

Countering extremism and terrorism in Russia

The Russian focus on countering extremism and terrorism has gradually shifted from a primarily home-grown problem in the northern Caucasus towards international engagement against global jihadi movements. At the same time, Moscow is sceptical about extremism being used as a 'geopolitical instrument to rearrange spheres of influence'.

Drivers of terrorist extremism in Russia

In October 2015, President Vladimir Putin publicly [admitted](#) that the number of **foreign terrorist fighters** (FTFs) from Russia and the former Soviet republics who have [travelled](#) to fight in Syria and Iraq ranges between 5 000 and 7 000. The number of fighters with Russian passports is [estimated](#) at 2 500 – the third largest group after Tunisia and Saudi Arabia – [primarily](#) from the [northern Caucasus](#) republics of Chechnya and Dagestan. Poor economic prospects in these [regions](#), coupled with historical grievances and a lack of trust in government, are the main [drivers of radicalisation](#). The [Caucasus Emirate](#) – a group created in 2007 to establish an independent Sharia-ruled emirate stretching between the Black, Caspian and Azov Seas – has declared Russia its primary enemy. The group's dwindling popularity and resources have pushed it towards a closer alliance with ISIL/Da'esh, in a bid for additional funding and training. Radicalisation also [occurs](#) in Russia's urban areas. As the [third](#) largest destination for immigrants – after the United States and Germany – Russia has accepted economic migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It is [estimated](#) that some 80% to 90% of ISIL/Da'esh fighters from these countries are radicalised and recruited while in Russia. [Analysts](#) point to the absence of an integration policy for migrants, growing xenophobia, and cultural alienation as possible reasons for the spread of radicalisation in Russian cities.

Extremism and an 'ideology of terrorism'

The [approach](#) adopted by Russia distinguishes between extremism and the 'ideology of terrorism'. According to the Strategy for Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation through 2025, adopted in November 2014, extremism – including nationalism, religious intolerance and political extremism – is a threat to national security. The strategy identifies **three priority areas**: inter-ethnic and inter-religious extremism; work with younger generations; and improving migration policy. Russia also [maintains](#) that extremism is often used as a **geopolitical instrument** to rearrange spheres of influence', including during the wave of 'colour revolutions' in the former Soviet space. Consequently, it has been cautious about [engaging](#) in US-led initiatives to counter violent extremism (CVE) without a clear **definition** of what is understood by 'extremism'. In 2015, Russia [criticised](#) the summit on CVE hosted by the US on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly as 'disrespectful', and seriously undermining UN efforts in this area. At the same time, Russia considers the ideology of terrorism as a form of extremism. The Federal Law on Counteraction to Terrorism ([No 35-FZ](#)) adopted in 2006 defines terrorism as 'the ideology of violence and the practice of influencing the adoption of a decision by public authorities, local self-government bodies or international organisations connected with frightening the population, and (or) other forms of unlawful violent actions'. It distinguishes between terrorist activity (i.e. various forms of assistance, preparation, and instigation of terrorism) and terrorist acts (bombing, arson, hostage-taking and other actions). It also provides the legal basis for the use of armed forces within and outside Russian territory for counterterrorism operations.

Terrorism as a form of extremism: legal and institutional response

The first [Federal Law](#) 130-FZ on Combating Terrorism adopted in 1998, in response to the violent clashes in Chechnya and subsequent terrorist attacks in the 1990s, laid the foundations for Russian counter-terrorism policy. The laws adopted subsequently, not only [increased](#) the power of the Russian security services, but also introduced a number of measures that extended the Kremlin's control over the Russian Federation's



regions. These include a set of laws on the Federal Security Service ([No 226-FZ](#), 1999), on countering money laundering and the financing of terrorism ([No 115-FZ](#), 2001), on combating extremist activity ([No 114 FZ](#), 2002), and the Federal Constitutional Law on states of emergency ([No 3-FKZ](#), 2004). The 2004 [Beslan](#) massacre marked a turning point in terrorism-prevention legislation, and triggered a **new wave of administrative and federal reforms** aimed at creating a nationwide system for countering terrorism. Federal Law [No 35-FZ](#), supplemented by a new official approach to countering terrorism in 2009, redistributed responsibilities among state agencies by [creating](#) a National Antiterrorism Committee (NAK) tasked with coordinating counterterrorism policies and operations, and a Federal Operational Coordination Centre (FOCC) within it. The director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) acts as chairman of the NAK, and decides on the execution of counter-terrorism activities. The Ministry of Defence [plays](#) an important role in coordinating efforts to prevent terrorist attacks on nuclear sites and attacks involving weapons of mass destruction, and in organising special operations to eliminate illegal armed groups and block illegal traffic of arms, ammunition and fissile and highly toxic materials. A presidential [decree](#) in December 2015 established counter-terrorism operational headquarters in five of Russia's coastal cities: Kaspiysk, Murmansk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, Simferopol and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk. The centres are tasked with organising the use of force and managing counterterrorism operations in Russian waters.

Taking the battle abroad

Russia has [actively](#) sought to shape debates about counterterrorism and CVE policies in various international fora. In 2011, the **NATO-Russia Council** ([NRC](#)) adopted an [Action Plan](#) on Terrorism, which led to an exchange system to provide air traffic transparency and early notification of suspicious air activities to help prevent terrorist attacks, called the Cooperative Airspace Initiative ([CAI](#)); as well as to the [STANDEX](#) project, aimed at fostering technical and scientific cooperation to develop technology for the detection of explosive devices in mass transport environments. In 2014, **Russia and the EU** issued a joint [statement](#) on combating terrorism, which lists the prevention of terrorism – in particular radicalisation and recruitment of terrorists and foreign fighters – as areas for closer cooperation. However, all practical civilian and military cooperation between [NATO](#) and Russia, and between the [EU](#) and Russia, was suspended in 2014 in protest against Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and violation of its territorial integrity.

Partly in response to the spread of the CVE narrative shaped by the US, Russia has developed alternative networks with **neighbouring countries and organisations**, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the ASEAN Regional Forum. Russia has also [initiated](#) counterterrorism cooperation with China, India and Iran by holding regular meetings with their defence ministers. The transnational nature of the terrorist threat and Russia's vulnerability given the relatively high [number](#) of its citizens among ISIL/Da'esh ranks have provided a pretext for Russia's broader engagement through **capacity-building** in neighbouring countries. Russia has [promised](#) US\$1.2 billion in military aid to Tajikistan, and [signalled](#) the possibility of providing further support, including resuming armed protection of the Tajikistani-Afghan border (Russia's military contingent in Tajikistan consisting of 6 000-7 000 troops). In February 2016, Russia [donated](#) 10 000 automatic rifles and millions of rounds of ammunition to the Afghan security forces. Probably the most striking example of the Russian 'counterterrorism campaign' is Syria, its first military [involvement](#) in the region since the 1970s. The downing of a Russian [passenger plane](#) by ISIL/Da'esh in 2015 provided additional legitimacy for this operation, despite accusations that Moscow has targeted rebel positions, rather than those of ISIL/Da'esh.

Countering extremism as a political tool

[Critics](#) of Moscow's approach argue that its excessive reliance on the use of [special forces](#) and its brutal [crackdowns](#) on insurgents and everyone connected with them only contribute to further radicalisation and create 'martyrs' and 'local heroes', as has occurred in Dagestan. The US Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism for 2014 [observe](#) that Russia's counterterrorism legislation is used to prosecute non-violent individuals and members of the political opposition, as well as to [restrict](#) the development of civil society, [rights groups](#) and independent media. At the same time, Russia's [criticism](#) of Western interventionism, which it sees as one of the root causes of international [instability](#) and radicalisation, and the Russian insistence on the primary role of states in conducting counter-extremism and counter-terrorism policies, may be interpreted as part of a confrontation with the West, and as an attempt to undermine political transformations occurring in other parts of the world.