



## Michał Strzelecki

COL., US Army War College International Fellow

michal.strzelecki@poczta.onet.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-1934-1721

# Terrorism in the Russian Federation: Fear and Threat or Tool and Opportunity?

## Introduction

9/11, 2001 opened a new world era. By bringing terror to the USA, Osama bin Laden infected the Americans with a fear too well known to many nations around the world. As the new conflict broke out, the USA and NATO had to accept that the day they declared the Global War on Terrorism, the Russians had already been waging their own, intense and cruel war against violent extremism for a decade. Nonetheless, terrorism was not a new phenomenon for the Russian population because even if the official propaganda claimed otherwise, the Soviet Union was not free of terrorism: since its creation, there were people ready to apply violence against the Soviet regime. The pro-tsardom veterans of the Civil War or the last resistance members of the nations forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union after World War II were recognised by Soviet regime as terrorists. When the post-WWII period was over and the last resistance insurgents captured or eliminated, modern terrorism appeared in Russia. Oppressed Soviet citizens were looking for any opportunity to leave the country; for some of them the last resort was airplane hijacking. Between 1954-1991, at least 107 plane hijacking attempts in the Soviet Union were reported. Since 1958, hijackers killed 120 people, and wounded 200<sup>1</sup>. To fight with modern terrorism, the Soviet regime had to develop forces with a capability comparable to Western counter-terrorist units, like the most famous German GSG-9 or British SAS.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> K. Kraj, *Rosyjski system antyterrorystyczny*, Krakowska Fundacja Badań Wschodnich, Kraków 2017, p. 30

<sup>2</sup> L. Neville, *European Counter-Terrorist Units 1972-2017*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2017, pp. 35-37, 48-50.

As a result, inside the Soviet internal security service KGB 'Alpha' unit was created.<sup>3</sup> But Soviet citizens were not afraid of terrorism: informed only via the official mass media they were just not aware of it.

Terrorist activity, originated mainly on the North Caucasus, has been affecting the Russian population for years even if only a small part of it was exposed to acts of terror. Russians are fed with terrorism-oriented propaganda, especially in times of political crisis when consolidation around the government is required. To deal with modern terrorism, the Russian Federation developed legal acts which determined the responsibilities and tasks of various levels of the Russian state administration in order to effectively prevent and, should they occur, combat acts of terror. In 2006, the last edition of such a document was published as Federal Law No. 35-Fz of 6 March 2006 on counteraction against terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

When the GWOT started, Vladimir Putin could not have missed the chance to combine his efforts with the new struggle of the Western world. On the eve of the invasion of Afghanistan, Putin offered the Coalition the much-needed support to gain justification for his activity in the post-Soviet region where 'chasing terrorists' authorized various operations against any of his opponents. He learned to use the war against terrorism, fear of terrorism, and terrorism itself as a tool for gaining influence on the Russian internal as well as the world opinion. The Author has researched open data sources available in the English and Polish languages: printed and internet publications, to compare declarations of the Russian Federation's leaders with the actions of their administration.

## Terrorism in the Russian Federation 1991–1999, 'trouble' in the North Caucasus

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the world and began a new era in history. For some of the former Soviet citizens, this event provided the opportunity to regain independence as all former Soviet Republics became independent countries. For ethnic Russians and other citizens of the now-independent Russian Federation, experiencing tremendous crises in every aspect of their everyday life was a tragedy. On 11 April 2005, Vladimir Putin called the Soviet Union collapse 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.'<sup>5</sup> But the option given to the former Soviet Republics was not valid for autonomous republics and districts the Russian Soviet

---

<sup>3</sup> The unit eventually merged with another FSB unit 'Vypmel', evolved into FSB Special Purpose Center with 'Alpha' and 'Vypmel' as separated Directorates and is still the Russian Federation's premier hostage rescue force for domestic operations. M. Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2013, p. 35; L. Neville, *European Counter-Terrorist...*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Федеральный закон от 06.03.2006 № 35-ФЗ «О противодействии терроризму», Russian Federation Ministry of Emergency Affairs website, <https://www.mchs.gov.ru/dokumenty/729> [accessed: 4.06.2021].

<sup>5</sup> 'Putin: Soviet collapse a "genuine tragedy"', *NBC News*, 25 April 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

Federative Socialist Republic was composed of. Boris Yeltsin, the then-head of the RSFSR, advised the leaders of the regions to 'take as much sovereignty as they can swallow.'<sup>6</sup> Among the nations making up the Russian Soviet Republic population only the Chechens dared to fight for freedom; their struggle eventually led to armed conflicts, known as the 'Chechen wars.'<sup>7</sup>

Recognition of the Chechen fighters was different all over the world, at least in the early 1990's. Many nations, especially the ones which had the opportunity to experience Russian or Soviet domination as part of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or one of the so-called 'satellite states,' tended to treat them as freedom fighters standing up against the too well-known Russian oppression. The situation started to change once the Chechens chose terrorist methods of warfare.<sup>8</sup> On 14 June 1995, a Chechen party led by Shamil Basayev seized a hospital in Budyonnovsk, Stavropol Krai, taking some 1800 hostages, including about 150 children. Basayev demanded termination of the Russian military operation in Chechnya and opening peace negotiations with the Chechen government. He declared they would execute hostages in the case of the Russian forces assault, a rejection of his demands, or prevention of his access to the mass media. Russian negotiators, led by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, eventually agreed, even though there were a few attempts to free the hostages, all of them fought off by Basayev's group. When on 19 June the terrorists were allowed to go back to Chechnya, more than 100 hostages volunteered to join them. As a result, 147 people died, some of them from Russian fire; the terrorists lost only 12 people.<sup>9</sup> The successful operation made Basayev a hero of the Chechen insurgency and soon followers of his cause were found. Russian citizens, having experienced the horror of the terrorist attack themselves or having watched it in the media, realized the seriousness of the threat.

On 14 December 1995, another Chechen warlord Salman Raduyev, driven by Basayev's idea, sized Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city. Although not able to take control over military and law enforcement facilities, he and his group sized large parts of the city and controlled it for two weeks. The federal forces, unable to repel the insurgents, eventually accepted a ceasefire and let the invaders out of the city. Two weeks later, on 9 January 1996, Raduyev and 200 terrorists struck a Russian air base at Kizlyar, Dagestan Republic. Surprised by the Russians' quick response, the terrorist moved to the nearest city and following Basayev's template, sized a local hospital and another building, taking more than 1000 hostages. The agreement was

---

<sup>6</sup> N. Buckley, 'Russia's regions are next battleground', *Financial Times*, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/f382bb26-6dd9-11e1-b98d-00144feab49a> [accessed: 27.02.2021].

<sup>7</sup> The First Chechen War started on 28 November 1994 with the federal force invasion and ended on 31 December 1996 with the Russian contingent's full withdrawal. The second war started on 1 October 1999 and was declared over on 16 April 2009. M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2014, pp. 34–48, 55–79.

<sup>8</sup> A. Stopczyński, 'Czeczenia w polskiej prasie w latach 90. XX wieku na przykładzie analizy wybranych opiniotwórczych tygodników', in: *Świat islamu w perspektywie współczesnej i historycznej*, eds. I. Kończak, M. Lewicka, A.S. Nalborczyk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2020, p. 174, DOI: 10.18778/8220-219-9.15.

<sup>9</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–41.

negotiated to let the Raduyev group withdraw to Chechnya, taking 150 hostages as human shields. The Russian forces ignored the agreement and engaged the insurgents just before they crossed the border; Raduyev decided to take more hostages and sized the village of Pervomayskoye. The federal forces tried to engage the terrorists, suffering heavy casualties. Russian commanders even ignored hostages, claiming they had already been dead. After an eight-day siege, Raduyev and some of his men eventually found their way out of Pervomayskoye into Chechnya, escaping the pursuit.<sup>10</sup> Since the Russian forces left Chechnya, the Republic became a land of anarchy, turning into a scene of criminal acts like clashes among rivaling clans, extortions and kidnappings.<sup>11</sup> In the meantime, a process of deep changes in the Chechen population began. Brutality and cruelty of the fights deeply affected combatants of both sides, as well as civilians. Some Chechens, traditionally Sunni Muslims, radicalized. Some members of the global jihadist network, many of them veterans of the mujahedin movement of the Afghan war, joined the Chechen insurgency. The most known among them was Saudi-born Emir Khattab, who soon became an icon of the Chechen jihad and Shamil Basayev's close partner. The presence of foreign volunteers, mainly Arabs, helped the Russians to present the Chechens as terrorists taking part of international jihad.<sup>12</sup> According to some sources, the Chechen insurgents' radicalization process was driven by other Russian government agencies, and many of the warlords, including Shamil Basayev, were Russian intelligence services assets at least since the beginning of the 1990's.<sup>13</sup> On 7 August 1999, Khattab and Basayev led a group of 1500 Chechen, Dagestani and Arab terrorists to Dagestan to support a local insurgency started in April that year. They failed to ignite a strong revolt and soon were forced back to Chechnya by combined force of federal troops and even armed locals. On 5 September, Khattab and Basayev made another attempt and were repelled again.<sup>14</sup>

## The Second Chechen War

The threat of terrorism became real for the Russian citizens, but until 1999, terrorist acts were affecting mainly people living in some specific regions of this vast country. Russians living outside the North Caucasus were more afraid of criminal activities than jihadists terror; yet it was to be changed soon. September 1999 brought Russian series of bomb attacks in a few locations including deep interior; two of them

---

<sup>10</sup> In 2000, Raduyev was detained by FSB and after a trial imprisoned in federal jail where he died in December 2002. M. Galeotti, *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces...*, *op. cit.*, p. 42. *idem*, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–43.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>13</sup> According to M. Van Herpen, Shamil Basyev was a Russian military intelligence service GRU asset. He fought alongside Abkhaz separatists during the war in Abkhazia in 1992, providing deniable force to reach the Russia goals without directly exposing the regular Russian Federation troops. M. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars. The rise of Russia's new imperialism*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2014; Polish Edition: Prószyński Media, Warszawa 2014, pp. 279–280.

<sup>14</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.

occurred even in Moscow. The first bomb exploded on 4 September in Buynaksk, a town in the Dagestan Republic, in a building occupied by Russian armed forces servicemen and their families, killing 83 people. On 8 and 13 September, two bombs exploded in a block of flats located in Moscow's southern districts resulting in 283 dead. On 16 September, a truck exploded in the city of Volgograd, Rostov Oblast. More than 300 people, mostly civilians, were killed; all of the attacks were carried out in the early morning to increase the number of casualties. Ordinary Russians were terrified.<sup>15</sup> On 22 September, a strange incident occurred in the city of Ryazan: a man planting bombs in the basements of a block of flats was spotted and arrested. He turned out to be an FSB officer and the whole situation was explained as the security services' counter-terrorism drill. However, the time of the incident which occurred almost simultaneously with recent acts of terror and similar *modus operandi* raised suspicions. According to some sources, all of these acts of terror were executed by FSB officers or their assets to provide *casus belli* for another war in Northern Caucasus.<sup>16</sup> The new war, waged by federal forces in a much more professional manner than the First Chechen War, helped the new leader Vladimir Putin win the presidential election in March 2000.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of this conspiracy theory, the Ryazan incident proved that other Russian government agencies were familiar with the tactics, techniques, and procedures of terrorists and had the capabilities to apply them – at least during military exercise. On 1 October 1999, Putin officially declared the beginning of a campaign to re-establish the federal authority over Chechnya. Fighting terrorism, including international jihadists, was announced as the main goal. The public opinion in the West, outraged by the brutality of the conflict, demanded peace talks. Everything changed on 11 September 2001: the USA, shocked by the unprecedented attack, were eager to accept any support in the newly announced Global War on Terrorism, and Putin was ready to be part of the new struggle. He was among the first state leaders who contacted the US president George W. Bush after the terrorist attack and offered his support. He also addressed the Russians on TV to convince them that Russia's fight against terrorism was the same war the USA was taking part in.<sup>18</sup> Russia, at least at the beginning of the GWOT, gained the reputation of a valuable partner and was invited to the coalition; previous accusation of being too harsh on the Chechen insurgents, civilians and other opposition to the Russian government were quickly forgotten. Russia's diplomatic support helped the USA develop a network of logistic bases in the post-Soviet countries necessary to launch a campaign in Afghanistan. The US Army Special Forces teams infiltrated to Afghanistan in the early days of the campaign were operating from the Forward Operations Base K2, located in the former Soviet air base in Karshi-Khandabad, Uzbekistan.<sup>19</sup> Manas air base, Kyrgyzstan, used by the US forces since 2001 and later developed into the main transfer airport for troops heading to or out of Afghanistan, was another

<sup>15</sup> M. Van Herpen, pp. 281–282.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 282–283. Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky wrote a book about the September 1999 acts of terror indicating the Russian FSB as the perpetrators: *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within*, Gibson Square Publishers, London 2007.

<sup>17</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> L. Neville, *Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2008, p. 6.

post-Soviet facility used by the Coalition.<sup>20</sup> All of them were available to the US and Coalition Forces due to the Russian diplomatic support.

## Terrorism in Russia since 9/11 – globalization of the domestic war on terrorism?

With the beginning of the Second Chechen War, the Chechens lost hope for the recognition of their cause by the world opinion and, eventually, accepted terrorism as the main method of warfare. Some of them left Chechnya and joined international jihadist movement: soon they were found among the Taliban fighting with the US-led Coalition in Afghanistan. Chechens took part in the battle against the US SOF teams atop Takur Ghar mountain in February-March 2002, in the early phase of the 'Anaconda' Operation.<sup>21</sup> By fighting members of the US and Coalition armed forces, Chechen Al-Qaeda members earned respect as die-hard fighters but also affirmed the Chechen insurgents' reputation as ruthless terrorists rather than freedom fighters in the Western world, even if they represented just a part of the Chechen diaspora. Chechen terrorists also increased the number of acts of terror in the Russian Federation. On 23 October 2002, 40 Chechen terrorists, led by Movsar Barayev, sized the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow during a musical performance, taking 750 hostages.<sup>22</sup> Their main demand was the withdrawal of the federal forces from Chechnya. Since the fiasco of the negotiations didn't allow to solve the crisis situation peacefully, on the early morning of 26 October, the FSB Special Purpose Centre, supported by the Moscow Police SOBR (SWAT) unit, started a hostage rescue operation. When the mission was over, all the terrorists were eliminated, but 129 hostages did not survive the operation.<sup>23</sup> The terrorists' ability to reach a target in the heart of Moscow, just 5 km from the walls of Kremlin, was another shock for Russians. Once again, the siege was broadcast by many TV stations offering the Russians an opportunity to watch the nightmare live. Two years later, on 1 September 2004, Chechen terrorists struck again, this time targeting a primary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, during a new school year opening ceremony. The terrorists had taken some 1200 hostages,

---

<sup>20</sup> 'Manas: Kyrgyzstan backs closure of US airbase', *BBC News*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22988967> [accessed: 3.04.2021]. In 2014, President of Kyrgyzstan Almazbek Atambayev demanded that the USA close their air base in Manas, while Russia kept their military installations in the country. The Russian influence over these decisions is clearly noticeable.

<sup>21</sup> L. Neville, *Takur Ghar. The SEALs and Rangers on Roberts Ridge, Afghanistan 2002*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2013, p. 20; J.G. Meek, 'The Secret Battles Between US Forces and Chechen Terrorists', *ABC News*, 19 February 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/secret-battles-us-forces-chechen-terrorists/story?id=22580688> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>22</sup> Other sources estimate the number of hostages taken at 912.

<sup>23</sup> K. Kraj, pp. 51–53. The main reason for civilian casualties was a nerve agent used by FSB to reduce terrorists' awareness before the assault was initiated. The gas proved effective in knocking out both terrorists and hostages unconscious. Unfortunately, due to OPSEC regulations information about the specification of the nerve agent could not be passed to medical teams present on the scene; therefore, the proper antidote could not have been applied and some of the hostages overdosed with the gas died.

mostly children. Again, their demands were the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Chechnya and release of the terrorists detained during a recent raid in Ingushetia in June 2004. To prevent the law enforcement forces from using nerve gas like during the Dubrovka siege, the terrorists had broken the glass in all the windows in the school buildings. The FSB Special Purpose Centre was called, and the local law enforcement forces tactical units were activated. On the third day of the siege a disaster started: the terrorists opened fire to the personnel trying to remove the dead bodies of the people killed during the early stage of the siege. The law enforcement members returned fire; some of the hostages attempted to flee. A few of them were shot down by the terrorists. The situation turned into a hasty assault without any control, with armed locals acting on their own, and with quite uncommon for the hostage rescue operations weapon systems like grenade launchers, flame throwers and even tanks used. In consequence, 331 people were killed, among them 186 children.<sup>24</sup> In addition to major attacks such as the ones on the Dubrovka theatre and the Beslan school, the Chechen terrorists carried out several acts of terrorism lesser known in the West. They targeted subways, airplanes, music concerts, and other soft targets in many locations throughout the Russian Federation, including the capital. What is worth noticing is the fact that Chechen terrorists, even if labelled as radical Sunni extremist by the Russian propaganda, are more politically than religiously inclined. The main factor that distinguishes the Chechen rebels from ISIS or Al-Qaeda terrorists is the use of the so-called 'Black Widows': wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of Chechen 'martyrs' who gave their lives in battles with the Russians or died from their hands.<sup>25</sup> At the end of second decade of the GWOT and the third of the Chechen Wars, due to the involvement of some members of the Chechen diaspora in terrorist attacks in the Western world, the world opinion lost all interest in supporting the Chechen struggle for freedom. The Chechen diaspora, once considered political refugees, came to be described as radical Muslims with a low capacity for assimilation among a democratic society, raising hard-core terrorists and questioning the principles of the free world. Chechens were the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon massacre on 15 April 2013,<sup>26</sup> they stabbed passers-by, killed one and injured four more on 12 October 2018 in the Opera District of Paris,<sup>27</sup> they beheaded history teacher Samuel Paty on 16 October 2020 in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a suburb of Paris.<sup>28</sup> By 2002, with the Dubrovka theatre siege, terrorism had become a real threat for Russian citizens; even if attacks affected just a small part or the Russian population, everyone had an opportunity to watch the horrors of the

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 53–55.

<sup>25</sup> Thair Shaikh, 'Attacks bear hallmarks of Chechen "Black Widows"', *CNN*, 29 March 2019, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/03/29/russia.moscow.suicide.bombers/index.html> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>26</sup> 'Boston Bombing Suspects Put Chechnya in Spotlight', *National Geographic*, 20 April 2013, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/130419-chechnya-russia-caucuses-boston-marathon-bombing-suspects-world-militants> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>27</sup> 'Paris knife attack: Suspect "French citizen born in Russia's Chechnya"', *BBC*, 13 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44098615> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>28</sup> T. Adamson, 'Suspect in teacher's beheading in France was Chechen teen', *The Associated Press*, 17 October 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/france-teacher-beheading-suspect-chechen-e91953f5c9fa0a4d52e51327d11a47fb> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

most dreadful attacks and was fully aware of the risk. President Putin frequently addressed the Russian Federation's citizens to reassure them that the threat was serious and real, and to provide himself with an excuse to act against his opponents.<sup>29</sup> In January 2021 Putin, called pro-Alexiei Navalny protesters 'terrorists';<sup>30</sup> while one month later, in February 2021 the FSB warned of a possible jihadist terrorists attack on a pro-Navalny demonstration to prevent people from joining the event.<sup>31</sup> If the pro-Navalny movement becomes a real challenge to Putin's regime, the terrorist factor can be used by security services to cause chaos and allow the government to resolve the problem and thus regain control over frightened people.

## Fighting terrorism abroad in the Russian Federation's foreign policy

Russia used its own struggle with domestic terrorism to present itself as state on the frontline of fighting global threats. Putin learned that pursuing real or hypothetical terrorists abroad could be a perfect justification for missions in foreign countries. In 2002, Russia accused the Georgians of not attempting to neutralize Chechen terrorists' safe heavens in the Pankisi Gorge. The Russians eventually bombed one village on the Georgian territory.<sup>32</sup> The accusation of supporting Chechen rebels was a constant element of the Russian propaganda against Georgia until the final outbreak of war between the two countries. In 2014, during the Russian operation of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, no charges of Ukraine supporting terrorists were raised; however, since Crimea was declared part of the Russian Federation, the situation changed. The Russians regularly recall alleged terrorist acts prepared by the Ukrainians to be committed in Crimea.<sup>33</sup> These activities should be regarded as the information warfare phase of a contingency plan for the next clash between Russia and Ukraine, which – should an opportunity arise – will develop into a full-scale conflict or never exceed the non-kinetic phase. Since the Russian Federation forcibly took control of the peninsula, the accusation of being a terrorist has fallen on the Crimean Tatars - an ethnic minority that has lived there for centuries and enjoyed great autonomy under the Ukrainian administration. As a pro-Ukrainian and traditionally Sunni Muslim community, they were a natural and easy target for the

---

<sup>29</sup> 'Putin warns IS plans to destabilize southern Russia and Central Asia', *TASS*, 9 June 2017, <https://tass.com/politics/950688> [accessed: 3.04.2021]; 'Putin calls for new tactics to fight terrorism', *TASS*, 6 March 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1047664> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>30</sup> T. Merz, J. Crisp, 'Putin calls pro-Navalny protesters "terrorists", rejects claims about Black Sea "palace"', *The Telegraph*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/25/putin-calls-pro-navalny-protesters-terrorists-rejects-claims/> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>31</sup> U. Botobekov, 'How Putin's Russia is Exploiting Jihadists Against pro-Navalny Protesters?', *Modern Diplomacy*, 20 February 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/02/20/how-putins-russia-is-exploiting-jihadists-against-pro-navalny-protesters/> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>32</sup> M. Galeotti, *Russia's Wars...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–73.

<sup>33</sup> S. Walker, 'Putin raises stakes over alleged Ukrainian terror plot in Crimea', *The Guardian*, 10 August, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/russia-accuses-ukraine-of-armed-crimea-incursion> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

Russian propaganda.<sup>34</sup> Fighting global terrorism was also the main official reason for the Russian armed forces commitment in Syria, officially started on 30 September 2015. The operation in Syria was the first in the history of the Russian Federation troops' deployments to a country beyond the borders of the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> What is worth noting, Chechens were among ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria.<sup>36</sup> To effectively combat terrorism abroad, the Russian Armed Forces had to develop new capabilities, created inside their new branch of the *Sily spetsial'nykh operatsiy* – SSO (special operation forces), whose skills, competences, and even equipment far exceed those of the 'traditional' SOF units of the Russian military – Spetsnaz GRU.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusions

A terrorist attack is a real threat in Russia and even if the possibility of becoming a victim is relatively small, it should be taken into consideration. The fight against terrorism – domestic and international – has become an important factor in the Russian politics since 9/11, although every researcher on the subject must be aware that the Russians had begun fighting violent extremism a decade before the Western world's Global War on Terrorism even started.

An analysis of Russia's involvement in the fight against terrorism leads to several conclusions:

1. The threat of a terrorist attack, even if acts of terrorism do not occur very often, is real in the Russian Federation.
2. The Russian Federation has forces capable of dealing with terrorism at home and abroad, even if the Russian approach to fighting terrorists can be considered strange or unusual in the West.
3. Vladimir Putin's administration has learned to manage the Russians' fear of terrorism in order to control the population and achieve their national and international goals.
4. Over the past three decades, the Russian Federation has used actual or alleged support for organizations it considers violent extremists as a pretext for starting open conflicts with opponents. This has to be taken into consideration by countries which have a history of supporting organizations or communities considered terrorist by the Russians.

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Crimean Tatars Face Unfounded Terrorism Charges Raids, Arbitrary Arrests, Torture of Activists', *Human Rights Watch*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/12/crimean-tatars-face-unfounded-terrorism-charges> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>35</sup> J. Daher, 'Three years later: the evolution of Russia's military intervention in Syria', *Atlantic Council*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>36</sup> N. Hauer, 'Chechen and north Caucasian militants in Syria Terrorists', *Atlantic Council*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chechen-and-north-caucasian-militants-in-syria/> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

<sup>37</sup> M. Strzelecki, "Uprzejmi Ludzie" czy "Zielone Ludziki"? Siły operacji Specjalnych Ministerstwa Obrony Federacji Rosyjskiej, *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka* 2017, no. 3, pp. 383–413, <https://btip.ka.edu.pl/pdf/bezpieczenstwo-teoria-i-praktyka-2017-nr3.pdf> [accessed: 3.04.2021].

5. During the recent international conflicts in which the Russian Federation has participated, the Putin administration has used the fight against international terrorism as a factor in gaining support and partnership with countries strongly involved in the GWOT. This should be taken into account by countries which base their security mainly on international treaties with states strongly engaged in the fight against international terrorism.
6. There are indicators suggesting that other Russian government agencies can control violent extremist organizations to provoke them to commit acts which can be used in the Russian Federation foreign policy. This should be considered by states at risk of conflict with the Russian Federation.
7. Other Russian government agencies have proven capable of emulating *modus operandi* of terrorists group to achieve goals of Russia's national interest. This should also be taken into consideration by states threatened by conflict with the Russian Federation.

## References

- Adamson, T., 'Suspect in teacher's beheading in France was Chechen teen', *The Associated Press*, 17 October 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/france-teacher-beheading-suspect-chechen-e91953f5c9fa0a4d52e51327d11a47fb> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- 'Boston Bombing Suspects Put Chechnya in Spotlight', *National Geographic*, 20 April 2013, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/130419-chechnya-russia-caucuses-boston-marathon-bombing-suspects-world-militants> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Botobekov, U., 'How Putin's Russia is Exploiting Jihadists Against pro-Navalny Protesters?', *Modern Diplomacy*, 20 February 2021, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2021/02/20/how-putins-russia-is-exploiting-jihadists-against-pro-navalny-protesters> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Buckley, N., 'Russia's regions are next battleground', *Financial Times*, 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/f382bb26-6dd9-11e1-b98d-00144feab49a> [accessed: 27.02.2021].
- 'Crimean Tatars Face Unfounded Terrorism Charges Raids, Arbitrary Arrests, Torture of Activists', *Human Rights Watch*, 12 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/12/crimean-tatars-face-unfounded-terrorism-charges> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Daher, J., 'Three years later: the evolution of Russia's military intervention in Syria', *Atlantic Council*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Galeotti, M., *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2014.
- Galeotti, M., *Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2013.
- Galeotti, M., *Spetsnaz: Russia's Special Forces*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2015.
- Hauer, N., 'Chechen and north Caucasian militants in Syria', *Atlantic Council*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/chechen-and-north-caucasian-militants-in-syria> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Kraj, K., *Rosyjski system antyterrorystyczny*, Krakowska Fundacja Badań Wschodnich, Kraków 2017.

- 'Manas: Kyrgyzstan backs closure of US airbase', *BBC News*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22988967> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Meek, J.G., 'The Secret Battles Between US Forces and Chechen Terrorists', *ABC News*, 19 February 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/secret-battles-us-forces-chechen-terrorists/story?id=22580688> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Merz, T., Crisp, J., 'Putin calls pro-Navalny protesters "terrorists", rejects claims about Black Sea "palace"', *The Telegraph*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/25/putin-calls-pro-navalny-protesters-terrorists-rejects-claims> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Neville, L., *European Counter-Terrorist Units 1972–2017*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2017.
- Neville, L., *Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2008.
- Neville, L., *Takur Ghar. The SEALs and Rangers or Roberts Ridge, Afghanistan 2002*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2013.
- 'Paris knife attack: Suspect "French citizen born in Russia's Chechnya"', *BBC*, 13 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44098615> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- 'Putin calls for new tactics to fight terrorism', *TASS*, 6 March 2019, <https://tass.com/politics/1047664> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- 'Putin submits bill on National Guard troops to State Duma', *TASS*, 6 April 2014, <https://tass.com/politics/867586> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- 'Putin warns IS plans to destabilize southern Russia and Central Asia', *TASS*, 9 June 2017, <https://tass.com/politics/950688> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- 'Putin: Soviet collapse a "genuine tragedy"', *NBC News*, 25 April 2005, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Shaikh, Thair, 'Attacks bear hallmarks of Chechen "Black Widows"', *CNN*, 29 March 2019, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/03/29/russia.moscow.suicide.bombers/index.html> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Stopczyński A., 'Czeczenia w polskiej prasie w latach 90. XX wieku na przykładzie analizy wybranych opiniotwórczych tygodników', in: *Świat islamu w perspektywie współczesnej i historycznej*, eds. I. Kończak, M. Lewicka, A.S. Nalborczyk, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2020, DOI: 10.18778/8220-219-9.15.
- Strzelecki M., "'Uprzejmi Ludzie" czy "Zielone Ludziki"? Siły operacji Specjalnych Ministerstwa Obrony Federacji Rosyjskiej', *Bezpieczeństwo. Teoria i Praktyka* 2017, no. 3, pp. 383–413, <https://btip.ka.edu.pl/pdf/bezpieczenstwo-teoria-i-praktyka-2017-nr3.pdf> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Van Herpen, M., *Putin's Wars. The rise of Russia's new imperialism*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2014; Polish Edition: Prószyński Media, Warszawa 2014.
- Walker, S., 'Putin raises stakes over alleged Ukrainian terror plot in Crimea', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/10/russia-accuses-ukraine-of-armed-crimea-incursion> [accessed: 3.04.2021].
- Федеральный закон от 06.03.2006 № 35-ФЗ «О противодействии терроризму», Russian Federation Ministry of Emergency Affairs, <https://www.mchs.gov.ru/dokumenty/729> [accessed: 4.06.2021].

## *Terroryzm w Federacji Rosyjskiej: obawy i zagrożenie czy narzędzie i sposobność*

### *Streszczenie*

Federacja Rosyjska boryka się ze zjawiskiem terroryzmu od trzech dekad, tj. od chwili jej powstania jako samodzielnego państwa wyłonionego po rozpadzie Związku Radzieckiego. Spektakularne zamachy terrorystyczne, chociaż relatywnie rzadkie, wywarły głęboki wpływ na rosyjskie społeczeństwo, w którym obawa przed zamachem terrorystycznym oraz ograniczenia motywowane walką z terroryzmem stały się czynnikami wpływającymi na codzienne funkcjonowanie obywateli. Głównym źródłem ekstremistów dokonujących zamachów na terenie Rosji są przede wszystkim mieszkańcy wchodzących w jej skład autonomicznych republik położonych na Północnym Kaukazie. Czynnikiem, które motywują północnokaukaskich terrorystów, są: dążenie do pełnej niepodległości, postrzegane przez stronę rosyjską jako separatystyczne, oraz sunnicki islam. Według niektórych źródeł niebagatelny wpływ na działalność terrorystów w Rosji mają również jej służby specjalne, przede wszystkim FSB. Przez lata wojny z terroryzmem administracja Władimira Putina wypracowała metody wykorzystania terroryzmu oraz walki z nim jako narzędzie wykorzystywane w polityce zagranicznej, a także do wywierania wpływu na rosyjską opinię publiczną.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Rosja, terroryzm, Północny Kaukaz, FSB, Putin

## *Terrorism in the Russian Federation: Fear and Threat or Tool and Opportunity?*

### *Abstract*

The Russian Federation has been struggling with the phenomenon of terrorism for three decades, since its creation as an independent state emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Spectacular terrorist attacks, although relatively rare, had a profound impact on Russian society, where fear of a terrorist attack and combating-terrorism-driven constraints have become a factor influencing the daily functioning of citizens. The main source of extremists who carry out attacks in Russia are primarily the inhabitants of its autonomous republics in the North Caucasus. The factors that motivate North Caucasus terrorists are the aspiration for the full independence, regarded by the Russian side as separatism, and Sunni Islam. According to some sources, its other government agencies, primarily the FSB, also have a significant impact on the activities of terrorists in Russia. Over the years of the war on terrorism, the administration of Vladimir Putin has developed methods of using terrorism and combating it as a tool in foreign policy and to influence Russian public opinion.

**Key words:** Russia, terrorism, North Caucasus, FSB, Putin

## *Terrorismus in der Russischen Föderation: Angst und Gefahr oder Instrument und Chance?*

### *Zusammenfassung*

Die Russische Föderation kämpft seit drei Jahrzehnten mit dem Terrorismusphänomen, seit das Land nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion als unabhängiger Staat gegründet wurde. Spektakuläre Terroranschläge waren bisher zwar relativ selten, haben die russische Gesellschaft aber stark erschüttert. Die Angst vor Terroranschlägen und durch die Terrorismusbekämpfung motivierten Auflagen hat den Alltag der Bürger

beeinflusst. Bei den Extremisten, die für die Anschläge in Russland verantwortlich sind, handelt es sich vornehmlich um Einwohner der autonomen Republiken im Nordkaukasus. Motiviert werden die nordkaukasischen Terroristen durch das Streben nach der vollen Unabhängigkeit, was von russischer Seite als Separatismus betrachtet wird, sowie durch den sunnitischen Islam. Einigen Quellen zufolge haben auch andere Regierungsbehörden (vorwiegend der FSB) wesentlichen Einfluss auf die Aktivitäten von Terroristen in Russland. Im Laufe des jahrelangen Kriegs gegen den Terrorismus hat die Regierung von Wladimir Putin eigene Methoden entwickelt, um den Terrorismus und dessen Bekämpfung als außenpolitisches Instrument zu nutzen und die öffentliche Meinung in Russland zu beeinflussen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Russland, Terrorismus, Nordkaukasus, FSB, Putin

### *Терроризм в Российской Федерации: опасения и угрозы или инструмент и возможность*

#### *Резюме*

Российская Федерация борется с явлением терроризма уже на протяжении трех десятилетий, то есть с момента становления России как независимого государства, возникшего после распада Советского Союза. Трагические теракты, хотя и относительно редкие, оказали глубокое влияние на российское общество, в котором страх перед терактами и ограничения, мотивированные борьбой с терроризмом, стали факторами, влияющими на повседневную жизнь граждан. Основным источником экстремистов, совершающих теракты на территории России, в первую очередь, являются жители автономных республик Северного Кавказа, входящих в состав Российской Федерации. Факторами, мотивирующими северокавказских террористов, являются: стремление к полной независимости (которую российские власти считают проявлением сепаратизма) и суннитский ислам. По некоторым данным, немалое влияние на деятельность террористов в России оказывают ее спецслужбы, в первую очередь ФСБ. За годы войны с терроризмом администрация Владимира Путина разработала методы использования терроризма и борьбы с ним как инструмента, применяемого во внешней политике, а также для воздействия на российское общественное мнение.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, терроризм, Северный Кавказ, ФСБ, Путин

