



# Russian State Terrorism and State Sponsorship of Terrorism

---

Kacper Rekawek



International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism

# Russian State Terrorism and State Sponsorship of Terrorism

---

Kacper Rekawek  
ICCT Report  
September 2024



International Centre for  
Counter-Terrorism

## About ICCT

---

The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) is an independent think and do tank providing multidisciplinary policy advice and practical, solution-oriented implementation support on prevention and the rule of law, two vital pillars of effective counter-terrorism.

ICCT's work focuses on themes at the intersection of countering violent extremism and criminal justice sector responses, as well as human rights-related aspects of counter-terrorism. The major project areas concern countering violent extremism, rule of law, foreign fighters, country and regional analysis, rehabilitation, civil society engagement and victims' voices. Functioning as a nucleus within the international counter-terrorism network, ICCT connects experts, policymakers, civil society actors and practitioners from different fields by providing a platform for productive collaboration, practical analysis, and exchange of experiences and expertise, with the ultimate aim of identifying innovative and comprehensive approaches to preventing and countering terrorism.

### Licensing and Distribution

ICCT publications are published in open access format and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.



# Contents

---

<b>About ICCT</b>	iii
<b>Abstract</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	2
<b>State Terrorism and State Sponsorship of Terrorism – Definitions and History</b>	5
Political Warfare as the Origin of Russian State Terrorism	7
<b>Russia: “State Terrorism” and/or “State Sponsor of Terrorism”?</b>	10
Transnational Repression	10
State Terrorism in the Russo-Ukrainian War	12
State Sponsorship of Terrorism at Home and Abroad	13
<b>War Crimes, Not Terrorism: The Case Against Designating Russia</b>	16
<b>Not All Is Lost? Designating and Prosecuting Individuals</b>	18
<b>Conclusion: A Way Forward?</b>	20
<b>About the Author</b>	22

## Abstract

The field of terrorism studies has traditionally been focused on non-state perpetrators of violence, such as different jihadi organisations which have been active in the West in the last three decades. Things looked different, however, during the Cold War, when state actors actively involved themselves in terrorism by, for example, supporting terrorist organisations operating abroad. This report takes stock of Russia's return to such a paradigm in the twenty-first century in general and after 2022, the onset of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, in particular. Russia not only terrorises its own population into submission but also uses homegrown terrorists for the domestic ends of Vladimir Putin, deploys terrorist tactics while fighting against Ukraine, and seems increasingly willing and able to use those tactics as part of its foreign policy toolbox in its "political warfare" against the broader West. For this reason, it is argued that one could seriously consider labelling Russia a "state terrorist" or a "state sponsor of terrorism." The report concludes that this might prove challenging in 2024, but also offers a way forward for prosecuting, sentencing, and arresting individuals involved in Russian state terrorism and state sponsorship of terrorism.

**Keywords:** terrorism, violent extremism, state sponsor of terrorism, Russian influence, far-right, disinformation, espionage

## Introduction

Spring 2024 brought a series of news related to alleged Russian attempts to “plot violent acts of sabotage in Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Mysterious fires broke out in warehouses in the UK, there were attempted railway derailments in Sweden, and, finally, two German/Russian men were arrested for suspected espionage for Russia. One of them, allegedly a member of “Donetsk People’s Republic” (a Russian “separatist” entity which emerged after the first stage of the Russo-Ukrainian hostilities in 2014, also banned in Germany), stands accused of attempting to sabotage “infrastructure relevant to the German and the United States’ military.”<sup>2</sup> The news followed the warning of the Czech Minister of Transport Martin Kupka, who claimed that “Russia has made “thousands” of attempts to interfere with European rail networks in a campaign to destabilise the EU and sabotage critical infrastructure”<sup>3</sup> on 5 April. Throughout 2023, Poland also publicised information on the dismantling of a Russian spy network which was also apparently preparing acts of sabotage on the Polish railway system.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Russia stands accused by Western intelligence services of attempting to use Western far-right extremists to conduct the aforementioned sabotage activities.<sup>5</sup> All of these incidents or recruitment attempts resulted in an unprecedented statement from the North Atlantic Council, the principal political-military decision-making body of NATO, condemning the Russian “hostile state activity”, which includes “acts of violence” perpetrated on the Alliance’s territory.<sup>6</sup>

Such accusations, clearly articulated as early as 2021 in NATO’s Brussels Summit Communiqué,<sup>7</sup> arrive against a backdrop of Ukrainian references to Russia as a “terrorist state”<sup>8</sup> and its troops as “terrorists.”<sup>9</sup> These accusations were at least partly validated by the November 2023 decision of the European Parliament to declare Russia a “state sponsor of terrorism”<sup>10</sup>, preceded by the Estonian parliament, which adopted resolutions to the same effect.<sup>11</sup> In addition to that, Ukraine also refers to Russian missile attacks on its infrastructure as “terrorist attacks.”<sup>12</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy doubled down on such language while commemorating the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the 9/11

1 See: Sam Jones, John Paul Rathbone and Richard Milne, Russia plotting sabotage across Europe, intelligence agencies warn, *Financial Times*, 5 May 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/c88509f9-c9bd-46f4-8a5c-9b2bdd3c3dd3?shareType=nongift>. It is worth nothing that such accusations and news arrive against the backdrop of mounting evidence of similar, and potentially more lethal Iranian actions, allegedly prepared by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) which could be regarded as outright cases of “state terrorism.” See: Matthew Levitt, “Contending with IRGC Plots,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 16 August 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/contending-irgc-plots>. At the same time, some describe Israel as “terror state” for its handling of the war it wages in Gaza and on Hamas. See, for example: Huseyin Hayatsever and Tuvan Gumrukcu, “Turkey’s Erdogan labels Israel a ‘terror state’, slams its backers in West,” *Reuters*, 15 November 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-calls-israel-terror-state-slams-west-2023-11-15/>.

2 Der Bundesanwaltschaft beim Bundesgerichtshof, “Festnahmen u. a. wegen geheimdienstlicher Agententätigkeit und Mitgliedschaft in der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung „Volksrepublik Donezk (VRD),“ [Arrests for, inter alia, intelligence agent activity and membership in the foreign terrorist group „Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR),]” April 18, 2024, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2024/Pressemitteilung-vom-18-04-2024.html?nn=478184>. The author would like to thank Daniel Heinke for spreading the news of the arrest to the non-German speaking audience on X (formerly Twitter).

3 Alice Hancock, “Russia is trying to sabotage European railways, warns Prague,” *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/f8207823-f5e1-4caf-934d-67c648f807bf>, April 5, 2024.

4 TVN24, “ABW zatrzymała kolejną osobę, która miała brać udział w rosyjskiej siatce szpiegowskiej,” [ABW detained another individual who allegedly was a member of the Russian spy network], June 30, 2024, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/abwzatrzymala-kolejna-osobe-ktora-miala-brac-udzial-w-rosyjskiej-siatce-szpiegowskiej-st7196646>.

5 Sean Rayment, “Russia recruiting far-Right extremists to launch attacks in the West,” *The Telegraph*, 11 May 2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/05/11/russia-recruiting-far-right-extremists-attacks-west-putin/>.

6 See: NATO’s statement: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_225230.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_225230.htm).

7 The Communiqué’s point 12 reads: “In addition to its military activities, Russia has also intensified its hybrid actions against NATO Allies and partners, including through proxies. This includes attempted interference in Allied elections and democratic processes; political and economic pressure and intimidation; widespread disinformation campaigns; malicious cyber activities; and turning a blind eye to cyber criminals operating from its territory, including those who target and disrupt critical infrastructure in NATO countries. It also includes illegal and destructive activities by Russian Intelligence Services on Allied territory, some of which have claimed lives of citizens and caused widespread material damage. We stand in full solidarity with the Czech Republic and other Allies that have been affected in this way.” See: NATO, Brussels Summit Communiqué Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 14 June 2021, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm?selectedLocale=en).

8 “Zelenskyy Calls Russia ‘Terrorist State’ After Latest Attacks on Ukraine,” *Voa News*, June 28, 2022 <https://www.voanews.com/a/zelenskyy-calls-russia-terrorist-state-after-latest-attacks-on-ukraine/6637126.html>.

9 Paul Adams, “Moral High Ground” *BBC News*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61002914>.

10 European Parliament, “European Parliament declares Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism,” 23 November 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>.

11 Tristan Fiedler, “Estonian parliament declares Russia a terrorist state,” *POLITICO*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/as-the-third-country-to-estonia-declares-russia-a-terrorist-state/>.

12 Nate Ostiller, “Zelenskyy: Ukraine will respond to Russia’s terrorist attacks,” *The Kyiv Independent*, October 25, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/zelenskyy-ukraine-will-respond-to-russias-terrorist-attacks/>.

attacks when he stated that “[Ukraine] knows well what terrorism is and sincerely sympathizes with the US people.”<sup>13</sup> His Chief of Staff, Andriy Yermak, followed suit in the aftermath of Hamas’ attack on Israel on the 7 October 2023 while tweeting: “HAMAS and Russia do have a lot in common [...] HAMAS is a terrorist organization, and RF [Russian Federation] is a state that behaves like a terrorist organization.”<sup>14</sup> Yermak also directly asked for Russia to be designated a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>15</sup>

Years have been spent on divulging details of Russian “disinformation”<sup>16</sup> or “hybrid”<sup>17</sup> operations among NATO Allies or EU Member States, but hardly any space has been devoted to discussing Russian activities in the context of terrorism and state support of terrorism as extreme forms of political violence. This report aims to change this reality as it engages with these two terms vis-à-vis Russian actions and what will be described as Moscow’s “political warfare” against the West and Ukraine. It seems prescient to not only regard terrorism as a form of violence coming from below, i.e. by non-state actors, namely individuals or groups, or organisations targeting a certain state, but also as organised in a top-down manner, i.e. by a state actor or through a proxy of that given state.

This report will attempt to conceptualise whether Russia could be labelled as either a state terrorist or a state sponsor of terrorism. Experts from outside the field of terrorism research have debated the merits of, for example, designating Russia a state sponsor of terrorism,<sup>18</sup> but this discussion largely escaped those involved in counter-terrorism (CT) and prevention/countering of violent extremism (P/CVE). Presently, Russia appears to be turning further away from the West and may be tightening its counter-terrorism cooperation with China.<sup>19</sup> However, things looked different a decade ago as Washington and Moscow used counter-terrorism as a “case of cooperation” to reduce friction, hoping for a spillover effect into more controversial areas of international cohabitation or co-existence.<sup>20</sup> As the threat of ISIS loomed large, some even argued that “U.S. and Russia share a vital interest in countering terrorism,”<sup>21</sup> or that the EU and Russia could make a common cause in stopping the spread of jihadism throughout Central Asia.<sup>22</sup> Against this backdrop, there was hardly any space in the field left for discussions on Russia’s nefarious links with far-right militants at home,<sup>23</sup> and their utilisation as deniable fighters in its “hybrid” war on Ukraine (2014-22).<sup>24</sup> The situation was the same with Moscow’s infiltration of the North Caucasus jihadi milieu, whose attacks and security threat were then utilised by the Kremlin to justify authoritarian counter-terrorism measures both at home (decision to launch the so-called Second Chechen War) or abroad (intervention in Syria, allegedly against ISIS).<sup>25</sup>

13 See: <https://x.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1715471039197552800?s=20>, October 20, 2023 for the twitter status of president Zelensky.

14 See: <https://x.com/AndriyYermak/status/1715252260261773402?s=20>, October 20, 2023 for twitter status of Andriy Yermak.

15 See: <https://x.com/AndriyYermak/status/1579383684683403265?s=20>, October 10, 2023 for twitter status of Andriy Yermak.

16 See, for example: Kacper Rekawek, Thomas Renard, Barbara Molas (eds.), *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights From Ten European Countries*, The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024 for a concise summary of Russian nefarious actions, including disinformation, which involved European far-right forces. Chapters on Czech Republic, France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Sweden will be of special interest to all interested in how Russian disinformation works in practice.

17 More on this concept in the latter part of the chapter.

18 See: Delaney Simon, Michael Wahid Hanna, “Why the U.S. Should Not Designate Russia as a State Sponsor of Terrorism,” *International Crisis Group*: Commentary, 4 August 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/united-states/why-us-should-not-designate-russia-state-sponsor-terrorism>.

19 Guy Faulconbridge, Lidia Kelly and Andrew Hayley, “Russia, China to talk about deeper security co-operation in Eurasia, Lavrov says,” *Reuters*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-china-cooperate-fight-against-terrorism-russian-agencies-cite-lavrov-2024-04-09/>

20 See, for example: Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Scott W. Harold, Michelle Grisé, et al., “Little in Common. Prospects for U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia Security Cooperation,” *RAND*, 20 February 2023, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RBA597-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA597-1.html), p. 11.

21 Simon Saradzhyan, “U.S. and Russia Share a Vital Interest in Countering Terrorism,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, 30 September 2015 <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/us-and-russia-share-vital-interest-countering-terrorism>

22 Ironically, this call was made by the author of this report in 2015. See: Anna Dwyer, Arkadiusz Legieć, Kacper Rękawek, “Ready to Go? ISIS and Its Presumed Expansion into Central Asia,” *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 19 (121), June 2015, <https://pism.pl/upload/images/artykuly/legacy/files/20020.pdf>.

23 See, for example: Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Fascists. Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia*, Abingdon: Routledge 2021.

24 See, for example: Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail*, Abingdon: Routledge 2022.

25 See, for example: Yuri Felshinsky, Alexander Litvinenko, *Blowing Up Russia*. London: Gibson Square Books, 2007.

In short, terrorism research paid little if no attention to the signs suggesting that Russia might be entertaining state sponsorship of terrorism as part of its domestic and foreign policies. Moreover, as will be shown, the state of terrorism and state-terrorism research leaves a lot to be desired, as it is mostly historical or concerns itself with autocratic regimes using terrorism against their own population as a part of a repressive strategy. Russia, however, not only terrorises its own population into submission but also deploys terrorist tactics while fighting against Ukraine, and seems increasingly willing and able to use those tactics as part of its foreign policy toolbox in its “political warfare” against the broader West as well.



# State Terrorism and State Sponsorship of Terrorism – Definitions and History

According to Claridge, state terrorism displays the following elements:

1. “it is systematic;
2. it is actually or potentially violent;
3. it is political;
4. it is committed by agents of the state, or by proxies who operate with the resources of the state;
5. it is intended to generate fear; [and]
6. it is intended to communicate a message to a wider group than the immediate victim(s); and the victim(s) will not be armed and organised for aggression at the time of the incident.”<sup>26</sup>

Another definition by Holden equates state terrorism with “terror implemented by those in control of institutions of power who resort to violence to exert control.”<sup>27</sup> This definition stresses the “severe violence” of activities carried out by “state agents, or their proxies” which “generate fear” and “are directed against selected individual citizens.” These individuals are representatives of “social groups which are often publicly targeted.” Thus, attacks on their representatives aim to “spread fear and uncertainty among the wider group against whom similar violence can take place in an unpredictable time.”<sup>28</sup> This view mostly focuses on “internal” state terrorism within one’s own country, such as campaigns directed against a given regime’s political opponents.<sup>29</sup> Such campaigns of state terrorism going “local” or targeting its own citizens inside a given country have occurred in South Africa,<sup>30</sup> Kashmir,<sup>31</sup> Argentina,<sup>32</sup> Ethiopia,<sup>33</sup> but also in the European context. For example, state-supported terrorism against ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Liberty) in Spain<sup>34</sup> or the “pro-state” loyalist paramilitaries (terrorists) in Northern Ireland<sup>35</sup> have been amply covered in the literature on the subject. Less attention was paid to the “external” aspects of state terrorism outside of their borders which could involve attacks against one’s real or perceived dissidents abroad.<sup>36</sup> Such elements can be considered part of the so-called

“transnational repression [which] could involve... stalking, harassment, hacking, assaults, attempted kidnapping, forcing or coercing the victim to return to the home country, threatening or detaining family members in the home country, freezing financial assets, [and] online disinformation campaigns.”<sup>37</sup>

As will be shown below, Russia is one of the most enthusiastic proponents of this tactic. Despite the aforementioned examples of how different state terror campaigns have already been covered in the literature, the term “state terrorism” has been the focus of approximately two percent of articles published in the leading peer-reviewed journals from the field of terrorism

26 See: David Claridge, “State terrorism? Applying a definitional model,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 8:3, 1996, pp. 47-63.

27 See: William N. Holden, “Ashes from the phoenix: state terrorism and the party-list groups in the Philippines,” *Contemporary Politics*, 15:4, 2009, pp. 377-93.

28 Ibid.

29 See: Ariel Heryanto, *State Terrorism and Political Identity in Indonesia: Fatally Belonging*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

30 David Welsh, “Right-wing terrorism in South Africa,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 7:1, 1995, pp. 239-264.

31 Tariq Osman Hyder, Kashmir: Self-Determination versus State Terrorism, *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 2022, 14:1, pp. 141-174.

32 Frederick Schiff, “Rewriting the “dirty war”: State terrorism reinterpreted by the press in Argentina during the transition to democracy,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 13:4-5, 1990, pp. 311-328.

33 Melakou Tegegn, “Mengistu’s ‘Red Terror,’” *African Identities*, 10:3, 2012, pp. 249-263.

34 See: Paddy Woodworth, *Dirty War, Clean Hands. ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy*, Nev Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

35 Steve Bruce, “The problems of ‘pro-state’ terrorism: Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 4:1, 1992, pp. 67-88.

36 See: Michaela Wrong, *Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad*, London: Harper Collins, 2021.

37 See: Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Transnational Repression” <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>

studies.<sup>38</sup> Bart Schuurman, who provided the aforementioned statistic, asserted that this state of affairs somehow validates

“a key point made by Critical Studies on Terrorism (CST) that a large segment of the research community appears to view terrorism as something virtually exclusive to non-state actors, which forego that states have historically, and arguably currently, been the most large-scale and ‘effective’ users of this form of political violence.”<sup>39</sup>

CST representatives have also been making the point that the specific label of state terrorism should first and foremost be applied to the global “North,” effectively the West in general, and the US in particular. Campaigns of violence in or against the so-called global “South,” such as those in Latin America,<sup>40</sup> or Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians can be labelled as state terrorism but the term can also be extended onto the concept of the “war on terror,” regarded here as a convenient excuse for a campaign of Western interventionism or an imperialist “perpetual war.”<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, however, CST has been less scrutinising of the actions of other countries in this regard, such as China and Russia.

As much as state terrorism has traditionally been conceptualised as inward-looking, state sponsorship of terrorism has a more external dimension such as that practised by Iran, which continues to support and sponsor Middle Eastern terrorist organisations operating outside its borders.<sup>42</sup> Daniel Byman has thoroughly and consistently written about state sponsorship of terrorism<sup>43</sup> and defined it as “providing designated terrorist groups with assistance [...] usually comes in the form of weapons, money, training, and the provision of safe havens.”<sup>44</sup> As some were quick to point out, “state-sponsored terrorism is nothing new” with the likes of Germany sponsoring Nazi terrorism in Austria in the 1930s or Italy supporting the Croat Ustasha in the same period.<sup>45</sup> Soviet Russia was also involved in a campaign of sabotage, diversion, and assassination of government officials of its Western neighbours (especially Poland) in the 1920s. In the twenty-first century, some saw this as a historical dry run for its “hybrid warfare”<sup>46</sup> unleashed against Ukraine in 2014.<sup>47</sup> Historically, it might seem that “state-sponsored terrorism” already had its heyday throughout the 1970s as countries such as the Soviet Union, often through its satellite states, provided training, armaments, documents, financial support and sanctuary to different terrorist organisations.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, “upon taking office in 1981, the Reagan Administration raised the issue of state-sponsored terrorism to a position of prominence on its list of foreign policy priorities.”<sup>49</sup> While explaining Soviet support for terrorist organisations, often conducted in a plausibly deniable way, Wardlaw stressed Moscow “often supports those who seek to disrupt the status quo. As a result of this, such forces are more likely to use unconventional means to challenge the power of a state and/or its protectors.”<sup>50</sup> As will be demonstrated below, the aforementioned words written in 1987 remain true in 2024.

38 Bart Schuurman, “Topics in terrorism research: reviewing trends and gaps, 2007-2016,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 12:3, pp. 463–480, 2019, p. 471.

39 Schuurman, “Topics in terrorism research”, pp. 472-3. This issue gained validation Paul Wilkinson, classic in the field, who as early as in 1981, when he surveyed the state of the discipline, admitted that it is predominantly concerned with violence by sub-state actors. See: Paul Wilkinson, “Can A State Be Terrorist?,” *International Affairs*, 57:3, Summer 1981, p.467.

40 See: Ruth Blakeley, *State Terrorism and Neoliberalism. The North in the South*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2009.

41 Jeremy Scahill, “Perpetual War: How Does the Global War on Terror Ever End?,” *Truthout*, 29 October 2013, <https://truthout.org/articles/perpetual-war-how-does-the-global-war-on-terror-ever-end/>.

42 Matthew Levitt, “The Hamas-Iran Relationship,” *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November 2023, <https://jstribune.com/levitt-the-hamas-iran-relationship/>.

43 See: Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections. States that Sponsor Terrorism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

44 Daniel Byman, “Understanding, and Misunderstanding, State Sponsorship of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2022, 45:12, pp. 1031-1049.

45 See: Alex P. Schmid, Ronald D. Crelinsten (eds.), *Western Responses to Terrorism*, Abingdon: Routledge, 1993.

46 See: András Rácz, *Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine. Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist*, Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015, <https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiia-report43.pdf>.

47 Wojciech Rodak, “Leśna, Łowcza i Stołpce. Wojna hybrydowa na Kresach II RP. Sowieckie zielone ludziki 1.0.” [Lesna, Lowcza and Stolpce. Hybrid warfare in the East of the Polish Second Republic. Soviet Green Men 1.0], *Nasza Historia*, 1 April 2016, <https://naszahistoria.pl/lesna-lowcza-i-stolpce-wojna-hybrydowa-na-kresach-ii-rp-sowieckie-zielone-ludziki-10/ar/c1-9813528>.

48 See: Yonah Alexander, Dennis A. Pluchinsky, *Europe’s Red Terrorists. The Fighting Communist Organizations*, London: Routledge, 1992.

49 See: Grant Wardlaw, “Terror as an instrument of foreign policy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 10:4, 1987, pp. 237-59

50 Ibid.

Russia continues to use the “weapon of the weak” and support the proverbial “disruptors.” It is not, however, seen as a state sponsor of terrorism as it is “too powerful” and its inclusion on the US Department of State’s Bureau of Counterterrorism list of state sponsors of terrorism<sup>51</sup> “would complicate U.S. foreign policy.”<sup>52</sup>

## “Political Warfare” as the Origin of Russian “State Terrorism”

As terrorism is intended to instil fear and panic, one must turn their attention to the issue of intent while assessing whether Russia is a state terrorist or a state sponsor of terrorism. Elements of its foreign and security policy are subservient to the notions of “political warfare” and “inter-state terrorism,” which clearly depict its intention and readiness to utilise instruments of political violence and/or terrorism to achieve its national goals.

The former term, political warfare,<sup>53</sup> denotes the employment of military, intelligence, diplomatic, financial, and other means—short of conventional war—to achieve national objectives.<sup>54</sup> These are in turn co-shaped by Vladimir Putin’s “philosopher of choice,” Ivan Ilyin,<sup>55</sup> who considers that Russia is under permanent threat from “imperialist neighbours” who constantly try to dismember or dismantle Russia.<sup>56</sup> In this sense, all of Russia’s foreign policy actions are allegedly defensive and aimed at preserving originality and distinctiveness from the aggressive West.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, Moscow justifies what effectively is an aggressive foreign policy, as it sees itself in permanent competition with its neighbours or, in other words, competitors.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, it perceives itself as an empire and, as such, it is entitled to territorial growth and expansion.<sup>59</sup> This attitude was firmly on display after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when certain speakers, like Russian foreign policy analysts, attempted to explain away the aggression in blunt, imperialist terms, declaring that Russia’s foray into Ukraine was comparable with that of the US into Afghanistan or Iraq. These wars allegedly provided Moscow with a blueprint, but also a veneer of respectability and an excuse for aggressive behaviour abroad.<sup>60</sup> This is also reflected in the country’s strategic documents such as the 2015 National Security Strategy, which observed that Russia is faced with “opposition from the United States and its allies,” who are containing Russia through “the exertion of political, economic, military, and informational pressure on it.”<sup>61</sup> To counteract this, Russia

“utilizes a range of means to further its interests, such as technologically sophisticated offensive cyber programs, covert action, and psychological operations [...and is] active in supporting state and substate actors in countries like Ukraine [...]. Finally, Russia is attempting to exploit European and transatlantic fissures and support populist movements to undermine European Union and NATO cohesion.”<sup>62</sup>

Such Russian counteraction is sometimes compared to old-fashioned “raiding and brigandry” which, however, is taken to another level by Moscow as it involves “state-sponsored assassinations,

51 See: Bureau of Counterterrorism, “State Sponsors of Terrorism,” *US Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/state-sponsors-of-terrorism/>.

52 Daniel Byman, “Understanding, and Misunderstanding, State Sponsorship of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2022, 45:12, p. 1036.

53 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Conceptualizing Malign Influence Of Putin’s Russia In Europe”, *Free Russia Foundation*, 2020, <https://thinktank.4freerussia.org/reports/conceptualizing-malign-influence-of-putin-s-russia-in-europe/>

54 Seth G. Jones, “The Return of Political Warfare,” *CSIS*, 2 February 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/return-political-warfare>.

55 Michael Eltchaninoff, *Inside the Mind of Vladimir Putin*, London: Hurst, 2018, kindle edition, loc. 516.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 648.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 770.

58 Andrzej Chwalba, Wojciech Harpula, *Polska-Rosja. Historia obsesji, obsesja historii*, [Poland-Russia. History of an Obsession, an Obsession with History] Rodz. 1: Wstęp, audiobook, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2021.

59 See: Malgorzata Nocun, *Milosc to cala moja wina. O kobietach z bylego Związku Radzieckiego*, [Love is all my fault. About women from the former Soviet Union]. Wolowiec: Czarne, 2023.

60 Trenin, Dmitri, “Russian Former Colonel Trenin: Russia Failed To Assess The Western Response To Ukraine Invasion, But There Is No Way Back, Russia Must Persevere And Conquer Most Of Ukraine,” *MEMRI*, Special Dispatch 10365, 8 December 2022, [https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-former-colonel-trenin-russia-failed-assess-western-response-ukraine-invasion-there#\\_ednref1](https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-former-colonel-trenin-russia-failed-assess-western-response-ukraine-invasion-there#_ednref1).

61 Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare. Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1772.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1772.html) p.46.

62 See: Jones, “The Return of Political Warfare”.

acts of terror, and industrial sabotage.”<sup>63</sup> Alternatively, it is also compared to the “Chinese concept of unrestricted warfare,”<sup>64</sup> and “new generation warfare.”<sup>65</sup> Most frequently, however, these Russian acts allegedly amount to “hybrid war” or “hybrid threats.”<sup>66</sup> In the end, though, Russia’s activities in this domain have also been described as “weapons of the weak,”<sup>67</sup> making up for Moscow’s inability to match the West in an open and declared confrontation.

The second concept, “inter-state terrorism” (*mezghosudarstvennyy terrorism*), has been developed by Russian military thinkers who noted its utility to wars Russia would be waging in the future. As recently as in 2016, Dmitry Rogozin, the then Russian Deputy Prime Minister, defined “inter-state terrorism” as

“a method of intimidating an adversary state by an aggressor state [while] influencing it with means of terrorism. The purpose of this kind of action is the physical elimination of the representatives of the political leadership and military command of the adversary state, or provoking mass panic and chaos via organizing terrorist acts against the civilian population.”<sup>68</sup>

An earlier definition stressed that inter-state terrorism is conducted in utmost secrecy, deniable, its practitioners blame its results on the opposite state, and is carried out “either directly by the secret services of the given country, or via recruiting international terrorists.”<sup>69</sup> Using these two definitions Csiki Varga, Jójárt, Rácz, and Tálás wrote about potential types of terrorist attacks “Russia could carry out either via its own special services or proxies” in a study for NATO’s Centre of Excellence.<sup>70</sup> According to them, these attacks would belong to one of five types:

1. Those with “strategic effect,” such as mass-casualty or “spectacular” attacks staged to provoke a certain response from the adversary;
2. those directed at the political or military leadership of the adversary;
3. “targeted killings abroad” – effectively, transnational repression;
4. sabotage attacks akin to examples mentioned at the beginning of this article;
5. “attacks aimed to stir up social tensions [which] can push the enemy state into a political crisis,” such as the 2018 attack by Russian proxies on the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Uzhorod, Western Ukraine, aimed at souring Hungarian-Ukrainian relations.<sup>71</sup>

According to the aforementioned authors, the five types of terrorist attacks play a significant role in Russia’s military thinking, which considers Moscow’s Western adversaries as “more sensitive to human losses and they possess various vulnerable objects that are crucial for the functioning of their economies and societies.”<sup>72</sup> In this sense, such attacks are an asymmetric method to make

63 Michael Kofman, “Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia’s Strategy for Great Power Competition,” *War on the Rocks*, 14 June 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/raiding-and-international-brigandry-russias-strategy-for-great-power-competition/>.

64 Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare And Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, 11 March 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/russian-hybrid-warfare-and-other-dark-arts/>.

65 Janis Berzins, *Russia’s New Generation Warfare In Ukraine: Implications For Latvian Defense Policy*, Latvia: National Defence Academy of Latvia, April 2014, <https://slidinfo.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/New-Generation-Warfare.pdf>.

66 For the most comprehensive analysis of what “hybrid threats” or “hybrid war” truly are and to what extent Russia actually utilised this concept in the Russo-Ukrainian war see: Rácz, *Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine. Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist*, Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2015, <https://www.fii.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiiareport43.pdf>.

67 Alina Polyakova, “Weapons of the weak: Russia and AI-driven asymmetric warfare,” *Brookings*, 15 November 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/weapons-of-the-weak-russia-and-ai-driven-asymmetric-warfare/>.

68 Tamás Csiki Varga, Krisztán Jójárt, András Rácz, Péter Tálás, “Terrorism Threat During Peer-to-Peer Conventional War. A Background Study,” *Defence Against Terrorism Review*, vol. 14, 2022, pp. 16-7, [https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article\\_pdfs/coedat\\_terrorismandpeer-to-peerconventionalwar.pdf](https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/coedat_terrorismandpeer-to-peerconventionalwar.pdf).

69 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

70 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-29.

71 Przemysław Witkowski, “Poland: Ex Oriente Lux,” in: K. Rekawek, T. Renard, B. Molas (eds.), *Russia and the Far-Right. Insights from Ten European Countries*, The Hague: ICCT, 2024, pp. 314-5, [https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2024-04/Russia%20and%20the%20Far-Right%20Insights%20from%20Ten%20European%20Countries%20-%20A4%20e-book\\_0.pdf](https://www.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2024-04/Russia%20and%20the%20Far-Right%20Insights%20from%20Ten%20European%20Countries%20-%20A4%20e-book_0.pdf).

72 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

up for Western technological prowess. Russian military theoreticians go as far as advocating such attacks while using “local insurgents and separatists supported with weapons and money from abroad” in order to ensure plausible deniability for Moscow.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, such military thinking comes from the conviction that the US and its Western Allies are intent on using what some Russian military theorists call “other means” to put pressure on Russia. Such means, in their view, amount to “cover operations that are designed to undermine stability within Russia, provoke wars along the perimeter of its borders and eventually prepare an open armed intervention.” These operations include “irregular warfare waged by terrorist formations” on the territory of Russia and thus, constitute an act of “interstate terrorism” which merits an adequate response from Moscow.<sup>74</sup>

---

73 Ibid.

74 Leonenko, S.D. and Bogdanova, D.M., Содействие террористическим организациям, деятельность которых направлена на дестабилизацию ситуации в России [Assistance to terrorist organizations whose activities are aimed at destabilizing the situation in Russia], 2012, [https://structure.mil.ru/mission/fight\\_against\\_terrorism/methodical/leonenko-bogdanova.html](https://structure.mil.ru/mission/fight_against_terrorism/methodical/leonenko-bogdanova.html).

## Russia: “State Terrorism” and/or “State Sponsor of Terrorism”?

Given the fact that Russia looks kindly on concepts such as “political warfare” and “inter-state terrorism,” one must now turn their attention to the core of this report’s argument and attempt to establish the extent to which Russia could be referred to as a “state terrorist” and/or “state sponsor of terrorism.” As will be demonstrated below, Moscow conducts a series of activities which would theoretically amount to it being described with both of these terms. This is especially visible in relation to transnational repression (a concerted campaign of assassinations against its dissidents abroad) and terroristic acts in or against Ukraine – both of these sets of actions support the argument that Russia is a “state terrorist.” Moreover, Russia also tasks members of its security services to conduct other violent acts in the likes of the Member States of the EU which go beyond the arson or sabotage instances mentioned at the beginning of this report. At the same time, Russia provides what Byman called “passive support” (i.e. tolerance and non-interference)<sup>75</sup> to terrorist entities designated by the US. This, in turn, provides Moscow with a cover of plausible deniability and distance from a seemingly non-state organisation operating on or from Russian soil. The latter effectively constitutes a case of “state sponsorship of terrorism.” The table below provides a graphic summary of the Russian state or state-sponsored terrorism while looking at its targets and perpetrators.

*Table 1: Universe of Russian state/state-sponsored terrorism*

Groups/Entities Targeted	Perpetrator	
	State	Proxy
<b>Third country or its nationals</b>	State terrorism (e.g. indiscriminate missile attacks in Ukraine)	State-sponsored terrorism (e.g. via the Russian Imperial Movement or Wagner/Wagner-like groups outside Russia)
<b>Russian nationals in third countries</b>	Transnational repression (e.g. conducted by GRU, Main Intelligence Directorate, Glavnoje Razvedyvatel’noje Upravlenij, operatives)	Transnational repression (e.g. by hired “contractors” and Wagner/Wagner-like groups)
<b>Russian nationals in Russia (dissidents)</b>	State terror (e.g. violent repression, arbitrary arrests – all conducted by official state agents)	State-sponsored terrorism (e.g. conducted by extreme-right groups against dissidents)

### Transnational Repression

There is growing evidence documenting violent acts perpetrated abroad by autocratic regimes. These are called “transnational repression” and amount to attempts to “harass and intimidate” one’s own citizens abroad. Transnational repression is a phenomenon which has a tendency

<sup>75</sup> Daniel Byman, “The Changing Nature of State Sponsorship of Terrorism”, *The Brookings Institution*, 29 May 2008, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05\\_terrorism\\_byman.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/05_terrorism_byman.pdf), p. 15.

to return to the spotlight after every spectacular case<sup>76</sup> such as the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, or the kidnapping of the Belarusian activist, Roman Protasevich, from a plane in the Belarusian air space.<sup>77</sup> It serves two purposes: it deters the potential dissenters, but also polices a given country's communities or diasporas abroad.

Russia has a long "history of violence against its citizens abroad." This "dates back to the early Soviet years, as Moscow targeted those opposed to the Bolsheviks who had migrated abroad (the so-called "white émigrés") [...] From 1934 onward, the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) became responsible for such efforts [...]. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been implicated in violence against citizens that have received political asylum in Western countries."<sup>78</sup>

The Authoritarian Actions Abroad Database (AAAD) has documented 74 instances of transnational repression perpetrated by Russia – six percent of the database's total.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, however, Russia is often the arena in which the repression takes place, as different Central Asian (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) states would seek extradition of its own citizens who sought refuge there. In this sense, Russia and some of its Asian neighbours seem to have formed a twenty-first century version of "Operation Condor," i.e. a South American alliance of countries intent on repressing their own citizens beyond their borders in the 1970s.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to straightforward cases of transnational repression, conducted either by Russian state agents or proxies abroad, Moscow also has a history of performing "terror attacks against NATO and EU countries."<sup>81</sup> A unit of the Russian military intelligence (GRU) has performed a variety of tasks in Europe, ranging from detonations of explosive devices at ammunition warehouses in the Czech Republic to "high-profile poisonings of GRU defector Sergei Skripal [with radioactive substances] in the UK and a Bulgarian arms dealer [Emilian Gebrev], [to] an abortive coup in Montenegro [in 2016]."<sup>82</sup> This practice seems to have been in full swing again in 2024, as alleged GRU operatives literally "toured" Europe to execute arson and sabotage attacks and recruit others to conduct these in the future. Using fake Ukrainian identities and cars hired in Lithuania, these operatives allegedly travelled southwards from Vilnius, then on to Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, and finally, Italy, where they have disappeared from the proverbial radar.<sup>83</sup>

Freedom House's database on transnational repression confirms AAAD's findings: they record 854 instances of such behaviour by states between 2014 and 2022 and find Russia responsible for around five percent of those. Thus, Russia finds itself in a leading group of "six countries [China, Iran, Russia, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey] that currently operate aggressive campaigns of transnational repression." Overall, Russian actions account for 7 of the 26 known assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014.<sup>84</sup> According to Freedom House, Russia conducts assassinations, renditions of citizens, unlawful deportations, operates digital threats

76 See: Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics," *International Studies Review*, Volume 23, Issue 3, September 2021, pp. 616–644.

77 Alexander Dukalskis, Saipira Furstenberg, Yana Gorokhovskaia, John Heathershaw, Edward Lemon and Nate Schenkkan, Transnational repression: data advances, comparisons, and challenges, *Political Research Exchange*, 4:1, pp. 1-17, 2022.

78 See: Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies".

79 See: Alexander Dukalskis, "Authoritarian Actions Abroad Database (AAAD)—Codebook, Version 5 (September 2020)," [https://alexdukalskis.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/online-appendix-aaad\\_making-the-world-safe-for-dictatorship-2.pdf](https://alexdukalskis.files.wordpress.com/2021/04/online-appendix-aaad_making-the-world-safe-for-dictatorship-2.pdf).

80 Luz Palmás Zaldua, Operarion Condor: a transnational criminal conspiracy, uncovered, *Open Democracy*, 4 June 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/operation-condor/>.

81 Roman Dobrokhotov et al., "Exclusive: Inside an Infamous Russian Spy Unit's First Bombing in NATO," *The Insider*, 20 October 2023, <https://theins.ru/en/politics/266039>.

82 Ibid.

83 Jaroslav Kmenta, "Podezření na tajnou aktivitu GRU v Evropě. „Ruské špióny“ zachytily kamery v autě u Čáslavi" [Suspicion of secret GRU activity in Europe. "Russian spies" caught on camera in a car near Čáslav], *Reporter*, 13 June 2024, <https://reportermagazin.cz/78140/podezreni-na-tajnou-aktivitu-gru-v-evrope-ruske-spiony-zachytily-kamery-v-aute-u-caslavi/>

84 See: Freedom House, "Transnational Repression. Understanding and Responding to Global Authoritarian Reach," 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>.

to its citizens abroad, launches spyware against them, and overuses Interpol to issue warrants targeting "criminals" on the alleged run, mostly in Europe. Freedom House maintains that the threats and actions are mostly issued against the regime's former insiders and current-day defectors which potentially possess information damaging to the Kremlin.<sup>85</sup>

## Russian State Terrorism in the Midst of the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Kyiv School of Economics maintained that as of 1 September 2023, "the infrastructure [damage] of Ukraine due to the war reach[ed] \$151.2 billion." That included destruction or damage to 167,200 housing units and at least eighteen airports, 344 bridges, overpasses, and over 25,000 kilometres of highways and roads. Moreover, 3,500 educational facilities have been damaged and destroyed.<sup>86</sup> Most of this destruction happened in regions directly suffering from the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and could be seen as a result of the war. However, TP4, a Ukrainian third sector initiative aiming "to document events that display features of crimes defined in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes," collected information that 1,200 residential buildings, located hundreds of kilometres away from the frontline, suffered serious damage as a result of Russian missile attacks or bombardments. Simultaneously, the same things happened to over 400 businesses, 240 educational institutions, sixty entertainment institutions, and twenty historic monuments located in regions of Ukraine which saw no ground fighting from 2014 onwards.<sup>87</sup> Such attacks, unlike strikes on the Ukrainian infrastructure which could be considered a military target, have no other purpose than the effective "terrorising" of the Ukrainian population into submission. Moreover, their random and indiscriminate nature only strengthens the argument for their effective classification as acts of "state terrorism." Ukraine has developed sites which document these and maintain that the "use[age] of weapons and ammunition designed to kill civilians indiscriminately on a large scale [...constitutes] criminal acts [...that ] have no military purpose."<sup>88</sup>

These attacks mostly come from the air in the form of missiles and other high-velocity projectiles launched by the Russian army, which induce fear and panic in the targeted population, just like traditional terrorist means like improvised explosive devices or bombs. The scale of this phenomenon, deployed strategically and intended to spread terror, is neatly captured by the fact that Ukraine has recorded more than 40,000 air alarms directing citizens to go to the shelters in anticipation of missile or drone attacks or outright bombardment by Russian forces.<sup>89</sup>

As early as March 2022, the UN was on record stating that in relation to Russian actions in Ukraine "the principles of distinction, of proportionality, the rule on feasible precautions and the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks have been violated." More than fifteen months later, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) stated that between February 2022 and the end of June 2023, it had recorded 22,784 civilian casualties (7,653 killed and 15,131 injured) caused by the use of explosive weapons with wide area effects.<sup>90</sup> Michelle Bachelet, the then United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, indicated that "most of the documented civilian casualties were caused by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas."<sup>91</sup> The Independent

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> The Kyiv School of Economics, "The total amount of damage caused to the infrastructure of Ukraine due to the war reaches \$151.2 billion estimate as of September 1, 2023", 3 October 2023, <https://kse.ua/about-the-school/news/the-total-amount-of-damage-caused-to-the-infrastructure-of-ukraine-due-to-the-war-reaches-151-2-billion-estimate-as-of-september-1-2023/>.

<sup>87</sup> See: TP4, "Documenting war crimes in Ukraine," <https://t4pua.org/en/>.

<sup>88</sup> See: "Russia's War Crimes In Ukraine," *Russia Invaded Ukraine*, <https://war.ukraine.ua/russia-war-crimes/>.

<sup>89</sup> See: "Air alarms in UA", *Statistics of Air Alarm*, <https://air-alarms.in.ua/en#statistic>.

<sup>90</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Ukraine: Civilian casualties - 24 February 2022 to 30 June 2023," 7 July 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/07/ukraine-civilian-casualties-24-february-2022-30-june-2023>.

<sup>91</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Ukraine: High Commissioner updates Human Rights Council," 5 July 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/07/ukraine-high-commissioner-updates-human-rights-council>.



International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine has continuously stressed that such Russian attacks are conducted with “apparent disregard for civilian harm and suffering”, are “indiscriminate and disproportionate” in nature, and lack a military objective.<sup>92</sup> The Commission noted that “other provinces of Ukraine, further from the frontline, have also been affected by explosive weapons hitting residential buildings and other civilian structures.”<sup>93</sup> These attacks killed more than 8,000 individuals and heavily featured provinces which, at that stage in the conflict, were situated hundreds of kilometres from the frontlines. Civilian targets within these were attacked during the daytime, most likely to maximise casualties among the Ukrainians.<sup>94</sup> These attacks came on top of other “war crimes of torture, wilful killing, rape and other sexual violence, and deportation of children, which are also violations of human rights.”<sup>95</sup>

## Russian State Sponsorship/Support of Terrorism at Home and Abroad

The case for Russia’s designation as a state sponsor of terrorism can also be made in relation to its seemingly deniable activities when Moscow provides what Byman termed “passive support” to terrorist entities. This allows Russia to claim deniability of actions and activities of a given violent/extremist or terrorist group. In Russia’s case, this should have concerned Moscow’s dealings with a plethora of far-right groups which had a love/hate relationship with state power in the country. A great example of such a relationship is Russian Image (*Ruskii Obraz*), a group that was the recipient of state subsidies and patronage from curators in and around the Kremlin, which at the same time conducted a string of terrorist attacks in Russia.<sup>96</sup>

The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is a special case in this category.<sup>97</sup> In 2008, RIM was referred to as “a dwarfish ultra-right group which openly uses a slightly modified four-wing swastika as its symbol,”<sup>98</sup> but twelve years later it became the first “white supremacist” entity to be designated “a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT)” by the US Department of State.<sup>99</sup> The group attracted interest from the US as RIM provided training facilities to members of the Swedish far-right Nordic Resistance Movement who then attempted to conduct a string of bombings against immigrant targets in Sweden.<sup>100</sup> In this sense, it indirectly crossed the line from being a violent and domestically focused entity into a provider of training and support for acts of terror conducted abroad.

Interestingly, RIM has a complicated relationship with the Russian authorities. On one hand, it talks and, to some extent, acts like an anti-government extremist (AGE) group, vehemently opposed to the regime of President Putin.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, however, its fighters, under the banner of “its” Imperial Legion (RIM’s paramilitary wing), have been fighting against Ukraine since 2014.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, its members fought and died in Libya as de facto contractors of the Russian government which intervened in the country.<sup>103</sup> This suggests at least alignment with the goals and practices of the government in Moscow and the latter’s more than tacit support for a group which has been designated a terrorist entity by the US and later Canada.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, however, the fact

92 See: The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, “*Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine*,” February 2023, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A\\_HRC\\_52\\_62\\_AUV\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf)

93 See: The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, “*Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine*,” October 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A-78-540-AEV.pdf>.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 See: Robert Horvath, *Putin’s Fascists. Ruskii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

97 Also known as ‘Russkoe imperskoe dvizhenie’ or RID.

98 See: Alexander Verkhovsky (ed.), “Spring-2008: Depression and Déjà Vu,” *SOVA Center Report*, 8 August 2008, [https://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2008/08/d13944/?sphrase\\_id=2012798#\\_ftnref6](https://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2008/08/d13944/?sphrase_id=2012798#_ftnref6)

99 Nathan A. Sales, “Designation of the Russian Imperial Movement,” *U.S. Department of State*, 6 April 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/designation-of-the-russian-imperial-movement/>.

100 See: Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022.

101 See: Mapping Militant Organizations, “Russian Imperial Movement,” Last modified April 7, 2023, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement> for RIM’s profile.

102 Rekawek, “*Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*”.

103 Mapping Militant Organizations, “Russian Imperial Movement,” Last modified April 7, 2023, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>

104 Government of Canada, “Government of Canada lists 13 new groups as terrorist entities and completes review of seven others,” 3 February

that the "Imperial Legion" seemingly functions outside Russian security structures, provides the Kremlin with a slim veneer of plausible deniability.

As much as the "Imperial Legion" or the broader RIM enjoy such deniability, the situation is more complex when it comes to the infamous Wagner Group, which is currently subsumed into the so-called Africa Corps, and allegedly under tight control of the GRU.<sup>105</sup> Wagner has been a leading Russian private military company in Russia. These are officially illegal in Russia but "through friendly oligarchs, these organisations unofficially serve the state." They are not, however, mere mercenaries as Vladimir Putin harnessed their capacities and skills to assist in the process of "building a new Russia" – he expected the PMC to have a state-supporting dimension. Consequently, the likes of Wagner were put on contracts allowing the organisation to "fight for access to oil in Syria, win profits from the mining of diamonds and uranium, and gain control over the 'separatist' republics in Ukraine." As such, they became an instrument in the hands of a "structurally" weak state, which is able to leverage the few strengths it possesses: "sowing conflict in every shape and form."<sup>106</sup> While sowing conflict, Wagner would continuously unleash "a systematic campaign of violence and terror," especially on its assignments in Africa.<sup>107</sup> Wherever the company went, however, its appearance in places such as Syria, Libya, Sudan, Central African Republic, and Mali was "preceded by agreements reached between local governments and the Russian Foreign Ministry, under the watchful eyes of Russia's intelligence agencies."<sup>108</sup> In this sense, Wagner was plausibly deniable to Russia as no official Russian operatives had been involved, but at the same time, it was also fully endorsed by Moscow, as its arrival anywhere was actually brokered by the Russian government.

While embarking on its foreign exploits, Wagner's action began to, according to some commentators, "bear a remarkable resemblance to the EU's comprehensive definition of a terrorist organization."<sup>109</sup> As a result of such views, potentially shaped by the company's brutal actions in Ukraine,<sup>110</sup> Wagner looked like low-hanging fruit to anyone wishing to tar Russia with the label of "state sponsor of terrorism." The reasoning was that if one was to accept the fact that Wagner was to be designated a terrorist organisation, then logically, Russia, its protector and employer, could suffer the same fate as a state sponsor. Throughout 2023, first, the Lithuanian parliament adopted a resolution which recognised the company as "a terrorist organisation,"<sup>111</sup> the French parliament then passed a similar resolution calling on the EU to add Wagner to its list of terrorist organisations,<sup>112</sup> and the UK issued a proscription order against the organisation and labelled it as "terrorist." The then UK's Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, stated that the company had "been involved in looting, torture, and barbarous murders. Its operations in Ukraine, the Middle East and Africa are a threat to global security."<sup>113</sup> This designation seemed to have only been confirmed by the events of the following year when the company was allegedly found

2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2021/02/government-of-canada-lists-13-new-groups-as-terrorist-entities-and-completes-review-of-seven-others.html>.

105 Vast literature on Wagner exists. See, for example: one of the latest monographs on the group/company: Anna Arutunyan, Mark Galeotti, *Downfall. Prigozhin, Putin and the new fight for the future of Russia*, London: Penguin, 2024.

106 Zbigniew Parafianowicz, *Prywatne Armie Swiata czyli jak wygladaja wspolczesne konflikty* [World's Private Armies or How the Modern Conflicts Look Like], Krakow: Mando, 2021, loc. 20, kindle edition.

107 Arutunyan and Galeotti, "Downfall, Prigozhin, Putin", p. 134.

108 Ibid., p. 142.

109 Andrea Castagna, Marco Melega, Anna Melenchuk "Can Russia Be Designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism?," *GMF*, 1 August 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/can-russia-be-designated-state-sponsor-terrorism>. See: "Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism," <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001E0931> for the full definition.

110 Ike Walton, "The Wagner Brigade and the shocking video of the execution of an alleged defector," *WSC*, 13 November 2022, <https://www.wireservice.ca/the-wagner-brigade-and-the-shocking-video-of-the-execution-of-an-alleged-defector-corriere-it/>.

111 BNS, "Lithuania designates Russia's Wagner as terrorist organisation," *LRT*, 14 March 2023,

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1936307/lithuania-designates-russia-s-wagner-as-terrorist-organisation>

112 "French Parliament calls on EU to list Wagner as 'terrorist group,'" *Le Monde*, 10 May 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2023/05/10/french-parliament-calls-on-eu-to-list-wagner-as-terrorist-group\\_6026136\\_5.html#:~:text=The%20French%20Parliament%20adopted%20a%20resolution%20on%20Tuesday%2C,passed%20with%20unanimous%20support%20across%20the%20political%20spectrum](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2023/05/10/french-parliament-calls-on-eu-to-list-wagner-as-terrorist-group_6026136_5.html#:~:text=The%20French%20Parliament%20adopted%20a%20resolution%20on%20Tuesday%2C,passed%20with%20unanimous%20support%20across%20the%20political%20spectrum).

113 Government of the UK, "Russian Wagner Group declared terrorists," 6 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/russian-wagner-group-declared-terrorists>.

plotting "an arson attack on a Ukraine-linked business in London."<sup>114</sup> Four months later, Poland arrested two suspected Wagner recruiters who, in 2024, were charged with "participation in an armed organisation which is intent on conducting terrorist crime."<sup>115</sup>

---

114 Daniel Sandford, "Two British men charged with helping Russian intelligence," *BBC News*, 26 April 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-68899130.amp>.

115 Wiktoria Beczek, "Wagnerowcy zatrzymani w Polsce zachekali, by zostac najemnikiem. Uslyszeli zarzuty," [Wagnerites detained in Poland urged to become mercenaries. They heard charges], *Gazeta.pl*, 21 June 2024, <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114883,31080424,wagnerowcy-zatrzymani-w-polsce-zachekali-by-zostac-najemnikiem.html#s=BoxOplmg4>.

## War Crimes, Not Terrorism: The Case Against Designating Russia

The previous part of the report concentrated on evidence and situations which support the cases for Russia's culpability as a "state sponsor of terrorism" or worse, a "state terrorist"/"terrorist state." As many of these incidents, however, are being perpetrated amidst an ongoing war on the territory of Ukraine, one must turn the attention towards the international humanitarian law (IHL) which regulates the conduct of war in order to protect civilians and consider there is a need and added value for progressing with Russia's terrorist designations. Perhaps, it could be argued, no such case exists as Russia could be held accountable under IHL.

Ben Saul, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, pointed out that most terrorist acts in war are "already criminalized as various war crimes."<sup>116</sup> Moreover, international humanitarian law prohibits "terrorism, acts of terror, and intending to spread terror amongst a civilian population" vis-à-vis both state and non-state perpetrators.<sup>117</sup> The Special Court for Sierra Leone, set up to prosecute international humanitarian law violations during the Sierra Leone civil war extended this approach to acts against property, provided such attacks would be conducted with the aim of spreading terror throughout the population.<sup>118</sup>

In short, IHL prohibits "measures of terrorism" and "acts of terrorism" against individuals not involved in hostilities, and "terrorist" acts which would be seen as "terrorism offences" outside the conflict zone<sup>119</sup> Such prohibition "is set forth in a large number of military manuals. Violations of this rule are an offence under the legislation of numerous States. The prohibition is also supported by official statements." The Fourth Geneva Convention, which addresses the humanitarian protections for civilians in a war zone, also prohibits

"all measures of intimidation or of terrorism' such as offensive support or strike operations aimed at spreading terror among the civilian population, [...] indiscriminate and widespread shelling, [...] and the regular bombardment of cities, [...] but also assault, rape, abuse and torture of women and children, [...] and mass killing."<sup>120</sup>

Based on the facts emerging from Ukraine and discussed throughout this report, it appears that Russian troops have likely committed several of the above acts on the territory of Ukraine, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, rape, unlawful detention in occupied parts of Ukraine,<sup>121</sup> and the infamous Bucha massacre.<sup>122</sup> This in itself, however, is not enough to secure a conviction as only a court can decide whether a war crime has been committed with the evidentiary threshold set at a high level. At the end of 2023, the International Criminal Court (ICC) quickly mobilised and sent teams to Ukraine to investigate claims of war crimes coming from Ukrainian authorities.<sup>123</sup> Contrary to some expectations, however, this could not have resulted in a string of indictments

<sup>116</sup> Ben Saul, "Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and International Humanitarian Law," *Sydney Law School, Legal Studies Research Paper*, No. 16/37, May 2016, p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>118</sup> Laura Paredi, "The War Crime Of Terror: An Analysis Of International Jurisprudence," *ICD Brief* 11, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Tristan Ferraro, "International Humanitarian Law, Principled Humanitarian Action, Counterterrorism and Sanctions: Some Perspectives on Selected Issues", *International Review of the Red Cross*, 103, 2021 p. 118.

<sup>120</sup> See: ICRC, "International Humanitarian Law Databases," [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule2#Fn\\_40E5B09C\\_00001](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v1/rule2#Fn_40E5B09C_00001).

<sup>121</sup> "What's in the UN report on rights abuses in Russian-occupied Ukraine?," *Reuters*, 20 March 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/un-report-documents-russian-rights-abuses-occupied-ukraine-2024-03-20/>.

<sup>122</sup> Yousur Al-Hlou, "Caught on Camera, Traced By Phone: The Russian Military Unit That Killed Dozens in Bucha," *The New York Times*, 23 December 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/22/video/russia-ukraine-bucha-massacre-takeaways.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Tanya Mehra, "An interview with Ben Saul on International Humanitarian Law in the context of the Israel-Gaza Crisis," *ICCT*, 31 October 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/interview-ben-saul-international-humanitarian-law-context-israel-gaza-crisis>.

as the ICC targets those bearing the greatest responsibility such as heads of state or military commanders (the number of Russians indicted by the ICC currently stands at four). The ICC also works on the basis of complementarity, co-working in the process with national jurisdictions, i.e. legal proceedings launched in this field given countries. Examples of these include six EU Member States forming, with the support of Eurojust, a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) to assist in holding Russia accountable for its crimes;<sup>124</sup> Ukrainian efforts to indict Russians (although many in absentia);<sup>125</sup> and US indictment of “four Russia-affiliated military personnel charged with war crimes in connection with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.”<sup>126</sup>

---

124 See: <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/eurojust-and-the-war-in-ukraine> for Eurojust’s announcement.

125 “Ukraine probing over 122,000 suspected war crimes, says prosecutor,” *Reuters*, 23 February 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-probing-over-122000-suspected-war-crimes-says-prosecutor-2024-02-23/>

126 U.S. Department of Justice, “Four Russia-Affiliated Military Personnel Charged with War Crimes in Connection with Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” 6 December 2023, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/four-russia-affiliated-military-personnel-charged-war-crimes-connection-russias-invasion>.

## Not All Is Lost? Designating and Prosecuting Individuals

Despite the fact that one should not expect a string of indictments of Russian officials by the likes of ICC, there are precedents which might point the way forward when it comes to holding those responsible.

The first case concerns the Czech Republic, which has unique experience with participants of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Since 2021 the country began sentencing its nationals who fought in the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2014 on the Russian side for “preparation of acts of terrorism.”<sup>127</sup> These nationals participated in the ranks of the so-called “separatist” or “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic,” forces which are both perceived as illegal entities under Czech law.<sup>128</sup> These separatist forces were organised into “army corps” and controlled by Russia. This is significant as it indicates that an EU Member State and NATO ally has effectively designated pro-Russian or Russian proxy forces as “terrorist.” It is possible that such an approach will be adopted by other EU or NATO members on a unilateral basis, especially in relation to its nationals fighting on the Russian side in the war of aggression against Ukraine.

Moreover, the Yugoslav wars also offer a precedent which might be of use while thinking of the responsibility of the Russian operatives involved in state terrorism. The Bosnian-Serb forces deployed violence, including war crimes such as ethnic cleansing, in both an indiscriminate and strategic manner so that local populations would be “terrorized” and rapidly flee a given area.<sup>129</sup> This “spreading fear through terror” in the Bosnian case aimed to cleanse parts of Bosnia, or in the case of Ukraine to break the will of Ukrainian resistance.<sup>130</sup> These goals might have been accomplished via different means (ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or long-range missile strikes in Ukraine), but both courses of action functioned as key elements of the aggressor’s strategy to subdue its opponent.

The Bosnian-Serb approach to war resulted in Stanislav Galić, the commander of the Army of Republika Srpska (or VRS) forces besieging the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo, convicted of “spreading terror among the civilian population” by having his troops shell and snipe the city. He was consequently sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>131</sup> The above-mentioned crime is constituted of the following elements:

1. it is an act of violence “directed against the civilian population or individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities causing death or serious injury [...]”
2. its offender “wilfully made the civilian population or individual civilians not taking direct part in hostilities the object” of the act; and
3. “the above offence was committed with the primary purpose of spreading terror among the civilian population.”<sup>132</sup>

<sup>127</sup> Kacper Rekawek, “An effective ban on foreign fighting? Wider implications of the Czech policy towards foreign (terrorist) fighters,” *RightNow!*, 20 September 2021, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2021/an-effective-ban-on-foreign-fighting-wider-implica.html>.

<sup>128</sup> Rekawek, “An effective ban on foreign fighting”.

<sup>129</sup> Iva Vukusic, *Serbian Paramilitaries and the Breakup of Yugoslavia. State Connections and Patterns of Violence*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, p. 39.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>131</sup> International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of Former Yugoslavia since 1991, “*Prosecutor vs Stanislav Galic*,” 5 December 2003, <https://www.icty.org/x/cases/galic/tjug/en/gal-tj031205e.pdf>.

<sup>132</sup> Kelisiana Thynne, “Better a war criminal or a terrorist? A comparative study of war crimes and counterterrorism legislation,” *International Review of the Red Cross*, 2021, 103, p.241

Apart from the case of Galić, the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of Former Yugoslavia since 1991 (or ICTY) also used the “evidence of terrorization of civilians” which was “factored into convictions on other charges” during different trials.<sup>133</sup>

If Galić, commander of an “army corps” of a military force, was convicted for his actions in Bosnia, then technically so could the Russian commanders responsible for “spreading terror” among the Ukrainian population. The key difference, however, is that the former had been present outside of Sarajevo and it had been easier to establish his direct responsibility for the crimes committed. Consequently, the fact that he remained on the territory of Bosnia led to his apprehension by the soldiers of the NATO-led Stabilisation Force SFOR in 1999.<sup>134</sup> The Russian commanders responsible for comparable crimes, however, are often outside the immediate conflict zone, and the fact that the Russian military uses a combined arms approach to warfare allows for certain masking of lines of direct responsibility for particular acts on the ground. Nonetheless, the likes of the Russian Commanders of the Joint Group of Forces in the Special Military Operation zone (effectively, in Ukraine) bear the final responsibility for the acts of the subordinates under their command and potentially, could be indicted along the lines of Galić. Moreover, their subordinates bear direct responsibility for their acts under the Russian criminal code which criminalises “the use in an armed conflict of means and methods prohibited” by international treaties to which the Russian Federation is a signatory, including the mistreatment of POWs and torture.<sup>135</sup> The spring of 2024 saw the first activity of the ICC in relation to such an approach with the court indicting two Russian commanders for being “allegedly responsible for the war crime of directing attacks at civilian objects (Article 8(2)(b)(ii) of the Rome Statute) and the war crime of causing excessive incidental harm to civilians or damage to civilian objects (Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute), and the crime against humanity of inhumane acts.”<sup>136</sup> A similar fate later awaited both the Russian minister of defence and his first deputy, who became the subjects of ICC arrest warrants in June 2024.<sup>137</sup>

133 See: Andrea Castagna, Marco Melega, Anna Melenchuk “Can Russia Be Designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism?,” *GMF*, 1 August 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/can-russia-be-designated-state-sponsor-terrorism>; The Council of the European Union, “Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism,” 27 December 2001, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32001E0931> for the full definition.

134 “Sarajevo Indictment: Ex-General Stanislav Galic Arrested,” *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 24 December 1999, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/sarajevo-indictment-ex-general-stanislav-galic-arrested>.

135 Thynne, “Better a war criminal or a terrorist?” p. 245

136 See: International Criminal Court, “Situation in Ukraine: ICC judges issue arrest warrants against Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu and Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov,” 25 June 2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-ukraine-icc-judges-issue-arrest-warrants-against-sergei-kuzhugetovich-shoigu-and>.

137 International Criminal Court, “Situation in Ukraine,” Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/situations/ukraine>.

## Conclusion: A Way Forward?

On 23 November 2022, the European Parliament declared that Russia is a “state sponsor of terrorism and a state that used [the] ‘means of terrorism’.”<sup>138</sup> This was a non-binding resolution as the EU has no mechanism to designate states as such sponsors or users of these means. The US is in a different situation, and, relatively recently (2021), it updated its State Sponsors of Terrorism list by adding Cuba. The designation was justified by the alleged “Cuban government repeatedly [providing] support for acts of international terrorism in granting safe harbor to terrorists.”<sup>139</sup> There, however, seems to be no intention to include Russia on the world’s only terrorism list which features states. Plenty of diplomatic and practical reasons have been discussed elsewhere – especially as it would complicate diplomatic efforts to end the Russo-Ukrainian war.<sup>140</sup> Some commentators have also insisted that “Moscow will at one level find the designation deeply insulting, not least because it views itself as at the forefront of countering terrorism. Thus, the Russian foreign ministry has threatened to break off diplomatic relations with the US if such a decision is taken. Even more worrying is the prospect that President Putin could regard this move as an overt call for a change in Russia’s government – particularly given that one of the two statutory paths to rescission involves a change in the designated country’s leadership.”<sup>141</sup> As controversial as such arguments will sound to the leadership in Kyiv, these will not be taken lightly in Washington, DC.

At the same time, however, given the evidence presented in this article, and also while setting it against the backdrop of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the arguments from this report should be familiar to anyone arguing that “geopolitics have returned.”<sup>142</sup> Such reasoning detects growing major power rivalry, which animates international relations in this decade. This seemingly opens the door for reliance on asymmetric weapons of the weak, such as state terrorism and state sponsorship of terrorism, as ways through which a given power may seem to outmanoeuvre its competitor(s). As it was shown, Russia has been firmly operating with this intention in mind for some time – for more than a decade it has both repressed internal opposition and conducted “political warfare” against its opponents. Consequently, this report introduces or effectively (re-)introduces a different state-centric approach to thinking about the issue of terrorism in the field of terrorism studies. The field suffers from an overfocus on bottom-up, non-state-related political violence and terrorism and seems to have neglected the fact that we might be back in the paradigm of state terrorism, which was responsible for a plethora of violence in the West prior to 1989.<sup>143</sup> In this sense, formal designations of Russia or not are, to an extent, irrelevant as there is mounting evidence that Moscow, in line with its concepts of political warfare and inter-state terrorism, is involved in both state terrorism and state sponsorship of terrorism. Consequently, even if further designations of the country do not materialise, it is useful to raise awareness of Russian involvement in such activities for the benefit of the research, academic and expert milieu, which tended to see Moscow not as a foe or a threat, but more of a partner in countering jihadi terrorism.<sup>144</sup>

138 European Parliament, “European Parliament declares Russia to be a state sponsor of terrorism,” 23 November 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20221118IPR55707/european-parliament-declares-russia-to-be-a-state-sponsor-of-terrorism>.

139 U.S. Department of State, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2021: Cuba,” Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/cuba/>.

140 Delaney Simon, Michael Wahid Hanna, “Why the U.S. Should Not Designate Russia as a State Sponsor of Terrorism,” *International Crisis Group: Commentary*, 4 August 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/united-states/why-us-should-not-designate-russia-state-sponsor-terrorism>.

141 Ibid.

142 See: Carsten Nickel, “What do we talk about when we talk about the ‘return’ of geopolitics?,” *International Affairs*, Volume 100, Issue 1, January 2024.

143 See: Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II. The KGB in the World*, London: Penguin Books, 2018.

144 See, for example: Simon Saradzhyan, “U.S. and Russia Share a Vital Interest in Countering Terrorism,” U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats “The Threat of Islamist Extremism in Russia,” 30 September 2015, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/us-and-russia-share-vital-interest-countering-terrorism>.



At the same time, the West possesses a string of instruments developed in order to tackle entities or individuals involved in terrorism, be it those present in the US,<sup>145</sup> the EU,<sup>146</sup> or the UK.<sup>147</sup> These instruments seem more feasible to be utilised against Russian-linked entities or individuals as designating or listing a sub-state, clandestine organisation is easier than targeting a state entity with all the geopolitical and economic ramifications inherent with such a move. Ironically, however, there are some overlaps between the current sanctions regime against Russia such as those agreed by the EU and the “restrictive measures” applied against listed terrorist groups, organisations, or individuals. Both Russia and sanctioned terrorist entities see their assets frozen and a ban on financial assets or resources being made available to them.<sup>148</sup>

Perhaps these mechanisms could be in operation not against the Russian state but against commanders of its forces or inciters/propagandists of violence/terrorism. Such an approach would be in line with the evidence against Russia presented in this article but does not carry the seismic consequences which would evidently follow from designating a whole country as a terrorist. It would also allow for the simultaneous work towards prosecuting the very same individuals under the IHL for crimes committed either before or after 24 February 2022 – the onset of the full-scale war. It would further allow Ukraine and others to continue referring to Russia as “terrorist” while showcasing its violent actions committed either during the Russo-Ukrainian war or the so-called Russian “political warfare” in the West. At the same time, it would produce concrete prosecutorial and sentencing results towards a growing body of individuals leading the Russian military in Ukraine or its terrorist operations in the West. These would not only amount to naming and shaming but also act as a deterrent to future state terrorism operations and their perpetrators.

---

145 U.S. Department of State, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

146 Council of the European Union, “EU terrorist list,” Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/fight-against-terrorism/terrorist-list/>.

147 Government of the UK, “Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations,” *Home Office*, 15 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/proscribed-terror-groups-or-organisations--2>.

148 See: Saul, “Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and International Humanitarian Law,” p.18

## About the Author

---

### Kacper Rekawek

Dr. Kacper Rekawek is a Senior Research Fellow and Programme Lead (Current and Emerging Threats) at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague. Prior to joining the ICCT, Kacper worked on issues related to countering terrorism and countering violent extremism while in academia (at C-Rex, the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo, the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews; SWPS University in Warsaw, and a PhD at Queen's University Belfast), think tanks (the Polish Institute of International Affairs, PISM, and secondments to RUSI, London and Al Ahram Centre, in Cairo) and the third sector (Countering Extremism Project in New York/Berlin and GLOBSEC in Bratislava).

Kacper's research interests encompass a vast field related to terrorist organisations and networks, and means of countering them. He originally started as a researcher focusing on terrorism in Europe in general, and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in particular. His PhD was a comparative study of the factions of the IRA. Since 2011, in his job as a terrorism analyst at PISM, he focused almost exclusively on global jihadism, which was also the focus of his major projects while he was at GLOBSEC between 2016 and 2019. Since 2014, he has also published extensively on the Western (extremist) foreign fighters in the Russo-Ukrainian war. From January 2020, he has been conducting research on the pre-war lives of such fighters which was supported by the Counter Extremism Project. While at C-Rex (2021-3) he also studied the "afterlives" of the aforementioned fighters who returned home after the first phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Rekawek has successfully led multinational research projects related to international security in general and terrorism and countering terrorism in particular (e.g. the comparative analyses of the state of European jihadism, supported by PMI Impact and Counter Extremism Project, which involved partners in eleven countries). He has worked on a number of other international projects, including efforts supported by the European Commission and NATO. He is a member and participates in the activities of the Society for Terrorism Research, European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues and the Radicalisation Awareness Network.

He is the author of four books: "Irish Republican Terrorism and Politics: A Comparative Study of the Official and the Provisional IRA", published by Routledge; a popular book on terrorism titled "A Man With a Small Bomb" which came out in Poland in 2017; and the first systematic study of the phenomenon of foreign fighting in the Russo-Ukrainian war, "Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail", published by Routledge in December 2022. In 2024, "Russia and the Far-Right: Insights From Ten European Countries" was published by the ICCT.



# International Centre for Counter-Terrorism

---

**International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)**

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: [info@icct.nl](mailto:info@icct.nl)

[www.icct.nl](http://www.icct.nl)