



# Blurring Terrorism and War: Russia's Counter-Terrorism Framework and the Risks for International Partners

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International Centre for  
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## Abstract

Russia's counter-terrorism framework reflects a dual dynamic: the persistence of genuine security threats alongside the expansion of terrorism-related designations to encompass non-violent conduct, political dissent, and wartime activities. Russia has reported a sharp rise in terrorism since 2022, but this increase reflects an expanding legal and political reclassification rather than a significant growth in violent threats. This policy brief examines how military courts, administrative designation systems, and financial compliance tools enable this expansion, often in ways that fall short of due process standards. It argues that these practices blur the boundary between legitimate counter-terrorism and politically motivated enforcement, with implications for international cooperation. Despite reduced engagement since 2022, Russia remains embedded in global counter-terrorism and financial governance frameworks, creating operational dependencies and legal risks for international partners. The brief calls for selective, risk-differentiated international engagement, enhanced scrutiny of Russian-origin information, and stronger safeguards to prevent the misuse of global counter-terrorism instruments.

## Introduction

Russia has reported a dramatic surge in terrorism since 2022, with nearly 2,500 attacks recorded in 2025 – almost as many as in the previous two decades combined.<sup>1</sup> Yet this apparent escalation contrasts with relatively low levels of lethal violence and a hundredfold lower number of confirmed attacks by independent observers.<sup>2</sup> This policy brief explains this conundrum and contributes empirical evidence to the broader debate on how terrorism is legally constructed and operationalised by states. It examines the genuine threat and argues that the increase in terrorism-related activity in Russia reflects not a substantive rise in violent threats, but a broad legal and political reclassification of terrorism, influenced by the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The reclassification of domestic activities exposes international partners to potential complicity in political prosecutions. The war did not stop international counter-terrorism cooperation, but changed its nature, making it less transparent and further externalising domestic counter-terrorism practices. With limited ability to verify Russian data, international partners relying on Russian terrorism designations – for intelligence-sharing, legal cooperation, or financial compliance – risk acting on politically instrumentalised data.

While Russian counter-terrorism policies have been widely studied,<sup>3</sup> including by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism<sup>4</sup> recent enforcement practices and the judicial dimension remain underexplored in the English-language literature. Thus, this policy brief aims to provide international organisations, governments, and expert communities with empirically grounded insights to inform risk assessments, shape cooperation practices, and help prevent the exploitation of global counter-terrorism instruments for political repression.

## Methodology Note

This policy brief draws on a combination of desk research, key informant interviews, and quantitative dataset analysis. Between October 2025 and February 2026, several interviews were conducted with lawyers, independent experts, and opposition activists from Russia to gather qualitative insights on judicial practices, enforcement, and political misuse of counter-terrorism frameworks. Quantitative analysis relied on multiple sources, including Russian Supreme Court and Ministry of Internal Affairs statistics (2015–2025), Sova Center data on hate-motivated crime, Global Terrorism Index data, ACLED political violence records (2018–2026), and the Memorial dataset on political prisoners.<sup>5</sup>

Official and independent sources were triangulated to identify discrepancies between reported terrorism incidents and prosecutions, with a focus on non-violent cases, administrative

1 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, “State of Crime in Russia, January–December 2025,” accessed March 2026, <https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/reports/item/68795497/>

2 Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2026 (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>

3 International Crisis Group, The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (III), Governance, Elections, Rule of Law, Europe Report No. 226, September 6, 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/russia-internal/226-north-caucasus-challenges-integration-iii-governance-elections-rule-law>; Pavel K. Baev, “From Chechnya to Syria: The Evolution of Russia’s Counter-Terrorist Policy,” French Institute of International Relations, April 2018, <https://www.ifri.org/en/papers/chechnya-syria-evolution-russias-counter-terrorist-policy>.

4 Kacper Rekawek and Antoine Baudon, “Beyond Blame Games: Deciphering Russia’s Response to the Evolving Jihadi Threat,” International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 28, 2024, <https://icct.nl/publication/beyond-blame-games-deciphering-russias-response-evolving-jihadi-threat>

5 Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, Judicial Statistics Data, accessed March 2026, <https://cdep.ru/?id=79>; Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, “State of Crime in Russia, January–December 2025,” accessed March 2026, <https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/reports/item/68795497/>; SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, “Racism and Xenophobia: Publications, January 2026,” January 2026, <https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2026/01/d52902/>; Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2026 (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Number of Political Violence Events by Country-Year,” accessed March 29, 2026, <https://acleddata.com/aggregated/number-political-violence-events-country-year>; Memorial Human Rights Defense Center, “Список преследуемых политзаключённых” [List of Political Prisoners], accessed March 29, 2026, <https://memopzrk.org/spiski-presleduemyh-politzaklyuchennyh/>.

designations, and implications for international cooperation. Official data should be treated with caution, as it may reflect changing legal classifications, reporting practices, enforcement priorities, and institutional incentives rather than solely underlying patterns of criminal activity or repression. Limitations also include potential political bias in official statistics and accessibility constraints for certain key informants; findings are intended to highlight trends and systemic patterns rather than provide definitive conclusions.

## Historical Evolution of Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism (Pre-2022)

Russia has historically faced genuine terrorism threats from nationalist movements – Chechen separatists and far-right Russian nationalists<sup>6</sup> – and to a much greater extent, violent Islamists from the North Caucasus and later the IS.

Before 2022, terrorism in Russia was shaped primarily by the trajectory of conflict in the North Caucasus, which evolved from a nationalist separatist struggle into a transnational jihadist insurgency and was Europe’s most violent before fighting broke out in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The two Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2000) began as a fight for independence but, by the late 1990s, had drawn in foreign fighters and increasingly adopted Islamist ideology, culminating in the declaration of Sharia rule and the emergence of militant networks with broader regional ambitions.<sup>7</sup> Over time, violence spread beyond Chechnya into neighbouring republics such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, where local grievances, repression, and religious tensions fuelled recruitment. At the time, up to three hundred law enforcement officials were killed annually,<sup>8</sup> and terrorist attacks against civilians were regular, with the biggest targeting a school in Beslan in 2004, taking the lives of 334. By 2007, the insurgency was reorganised under the umbrella of the Caucasus Emirate, a regional jihadist project linking disparate militant groups. By the mid-2010s, parts of this underground had aligned themselves with the so-called Islamic State, reflecting both the globalisation of jihadist movements and the displacement of fighters to theatres such as Syria and Iraq when domestic operational space narrowed.<sup>9</sup>

Russia’s counter-terrorism approach during this period relied heavily on coercive measures, including large-scale military operations, “mopping-up” raids, and extensive use of security services (siloviki), often accompanied by grave human rights violations such as torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Human rights groups estimate 15,000-20,000 civilians died and 3,000-5,000 went missing during the second Chechen war. The state also pursued a strategy of indirect rule in Chechnya, empowering loyal local elites under<sup>10</sup> the Kadyrov leadership, while declaring remaining insurgents as terrorists beyond negotiation. At the same time, the authorities intervened in the religious sphere by promoting “traditional” Sufi Islam through state-aligned institutions and repressing Salafi communities, a policy that contributed to further radicalisation by blurring the line between peaceful religious practice and security threats.<sup>11</sup>

6 Johannes Due Enstad, “Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Putin’s Russia,” Perspectives on Terrorism (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism), accessed March 29, 2026, <https://pt.icct.nl/article/right-wing-terrorism-and-violence-putins-russia>

7 International Crisis Group, Chechnya: The Inner Abroad, Europe Report No. 236, June 30, 2015, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/russia-internal/236-chechnya-inner-abroad>

8 Memorial Human Rights Center, “Вооруженный конфликт на Северном Кавказе: итоги двадцати лет” [Armed Conflict in the North Caucasus: Twenty Years On], April 3, 2026, accessed April 20, 2026.

9 International Crisis Group, The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (III), Governance, Elections, Rule of Law, Europe Report No. 226, September 6, 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/russia-internal/226-north-caucasus-challenges-integration-iii-governance-elections-rule-law>

10 “The Situation in the Northern Caucasus 2009-2010: Human Rights Violations Stemming from the Antiterrorism Campaign Continue”, FIDH and Memorial, September 2010; Alexandr Cherkasov, “Книга чисел. Книга утрат. Книга страшного суда” [“The book of numbers. The book of losses. The book of the Last Judgment”], Polit.ru, 19 February 2004.

11 State support for particular Islamic traditions in the North Caucasus has generally been pragmatic and security-driven rather than primarily ideological, varying across regions and over time. During the Soviet period, especially from the 1920s onward, authorities often repressed Sufi networks, which served as important centres of social mobilisation and resistance in parts of Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia. The

Alongside these hardline measures, a more limited “soft” approach was briefly tested during the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev. This included the establishment of regional adaptation commissions offering reintegration pathways for insurgents, reduced pressure on religious practices, and community-based negotiation mechanisms aimed at encouraging defections from the underground. While these initiatives contributed to a temporary reduction in violence and recruitment, they remained secondary to coercive strategies and were largely abandoned in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, when security imperatives again took precedence.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the combination of the soft and hard measures and the outlawing of insurgents in the Middle East helped to get terrorism under control. If at its peak in 2010, independent observers recorded 327 attacks, the number dropped to one attack in 2021.<sup>13</sup>

## Post-2022 Shift: Reclassification and Expansion of Counter-Terrorism Framework

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia significantly expanded its legal and administrative counter-terrorism framework beyond acts of violence. While the post-2022 expansion marks a significant shift, it builds on counter-terrorism legislation and practices developed in the post-9/11 period, when Russia, like many states, broadened security powers in response to international counter-terrorism commitments and cooperation initiatives.<sup>14</sup>

Although there was a slight increase in the number of independently verified attacks – from one recorded attack in 2021 to 27 in 2025 – official Russian statistics report a dramatic surge in terrorism over the same period, from 41 to 2,475 attacks. Much of the official statistic increase appears to stem from the inclusion of activities related to the war in Ukraine or to acts of civil resistance, rather than acts of terrorism.<sup>15</sup> They range from arson attacks on military enlistment centres, rail infrastructure, or splashing paint on FSB buildings by often coerced Russian citizens, to Ukrainian military drone attacks against military airfields. Over 80 percent of terrorism-related prosecutions in 2025 did not involve direct violence, while only a minority of cases involve lethal acts.<sup>16</sup> Now, Russia monthly adds hundreds of entries to the list of “terrorists and extremists”, maintained by a federal agency, Rosfinmonitoring. The dataset grew from 1,600 entries in 2022 to nearly 20,000 by early February 2026<sup>17</sup>.

This analysis demonstrates that terrorism statistics in Russia do not reliably measure security threats, but instead capture enforcement practices. These patterns are reflected across the categories examined below.

significance of Sufism also varies across the region; while it plays a prominent role in the eastern North Caucasus, it has historically been much less influential in the western North Caucasus. Shamil Sh. Shikhaliev, “Discussions of Sufism in Dagestan in Historical Retrospective,” *History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Caucasus* 18, no. 2 (2022): 323–345, <https://doi.org/10.32653/CH182323-345>. “In a Climate of Fear: Political Process and Parliamentary Elections in Chechnya”, Memorial, Centre “Demos”, International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2005.

12 Varvara Pakhomenko, “Between Dialogue and Violence: The North Caucasus’s Bloody Legacy,” *OpenDemocracy*, December 14, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-s-north-caucasus-lesson-in-history/>

13 Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>

14 Georgia Holmer, “The New US Counter-Terrorism Strategy: Selective Amnesia,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, May 28, 2026, <https://icct.nl/publication/new-us-counter-terrorism-strategy-selective-amnesia>

15 Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, “State of Crime in Russia, January–December 2025,” accessed March 2026, <https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/reports/item/68795497/>; Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>; Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), “Number of Political Violence Events by Country-Year,” accessed March 29, 2026, <https://acleddata.com/aggregated/number-political-violence-events-country-year/>; Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov, “The Disastrous Paradox of Russian Fear,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, April 10, 2026, <https://cepa.org/article/the-disastrous-paradox-of-russian-fear/>.

16 *The Insider*, “Terrorism Verdicts in Russia Triple Since 2021, Reaching 94 per Month,” July 18, 2025, <https://theins.ru/en/news/283253/>; Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2026* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026), <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Global-Terrorism-Index-2026-Report.pdf>

17 Rosfinmonitoring, “List of Terrorists and Extremists,” accessed March 2026, <https://www.fedsfm.ru/documents/terrorists-catalog-portal-act>

## 1. Combating ideology-driven terrorism

In recent years, violent Islamism and far-right violence have been increasing from their 2021 low, though remaining below peak levels of the early 2010s.<sup>18</sup> The IS–Khorasan (ISK) terrorist attack on Moscow’s Crocus City Hall in 2024 resulted in 151 deaths, making it one of the world’s largest in recent years.<sup>19</sup> Despite this increase, Moscow attributes the majority of terrorist attacks to Ukraine. A dataset compiled by Russian state media RIA Novosti indicates that in 2025, 71 percent of foiled attacks were linked to Ukraine, while 19 percent were attributed to violent Islamism.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the decline of organised domestic Islamist insurgency, individuals from the North Caucasus remain disproportionately targeted in terrorism-related enforcement, accounting for over a third of the Rosfinmonitoring list. While occasional attacks on police continue, they occur on a much smaller scale. The June 2024 attack in Dagestan, which took 21 lives, was a notable exception. Authorities reported six terrorist attacks in the region in 2024 and three in 2025.<sup>21</sup> Many terrorism-related prosecutions in the North Caucasus appear to be linked to opposition activity or alleged connections to Ukraine rather than organised Islamist insurgency. Media and human rights organisations report numerous cases involving young people, including minors, accused of terrorism-related offences: posting pro-opposition materials or alleged communication with Ukrainian actors.<sup>22</sup>

Migrants from Central Asia are another major group designated as “terrorists or extremists”, reflecting both genuine security concerns and systemic patterns of discriminatory enforcement.<sup>23</sup> Tajikistan and Uzbekistan nationals make up over 900 and 700 Rosfinmonitoring list entries, respectively.<sup>24</sup> Following the ISK 2024 attack, 86 Tajik nationals were charged. Across Central Asia, ISK-related arrests and incidents have increased, reflecting both the group’s regional focus and intensified counter-terrorism efforts. In 2022, a Russian court designated the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan – representing part of the Tajik opposition in exile – as a terrorist organisation, affecting associated individuals.<sup>25</sup>

This has direct implications for international engagement on countering violent Islamism, as partners risk treating politically constructed cases as equivalent to genuine terrorism threats.

## 2. Silencing dissent

Terrorism-related and affiliated charges and designations have become a tool of political repression against critics of the war, indigenous rights activists and other dissenters, extending across a wide spectrum of society. UN Special Rapporteurs and experts describe Moscow using

18 Kill with Russia SOVA research organisation member, February 2026. SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, “Racism and Xenophobia: Publications, January 2026,” January 2026, <https://www.sova-center.ru/racism-xenophobia/publications/2026/01/d52902/>

19 International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, “Beyond Blame Games: Deciphering Russia’s Response to the Evolving Jihadist Threat,” accessed March 29, 2026, <https://icct.nl/publication/beyond-blame-games-deciphering-russias-response-evolving-jihadi-threat>

20 RIA Novosti, “Теракты” [Terrorist Attacks], January 14, 2026, <https://ria.ru/20260114/terakty-2034839540.html>; TASS, “В России в 2025 году предотвратили 172 терактаНовости общества” [In 2025, 172 terrorist attacks were prevented in RussiaSociety News], accessed March 29, 2026, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/24762245>

21 Kommersant, “High Activity of Terrorist Organisations Recorded in the North Caucasus Federal District,” December 16, 2025, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/8292884>; Al Jazeera, “At Least 20 Killed in Synagogue, Church Attacks in Russia’s Dagestan,” June 23, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/23/synagogue-church-attacks-in-russias-dagestan-kill-police-report>

22 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, “Young ‘Terrorists’: How Security Forces in the North Caucasus Fabricate Cases against Teenagers,” Kavkaz.Realii, December 2, 2025, <https://www.kavkazr.com/alyunye-terroristy-kak-na-severnom-kavkaze-siloviki-fabrikuyut-dela-protiv-podrostkov/33610759.html>

23 United Nations, “Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova,” September 15, 2025, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4094567?v=pdf>

24 Rosfinmonitoring, “List of Terrorists and Extremists,” accessed March 2026, <https://www.fedsfm.ru/documents/terrorists-catalog-portal-act>

25 Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, “Unified Federal List of Organizations, Including Foreign and International Organizations, Recognized as Terrorist in Accordance with the Legislation of the Russian Federation”, accessed March 29, 2026, <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>

a “deliberate strategy of using ‘extremism’ and counter-terrorism frameworks to dismantle civil society, criminalise and imprison human rights defenders, and target those seeking their support.”<sup>26</sup>

Russian law extends terrorism-related offences to non-violent conduct aimed at influencing decisions,<sup>27</sup> criminalising “justification,” “assistance,” or alleged participation in loosely defined “terrorist communities,” often linked to online speech or financial transfers.

Since 1 June 2025, legislation has allowed the inclusion in the “terrorist and extremists” list those accused of disseminating “fake information” or “discrediting” the army – offences criminalised in 2022.<sup>28</sup> “Treason” and “espionage” often come along with terrorism charges, too. In one case, a theatre director and a playwright were convicted for six years in prison for a production portraying Russian women who travelled to Syria to marry members of ISIS, despite the play having previously received a state-supported cultural award.<sup>29</sup> In April 2026, Nobel Peace Prize laureate, the ‘International Memorial Movement’, was designated “extremist” after being accused of “justification of terrorism”. In one documented case, an exiled activist only became aware of their designation through external research, as the government releases list updates, but does not notify individuals.<sup>30</sup>

Rosfinmonitoring’s list of “terrorists and extremists” includes religious and ethnic communities within Russia (including hundreds of Jehovah’s Witness branches), as well as human rights, anti-corruption, and pro-democracy organisations.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Framing war in Ukraine as terrorism

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly after the 2022 invasion, terrorism-related charges have increasingly been used to legally frame Ukraine-related activities.<sup>32</sup> Cases often stem from alleged arson attacks, financial support provided by Russian citizens to Ukrainian armed groups or communication with real or purported Ukrainian contacts, with reports of provocation tactics by law enforcement to induce individuals to share information and later use it as evidence.<sup>33</sup> Individual observers record hundreds of sabotage cases in 2022-2025, some of which were claimed by domestic resistance groups such as Atesh and Ostanovi Vagony (Stop the Cars).<sup>34</sup>

Captured Ukrainian military personnel are systematically prosecuted as terrorists rather than recognised as prisoners of war, reflecting the limited application of international humanitarian

26 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Strategy of Blatant Abuse of Counter-Terrorism and Extremism Laws to Destroy Russian Civil Society Must End: UN Experts,” April 9, 2026, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/04/strategy-blatant-abuse-counter-terrorism-and-extremism-laws-destroy-russian>

27 The legal definition of terrorism in Russian law is broad: “the ideology of violence and the practice of influencing the adoption of a decision by state power bodies, <...> connected with intimidation of the population and (or) other forms of unlawful violent actions”. Russian Federation, Federal Law No. 35-FZ of March 6, 2006, “On Counteracting Terrorism.”

28 The Insider, “Banking on Repression: How Russia Weaponized Its ‘Terrorist’ List against Political Dissidents,” December 28, 2025, <https://theins.press/en/politics/288135>

29 Amnesty International UK, Urgent Action – “Release of Women Director and Playwright”, 2023, <https://amnesty.ca/urgent-actions/russian-federation-release-women-director-playwright/>

30 KII with an exiled activist from the Northern Caucasus, accessed February 2026.

31 Rosfinmonitoring, “List of Terrorists and Extremists,” accessed March 2026, <https://www.fedsfm.ru/documents/terrorists-catalog-portal-act>

32 Terrorism often functions as a flexible legal and political category that can be applied across different forms of conflict and security challenges. In Russia, the second Chechen war was formally conducted as a “counter-terrorism operation” (1999–2009), creating a special legal regime that restricted rights and freedoms in Chechnya and, at times, elsewhere in the Russian Federation. Similarly, in Ukraine, where domestic legislation initially provided limited mechanisms for regulating armed conflict, the government designated its military campaign against the Russia-backed armed uprising in Donbas as an “Anti-Terrorist Operation” (ATO) between 2014 and 2018. These examples illustrate how the language of counter-terrorism has often been used by states to govern situations that also possess characteristics of armed conflict.

33 OVD-Info, “Репрессии в России в 2025 году: обзор” [Repression in Russia in 2025: Overview], January 30, 2026, <https://reports.ovd.info/repressii-v-rossii-v-2025-godu-obzor-ovd-info#2-2>

34 Nichita Gurcov, “Behind the Lines: How Ukraine Has Outgunned Russia in Sabotage,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/behind-lines-how-ukraine-has-outgunned-russia-sabotage>

law (IHL).<sup>35</sup> The Criminal Code contains only a few IHL provisions, and courts rarely apply them to war-related cases, despite official allegations of violations by Kyiv. In 2022-2024, only eight people were charged.<sup>36</sup>

The designation of Ukrainian military units as terrorist organisations enables the prosecution of regular combatants under counter-terrorism frameworks. In total, nearly thirty armed groups, including Azov, Aidar, and Donbas, have been designated as terrorist organisations by Russian courts.<sup>37</sup>

High-profile cases illustrate the expansive and often disproportionate application in wartime contexts. In the 2022 Crimean Bridge explosion case, eight defendants who allegedly had no knowledge of the planned attack were convicted of terrorism and sentenced to life imprisonment. A Ukrainian officer allegedly responsible for the sinking of Russia's flagship Moskva in 2022 was charged in absentia with international terrorism and sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>38</sup>

Repression extends beyond Ukrainian soldiers to civilians in occupied territories. Russian security forces detain individuals suspected of assassinations, as well as of prior public service, pro-Ukrainian views, or speaking Ukrainian. The number of convicted Ukrainians has risen from dozens in 2024 to thousands by the end of 2025. As of early 2026, nearly 1400 Ukrainians were listed as “terrorists and extremists”. They are commonly charged with terrorism-related offences, alongside illegal border crossing, or attempts at violent seizure of power. While some allegations may have a factual basis, human rights groups emphasise that confessions are often extracted under torture and are therefore unreliable.<sup>39</sup>

By treating wartime conduct as terrorism, Russia blurs the boundary between counter-terrorism and the law of armed conflict, creating legal and operational risks for partners who may inadvertently legitimise prosecutions that are inconsistent with international humanitarian law.

## Judicial Mechanisms and Due Process Risks

While administrative measures determine who is labelled a “terrorist” or “extremist,” it is the judiciary and law enforcement system that ultimately gives these designations legal force. The functioning of judicial mechanisms is essential to understanding how the counter-terrorism framework operates in practice: whether it serves as a tool for addressing genuine security threats or as a vehicle for enforcing politically motivated prosecutions. Examining due process, evidentiary standards, and institutional independence is therefore critical to assessing both the reliability of terrorism-related cases and the risks they pose for international cooperation.

35 KII with Memorial Human Rights group member, December 2025. Memorial Human Rights Defense Center, “Дело военнослужащих ВСУ Виталия Панченко и Ивана Дмитракова” [Case of Ukrainian Armed Forces Servicemen Vitalii Panchenko and Ivan Dmitrakov], accessed March 29, 2026, <https://memopzk.org/dossier/delo-voennosluzhashhih-vsu-vitaliya-panchenko-i-ivana-dmitrakova/>

36 Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, “Data on imposed sentences under articles of the Criminal Code,” accessed March 29, 2026, <https://stat.xn----7sbqk8achja.xn--p1ai/stats/ug/t/14/s/17>

37 The groups are former volunteer units, established between 2014 and 2022 by Ukrainians and foreign nationals and subsequently integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, “Unified Federal List of Organizations, Including Foreign and International Organizations, Recognized as Terrorist in Accordance with the Legislation of the Russian Federation”, accessed March 29, 2026, <http://www.fsb.ru/fsb/npd/terror.htm>

38 OVD-Info, “Репрессии в России в 2025 году: обзор” [Repression in Russia in 2025: Overview], accessed March 29, 2026, <https://reports.ovd.info/repressii-v-rossii-v-2025-godu-obzor-ovd-info#2-2>; The Moscow Times, “Military Court Admits Ukrainian Missile Strike Sank Moskva Cruiser,” January 23, 2026, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2026/01/23/military-court-admits-ukrainian-missile-strike-sank-moskva-cruiser-a91759>

39 Nichita Gurcov, “Personal Payback: Assassinations Escalate in Ukraine and Russia's Shadow War,” Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/personal-payback-assassinations-escalate-ukraine-and-russias-shadow-war/>; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Rule of Fear in Russia: A Strategy to Silence Anti-War Dissent says UN Expert,” October 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/10/rule-fear-russia-strategy-silence-anti-war-dissent-says-un-expert#:~:text=The%20report%20documents%20the%20widespread,unattainable;%20perpetrators%20enjoy%20total%20impunity>

In Russia, military courts exercise exclusive jurisdiction over terrorism-related cases, prosecuting thousands of civilians under the terrorism framework. These courts fall short of international fair trial standards and even the limited benchmarks of the broader Russian judiciary. Embedded within the military hierarchy and subordinated to the executive, with serving or former military officers having legal preference in judicial appointments, the courts effectively represent one side of the armed conflicts in which the Russian state is engaged. Executive influence over judicial appointments and proceedings is substantial, as the President appoints nearly all judges, and nearly 40 percent of all judges have professional backgrounds in prosecution or investigative bodies, reinforcing a prosecutorial bias.<sup>40</sup>

Once charges are filed, conviction is highly likely. Acquittals account for less than 1 percent of decisions by professional judges (20–30 percent in jury trials) and are effectively absent in terrorism-related cases.<sup>41</sup> Appeals overturn acquittals 4.5 times more frequently than convictions, and no terrorism-related conviction has been overturned in the past five years.<sup>42</sup> Military courts issued over 300 verdicts in 2021, and an average of five verdicts per day in 2025, with sentences becoming increasingly severe, including a growing number exceeding 20 years.<sup>43</sup> Oversight is structurally weak and largely ineffective. Appeals are reviewed within the same military judicial system, and Russia's withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights in 2022 removed an important external accountability mechanism.

Terrorism-related cases are subject to a harsher procedural regime, including no statute of limitations, mandatory minimum sentences, and closed hearings with limited public access to decisions. Defence lawyers in such cases face surveillance, pressure, and, in some instances, prosecution.<sup>44</sup>

Investigators operate under performance targets that prioritise confessions, contributing to widespread reliance on coerced testimony. Allegations of torture and ill-treatment are common, while legal safeguards remain weak: torture was codified as a separate offence only in 2022, complaints are rarely recorded and investigated, and state-appointed lawyers often limit access to independent defence. As a result, coerced statements are routinely admitted as evidence. Official data indicates that only one criminal case is opened for every 44 complaints of abuse, while up to 20 percent of the population has reportedly experienced abuse by law enforcement, suggesting that ill-treatment is systemic.<sup>45</sup>

Systemic deficiencies in due process and the near-certainty of conviction mean that Russian terrorism-related cases cannot be treated as reliable legal outputs, limiting their admissibility and increasing the legal and reputational risks of cooperation based on such evidence.

40 Helen C. Castronovo and V. Zorina, "The Problem with the Russian Judiciary," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/12/the-problem-with-the-russian-judiciary>

41 Judicial Department of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, Judicial Statistics Data, accessed March 2026, <https://cdep.ru/?id=79>

42 Elena Yurishina, "Chances of Receiving an Acquittal in Russia — 0.15%. Only Three Exceptions: Cases against Law Enforcement, Jury Trials, and Private Prosecution," *Tochno.st*, May 24, 2023, <https://tochno.st/materials/shansy-poluchit-opravdatelnyy-prigovor-v-rossii-015-isklyucheniye-vsego-tri-dela-protiv-silovikov-sudy-prisyazhnykh-i-chastnoe-obvinenie-rasskazyvaem-na-etikh-primerakh-kak-ustroena-palochnaya-sistema>

43 The Insider, "Terrorism Verdicts in Russia Triple Since 2021, Reaching 94 per Month," July 18, 2025, <https://theins.ru/en/news/283253>; United Nations News, "Russia using 'rule of fear' to silence anti-war dissent, says UN independent human rights expert," October 28, 2025, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/10/1166199>

44 Amnesty International, *Terrorising the Dissent: Abuse of Terrorism Related Charges in Russia*, February 19, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/02/russia-surge-in-abuse-of-anti-terrorism-laws-to-suppress-dissent/>

45 Sever.Realii, *The Investigative Committee disclosed the number of criminal cases on torture in pretrial detention centers and penal colonies*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 2, 2019, <https://www.severreal.org/a/30303069.html>; World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), "Igor Kalyapin: Ten Portraits Against Torture and Impunity," December 2, 2012, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/events/igor-kalyapin-ten-portraits-against-torture-and-impunity>

## International cooperation

These domestic practices shape Russia's external counter-terrorism posture. Since 2022, Russia has assumed a dual role: undermining elements of the international counter-terrorism system while remaining an operational partner in selected areas. While Western states have largely suspended cooperation, Russia continues to engage in multilateral frameworks and expand ties with non-Western partners. This creates a policy dilemma: cooperation may support counter-terrorism objectives but risks legitimising politically motivated prosecutions. The implications of this dilemma become particularly evident in practice, where cooperation continues in selective law-enforcement, multilateral counter-terrorism platforms, and international policing and financial compliance systems, as outlined below.

### 1. Law enforcement cooperation

Despite growing political tensions, Russia remains an operationally relevant partner in specific counter-terrorism areas where interests overlap. Thousands from the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia joined the IS and other violent transnational Islamist groups.<sup>46</sup> Preventing cross-border terrorist activity of the IS-affiliated fighters from the North Caucasus, Central Asia, or Afghanistan and financing remains a shared priority.

Many democratic and NATO states' agencies treat Russian-origin evidence and requests with caution due to concerns about investigative integrity and human rights standards,<sup>47</sup> but limited cooperation persists. The French President Emmanuel Macron offered Moscow increased technical cooperation following the Crocus City Hall attack. In August 2024, Turkey and Russia resumed joint ground patrols in north-east Syria.<sup>48</sup> Although Europol suspended any cooperation with Russia in 2022, the author is aware of at least one case in 2025 in which law enforcement authorities in an EU member state requested and used a Russian military court judgment as evidence in a domestic terrorism-related case.

At the same time, Russia has strengthened cooperation with countries outside the Western-led system. This includes bilateral engagement with China, several Central Asian states, and other partners maintaining security links for pragmatic reasons, such as border control, intelligence-sharing on Islamist networks, and counter-narcotics. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have extradited Russian citizens accused of "justification of terrorism" and other politically motivated offences. Georgia has reportedly detained Russian citizens at Moscow's request.<sup>49</sup>

Russia's expanding security partnerships also create risks of exporting coercive counter-terrorism practices to third countries. In 2024, in the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner, a Russian state-linked armed group, reportedly detained a humanitarian worker, a Belgian-Portuguese national. After being held unlawfully for about a month and reportedly subjected to torture, he was transferred to the national authorities, which sentenced him to ten years of hard labour for terrorism-related offences.<sup>50</sup>

46 International Crisis Group, "Too Far, Too Fast: Sochi, Tourism and Conflict in the Caucasus," Europe Report No. 228, January 30, 2014, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/caucasus/228-too-far-too-fast-sochi-tourism-and-conflict-caucasus>

47 Kill with a Federal Australian police officer, October 2025

48 "Macron Says IS Branch Behind Moscow Attack, Also Targeted France," Le Monde, March 25, 2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/25/macron-says-is-branch-behind-moscow-attack\\_6651571\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/03/25/macron-says-is-branch-behind-moscow-attack_6651571_4.html); "Turkey, Russia Resume Joint Patrols in Northeast Syria, Turkish Ministry Says," Reuters, August 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkey-russia-resume-joint-patrols-northeast-syria-turkish-ministry-says-2024-08-23/>

49 Evgeny Dyuk, "Deportations of Political Activists to Russia: Where Russians Are Most at Risk," Deutsche Welle (Russian edition), February 4, 2026, <https://www.dw.com/ru/deportacii-politaktivistov-v-rossiu-gde-rossianam-opasnee-vsego/a-75798727>

50 He was released in April 2026. European Parliament, Resolution on the arbitrary arrest and torture of Belgian Portuguese researcher Joseph Figueira Martin in the Central African Republic (2025), P10\_TA(2025)0162, July 10, 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0162\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2025-0162_EN.pdf)

At the multilateral level, Russia remains an active participant in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, both of which retain counter-terrorism mandates and conduct joint exercises. Russia also continues to engage in the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee and the Office of Counter-Terrorism, the latter chaired by a Russian national.<sup>51</sup> These platforms allow Moscow to shape both normative and operational aspects of the global counter-terrorism agenda.

Russia makes extensive use of international policing mechanisms, raising concerns about their potential misuse for political purposes.<sup>52</sup> Russia accounts for nearly half (49 percent) of all Interpol Red Notices globally, with terrorism-related charges comprising 40 percent of its requests and around two-thirds of all terrorism-related notices, as of late 2025.<sup>53</sup>

Interpol Constitution prohibits intervening in matters of a political, military, racial, or religious character and must ensure that the issuance of a Red Notice does not violate human rights. On 10 March 2022, Interpol publicly announced that Russia was being placed on a watch list to “prevent any potential misuse of Interpol’s channels in relation to the targeting of individuals within or beyond the conflict in Ukraine”.<sup>54</sup> In 2024, Interpol blocked seven Russian requests for arrest warrants against the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) judges and its prosecutor, following the ICC arrest warrant against Vladimir Putin. Russia reportedly uses an Interpol messaging system to request sensitive information directly and in confidence from another country, and obtained detailed information from Ankara on Kremlin critics Lyubov Sobol and Gleb Karakulov.<sup>55</sup> Selective engagement – limited to narrowly defined, threat-specific cooperation – may be necessary, but any reliance on Russian evidence, requests, or judicial outputs requires heightened scrutiny.

## 2. Financial compliance mechanisms

Russia increasingly leverages global financial compliance and anti–money laundering (AML) systems to target political opponents beyond its borders. Rosfinmonitoring, a federal executive body responsible for combating money laundering and terrorist financing, effectively excludes people from financial systems by designating them as “terrorists and extremists”. The designation triggers automated risk alerts in major know-your-customer (KYC) and AML databases used by private compliance providers. In 2025, Revolut temporarily blocked bank accounts of members of Anti-Corruption Foundation, founded by Alexey Navalny and the Anti-War Committee, which brings together parts of the opposition in exile. Both organisations are designated “terrorist” in Russia.<sup>56</sup> Russia’s closest ally, Belarus uses a similar tactic. Several European banks blocked accounts of Belarusian Dmitri Navosha, after the Belarus KGB declared him a “terrorist” in 2022.<sup>57</sup>

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) assesses procedural compliance rather than the substantive legitimacy of terrorist designations, allowing states to remain formally compliant while instrumentalising the framework for political repression. Although FATF suspended Russia’s membership in 2023, Moscow remains part of its Eurasian regional affiliate and continues to exploit gaps in FATF standards.<sup>58</sup>

The structure of global compliance systems incentivises over-compliance: automated risk-scoring systems, combined with penalties for under-compliance, often result in account freezes without independent scrutiny. These effects are compounded by enhanced due diligence requirements

51 United Nations Office of Counter Terrorism, Leadership, United Nations, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/en/leadership>

52 Edward Lemon, “Weaponizing Interpol,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 2019): 15–29, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/weaponizing-interpol/>

53 INTERPOL, Red Notices, accessed March 30, 2026, [https://www.interpol.int/How we work/Notices/Red Notices/View Red Notices](https://www.interpol.int/How%20we%20work/Notices/Red%20Notices/View%20Red%20Notices)

54 INTERPOL, “Ukraine: INTERPOL General Secretariat Statement,” March 10, 2022, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2022/Ukraine-INTERPOL-General-Secretariat-statement>

55 Disclose and BBC World Service, “How Moscow Tracks Down Its Opponents Thanks to INTERPOL,” January 26, 2026, <https://disclose.ngo/en/article/how-moscow-tracks-down-its-opponents-thanks-to-interpol>

56 Deutsche Welle, “Как банки ЕС блокируют счета граждан России и Беларуси” [How EU Banks Are Blocking the Accounts of Russian and Belarusian Citizens], November 12, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ru/kak-banki-es-blokiruut-sceta-grazdan-rossii-i-belarusi/a-74692230>

57 Alexandra Prokopenko, “The Kremlin Has Weaponized Western Financial Checks to Punish Russian Dissidents,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 13, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/11/russia-eu-banking-exploits>

58 Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Statement on the Russian Federation, February 24, 2023, <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/Fatfgeneral/fatf-statement-russian-federation.html>

linked to international sanctions and affecting all Russian citizens globally. Most compliance databases are not accessible to individuals, limiting their ability to verify or challenge designations. As a result, domestic designations are externalised into global financial infrastructure, affecting third-country institutions and individuals.<sup>59</sup>

International partners face a complex trade-off when engaging with Russia on counter-terrorism. Selective cooperation can provide valuable operational access to intelligence on genuine security threats, such as transnational jihadist networks or terrorist financing. However, reliance on Russian-origin data, judicial outputs, or financial designations carries significant legal, reputational, and human rights risks, particularly when cases are politically motivated or involve coerced evidence. Partners must therefore balance the operational benefits of engagement against the potential for complicity in repression, misuse of international mechanisms, or undermining of IHL. Risk-differentiated and carefully scrutinized cooperation offers the most viable approach.

## Conclusion

Russia's counter-terrorism framework reflects a dual reality. On the one hand, the country continues to face genuine security threats, including Islamist networks, sabotage, and politically motivated violence. On the other, the legal and institutional architecture of counter-terrorism has expanded far beyond these threats, increasingly encompassing non-violent conduct, political dissent and conventional warfare.

The divergence between international and domestic data suggests that the growth in terrorism-related prosecutions is driven less by an increase in violent activity than by legal reclassification and enforcement practices. Military courts, administrative designation mechanisms, and financial compliance tools together form an integrated system that enables authorities to restrict individuals' rights at multiple stages, often without meaningful judicial oversight.

These dynamics extend beyond Russia's borders. Through law enforcement cooperation, international legal instruments, and global financial compliance systems, domestic designations can have transnational consequences. International partners face a structural trade-off: disengagement reduces the risk of enabling repression but may limit access to operational intelligence, while continued cooperation carries legal, ethical, and reputational risks.

The findings of this brief suggest that this dilemma is best addressed through selective, risk-managed engagement rather than either unconditional cooperation or complete disengagement. Cooperation should remain possible in narrowly defined areas of shared concern, such as transnational jihadist networks or terrorist financing supported by independently verifiable evidence. At the same time, greater caution is warranted in areas involving extradition, deportation, mutual legal assistance, or reliance on Russian judicial decisions and terrorism-related prosecutions, where risks of politicisation and due process violations are particularly acute.

To mitigate these risks, governments, international organisations, and private-sector actors should strengthen their capacity to assess the reliability of Russian-origin information. Independent corroboration should be sought wherever possible, while confession-based evidence, closed proceedings, and undisclosed sources should be treated as high-risk indicators. Enhanced scrutiny is also needed within international mechanisms such as INTERPOL and within global financial compliance systems, where domestic Russian designations may be externalised into international legal and financial processes. Russian terrorism and extremism listings should therefore be treated as risk indicators requiring additional assessment rather than as automatic grounds for restrictive measures.

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<sup>59</sup> Financial Times, "How Russia Weaponised Global Banking to Silence Dissidents," November 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/9f499f4d-f78b-4154-aa2e-cabe9bd22d16>

Finally, international actors should maintain a clear distinction between terrorism, political dissent, and conduct governed by international humanitarian law. Failure to preserve these boundaries risks legitimising politically motivated prosecutions and importing contested wartime narratives into international counter-terrorism frameworks. Decisions concerning cooperation, extradition, sanctions compliance, and recognition of terrorism-related judgments should therefore incorporate robust human rights safeguards, including independent review and non-refoulement assessments in politically sensitive cases.

Without such safeguards and differentiation between genuine threats and politicised designations, international counter-terrorism cooperation risks being co-opted, undermining both its effectiveness and its legitimacy. Conversely, a more selective, evidence-based, and rights-conscious approach can preserve cooperation against genuine security threats while reducing the risk of complicity in repression and the misuse of counter-terrorism instruments.

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From 2011 to 2016, she served as Analyst on Europe and Central Asia for the International Crisis Group, focusing primarily on the North Caucasus — tracking the evolution of insurgency, radicalisation, and Russian state counter-terrorism policy in Chechnya, Dagestan, and the wider region. This built on earlier human rights fieldwork in Chechnya from 2006 to 2009 with the Demos Center, and broader Caucasus with the Stichting Justice Initiative (2009-2011).

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she has worked in the humanitarian and security response: from 2022 to 2024 she led the Crisis Analysis Team at Mercy Corps' Ukraine Response, providing conflict and risk analysis to guide humanitarian and development programming. Earlier, from 2018 to 2020, she was Geneva Call's Head of Mission in Ukraine, engaging armed actors to strengthen respect for international humanitarian law and protect civilians, and from 2016 to 2017 she worked as Early Recovery Adviser to UNDP Ukraine in the non-government-controlled areas of Donbas.

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