



# RUSSIAN TERRORISM – A REAL DANGER TO EUROPEAN SECURITY

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*Today, amid the imperial dream, in a context where Russia is in the midst of a territorial war (the one in Ukraine) carried out with hybrid means, coupled with a recent history of Russian terrorist attacks of several types, the question of an imminent danger to the security of the democratic European region may be raised. Thus, the analysis starts from the hypothesis that Europe is facing a new terrorist danger promoted by Russia, developed against the background of actions to destabilise the democratic order through hybrid warfare, with great risk to regional security.*

*In this regard, the purpose of the article is to identify Russia's terrorist potential at present. Its subsumed objectives are to analyse the three growing dangers that build Russia's terrorist potential. The first threat is the turbulent history of terrorism in this country. The second danger relates to the existence of a military group that has carried out several terrorist actions outside Russian territory, the Wagner group. The third danger is the activation of Islamist terrorism in Ukraine, by enlisting in the Russian army and training radicalized fighters from Muslim countries under Russian rule. The main research method is documentation. Studies, press articles and statistics on the subject were analysed, on the basis of which conclusions were drawn.*

**Keywords:** *terrorism; security; hybrid warfare; Russian danger; Wagner.*

## Introduction

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the word “terrorism” has taken on new meanings, especially in the context in which four states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) of the European Union have declared Russia to be a “terrorist regime”. In

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November, the European Parliament, meeting in plenary session, declared Russia a “state sponsoring terrorism and using terrorist means” (HotNews.ro 2022). With regard to the United States of America, its position on considering Russia as a “terrorist state”, formulated by NATO Ambassador Julianne Smith, is seen as “counterproductive, in the sense that it could slow down or obstruct our ability to send humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, or export grain from Ukraine” (Toader 2022). This article does not seek to explain what it means for a state to be declared ‘terrorist’. The only point to be made on this issue is the conclusion resulting from the content of the article on “How international relations change the declaration of Russia as a “terrorist regime”, published by *Europa Liberă* in early November, that there is no unitary position of the world’s states on state terrorism. The analysis contained in the paper focuses on identifying the potential of this country to carry out globally recognized terrorist actions, such as bombings, chemical or biological attacks.

The terrorist potential of a state must be analysed in the context of its terrorist history. In the case of Russia, the country has, for many years now, engaged in various initiatives to undermine other societies in order to achieve the objectives of President Putin and his regime. Such actions include cyberattacks, meddling in elections and political processes using official propaganda tools such as Russia Today and Sputnik, complemented by more subtle disinformation programmes. At the same time, conventional and unconventional manifestations of armed intervention in the vicinity of Russia have taken place. All of these can be included in what is called “hybrid warfare” (Orenstein 2019). Also, the Russian authorities of the Putin regime have put into practice several acts of terrorism in several countries characterized by an open society (Great Britain and Germany). The assassinations or assassination attempts carried out by Kremlin agents (some of whom have even received various distinctions for these acts), in which they used radioactive elements, chemicals or firearms, are already notorious. For example, the European Court of Human Rights found the Kremlin responsible for the 2006 murder by radiation poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian intelligence official who defected to the West. The Kremlin has denied any involvement in Litvinenko’s death, moreover, the two assassins, Lugovoi and Kovtun, appointed Russian agents by the ECHR, have suggested that the deserter may have poisoned himself (Newman 2021). Another case is that of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian Chechen, who was shot and killed on his way to a mosque in Berlin’s small Kleiner Tiergarten Park. Khangoshvili had fought against Russian troops in Chechnya and, despite denying involvement in his death, Russia has long classified him as a “terrorist” (Holroyd 2021). The targets of these attacks were mainly opponents of the regime seeking support in the West (Filipov 2017). Such an action also took place in Ukraine in 2004, when Viktor Yushchenko, whose victory in the elections did not fit Moscow’s plans, was poisoned with dioxin (Rupar 2014).



Russia's link with terrorism, totally different from that of democratic countries, is also reflected in its anti-terrorist legislation (Analysis 2010). It mainly targets the jihadist threat, but Putin uses it to regulate the persecution of any form of opposition to his regime. Externally, the Russian position is contrary to counterterrorist statements, for example, supporting Bashar al-Assad in his campaign against non-jihadist opposition groups (Rahman-Jones 2017) as he accepted the displacement of foreign terrorist fighters from countries of the Russian Federation, Chechnya and Dagestan, in Syria and other conflict zones where Islamist militants are active. This maneuver brought an advantage to Russia because it meant dislodging terrorists who would have posed a threat to it from its territories of interest (Borshchevskaya n.d.).

As will be demonstrated below, Russia's hybrid war against the Western world comprises a terrorist component. Moscow has so far shown that it is willing to use terrorism to achieve its interests, even though it has had policies to distract the West from its terrorist actions by promoting anti-jihadist actions. The war in Ukraine has brought the subject back to the attention of European authorities responsible for regional security. It is not necessary for the end of this war to limit these actions, since they are part of Russia's foreign instruments of warfare.

Hybrid warfare is a military strategy that combines conventional warfare, irregular warfare, cyber warfare, subversion, and blurs the formal distinction between war and peace. It is often characterised by the use of fictitious propaganda, espionage, ethnic mobilisation, linguistic or confessional minorities and terrorism.

### **1. History of Russian Terrorism**

Terrorism has been present as a phenomenon in the Russian social and political for a long time. This is confirmed by the fact that as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there have been legal provisions in Russia that address this issue. Most of them are related to the annihilation of any threat to the tsarist power. Terrorist events intensified during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the phenomenon acquired certain distinct features: nationalist, revolutionary and highly reactionary (Laskowska n.d.).

To understand Russian terrorism, it is necessary to understand the history of terrorism in this country, and especially the way in which the power and population related to it. A first step in obtaining this agreement is to examine the events of the autumn of 1905, when Lenin forced the Bolshevik Party to take actions that sowed terror and which he called "guerrilla war". These actions of revolutionary terror were accepted by a large part of the population and became a mass phenomenon. The explanation is that "the revolutionary actions were a response to the tsarist actions against those who opposed the regime: death penalty, deprivation of liberty, exile to penal colonies, prohibition to establish residence in certain places, prohibition of the possession of specific offices or where specific activities were carried out,



expulsion of perpetrators from universities, their ban on entering or leaving the country” (Blackmore 2020).

After 1917, Russia experienced unique forms of politics and ideological terrorism: revolutionary (red) and counter-revolutionary (white) terrorism during the revolution and the civil war that followed; internal state terrorism during Stalin’s political repression; international state terrorism during the period of domination by the Soviet authorities. These forms were not criminalised during their emergence and were not considered by society and the state as political terrorism until the collapse of the socialist system (Laskowska n.d.).

State terrorism in the Soviet period, especially during the Stalin era, was monstrous. To rule, the Soviet state established a unique system of administration of justice aimed at destroying political opponents. Millions of people have died or suffered repression for political reasons. According to W.W. Luneev, during that period about 40 million people were victims of repression (Getty 2002). Because of Stalin, society was terrorized with hideous, albeit effective methods, used to introduce and preserve totalitarianism, by creating a system whereby people were crushed at every attempt to oppose the regime. For a long time, the term terrorism was not used in Russia. After 1970, the government in Moscow named terrorist acts: 1973 – an explosion of a plane flying from Moscow to Chita; 1978 – a series of explosions in the Moscow metro; 1982 – hijacking of an aircraft flying to Turkey; 1983 – hijacking of a plane at Tbilisi airport and an assassination attempt on the life of the First Secretary and other leaders of the Communist Party (Laskowska n.d.).

With Perestroika, terrorist actions appeared in countries that wanted to gain independence from the USSR. After 1990, these actions intensified. The term terrorism begins to be used in a sense close to that of the democratic world. Among the countries where terrorist actions took place at that time were Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (Laskowska n.d.). After the collapse of the USSR, terrorism in Ukraine is primarily linked to Chechnya. In 1991, the Supreme Council of the Chechnya Republic was abolished and power would pass to the Chechen people. Such action led to a war and, implicitly, to the formation of terrorist-type groups, which operated both in Russia and abroad and which became increasingly active (C.Walters 2019).

The terrorist attacks that followed in response to the actions of the Russian government (especially the Russian army) involved hostage-taking (Budyovsk – 1995, Pervomaiskoye – 1996), as well as other more violent actions and better organized attacks (attacks on the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in 2002 and the school in Beslan in 2004) (C.Walters 2019).

In conclusion, Russian terrorism most often springs from political reasons, which reflect the difficult and complex situation of the Russian state.



## 2. Wagner Group – Terrorist Group

The Wagner Group has sparked controversy since the day of its establishment. A Russian paramilitary organization, the mercenary group carried out operations that the Russian Ministry of Defence silently approved, while maintaining plausible deniability. After years of denial and silence, the Kremlin has officially acknowledged the organization's existence, despite the fact that mercenaries are illegal under the Russian Constitution (McBride 2022).

The Wagner Group is currently led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an important figure in the Kremlin. Prigozhin has cultivated a cult of personality through the organization's activities, openly attacking the Russian Ministry of Defence for battlefield losses in Ukraine and, more recently, opening a "Wagner Center" in St. Petersburg to help incubate start-ups with IT potential military applications (McBride 2022). Dmitry Utkin, a far-right GRU officer, is also at the head of the mercenary group. Wagner has sought to recruit far-right people not only from Russia, but also from among foreigners who can use the group's tactics in their home countries if necessary. For example, the Rusich Group, a subsidiary of the Wagner Group, openly recruits neo-Nazis, fascists and dughinists into its ranks (Dinu 2022).

The Wagner Group paramilitaries have taken part in military operations in Ukraine, Syria, North Africa and the Central African Republic, their operations being truly bloody, involving numerous massacres (Dinu 2022).

Wagner has earned the status of a shadowy organisation in Ukraine's Donbas region since 2014, when it took part in military operations at the behest of the GRU by arming pro-Russian militias. Wagner mercenaries were also part of the "unmarked" Russian troops that deployed and annexed Crimea (Dinu 2022).

In Syria, Wagner routinely took part in extortions and civilian massacres, all with the tacit approval of the Syrian government. Their prominence continued to grow as they helped the army of the ill-equipped regime retake its territory, especially from the terrorist organization Islamic State. In 2017, four Russian mercenaries savagely beat a Syrian army deserter to death and filmed the murder, the instrument of torture and murder being a sledgehammer (McBride 2022).

In February 2018, the organization attempted to consolidate its status as a leading combat force by attacking a U.S. Special Forces outpost in eastern Syria. Several hundred Wagner mercenaries along with Syrian government forces attacked thirty American Special Forces members and their allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Their action was not successful because the Wagner group and Syrian regime troops suffered significant losses of military equipment and human lives, and on the American side the casualties were zero, with only one SDF soldier injured (McBride 2022).

Taking advantage of the power vacuum created in the wake of the Arab Spring, Wagner deployed forces in North Africa in support of warriors aligned with their



geopolitical (national) or private interests. Mercenaries played a role in the second Libyan civil war, fighting for General Khalifa Haftar when the rival government tried to storm the capital Tripoli. A report by Human Rights Watch stated that the group has indiscriminately placed mines across the country, which continues to affect locals (McBride 2022).

The Wagner group's reputation has grown amid its engagement in African nations such as Mali, Sudan and the Central African Republic. The organization has been linked to several massacres in the Central African Republic, to the point where the United Nations has begun to investigate their links to civilian executions (McBride 2022). In Mali, Wagner supported the military junta, which was beneficial to Russia's interests, amid Russian arms government demands and diplomatic support to stop human rights groups' investigations into large-scale crackdowns on dissidents. Wagner has also been linked to civilian massacres in Mali (Dinu 2022).

Beyond previous actions in other regions of the world, the issue of terrorism committed by the Wagner group has really come to the attention of international opinion with the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. The media periodically publishes information about the crimes of these mercenaries and their processes, the most conclusive example being the situation in Bucha in the spring. From the very first days, Ukraine blamed Russia's 64<sup>th</sup> Motorized Infantry Brigade, which was based in Bucha. According to communications intercepted by German intelligence services, Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group (McBride 2022) were also involved.

In November 2022, the head of Russia's private military group Wagner defended a brutal video that apparently shows the death of a mercenary who defected to Ukraine. Putin's ally Yevgeny Prigozhin said the unverified footage of 55-year-old Yevgeny Nuzhin being hit with a sledgehammer was "the death of a dog for a dog". The convicted murderer announced in September that he had switched sides to the Ukrainians (BBC 2022).

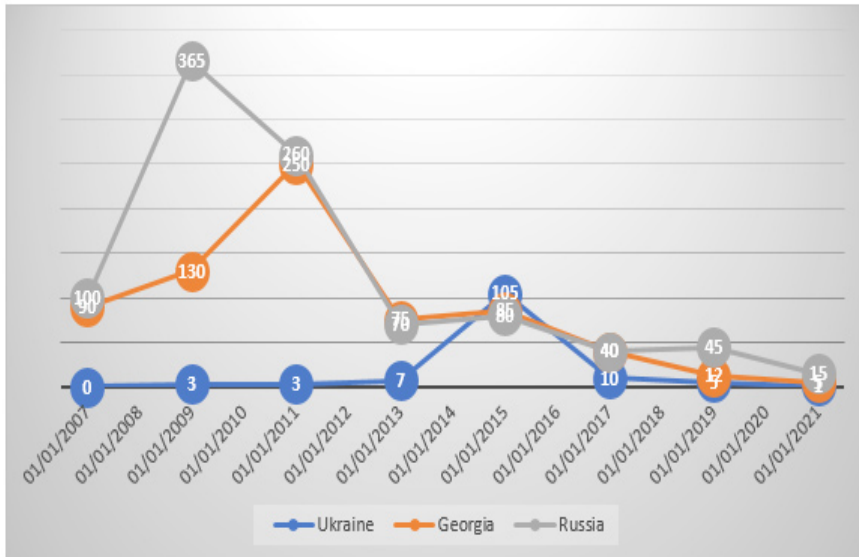
### **3. Terrorism in Russian - Controlled Areas**

We have previously pointed out that acts of terrorism are a method for the Kremlin regime to solve the problems related to the preservation of power, eliminating potential enemies and resolving conflicts. On the evolution of terrorism, the study "Ukraine Russia crisis: terrorism briefing" conducted by The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP)<sup>1</sup> in March 2022, provides important data, for example on

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) is an independent, non-partisan, non-profit think tank dedicated to reorienting the world's focus towards peace as a positive, achievable and tangible measure of human well-being and progress. The IEP achieves its objectives by developing new conceptual frameworks to define peace, providing values for measuring peace and discovering the relationships between business, peace and prosperity, and promoting a better understanding of the cultural, economic and political factors that create peace.

the evolution of terrorism against the background of Russia’s conflicts with Georgia in 2008 and with Ukraine in 2014.



**Figure no. 1:** Terrorist attacks in Ukraine, Georgia, Russia, between 2007 and 2021

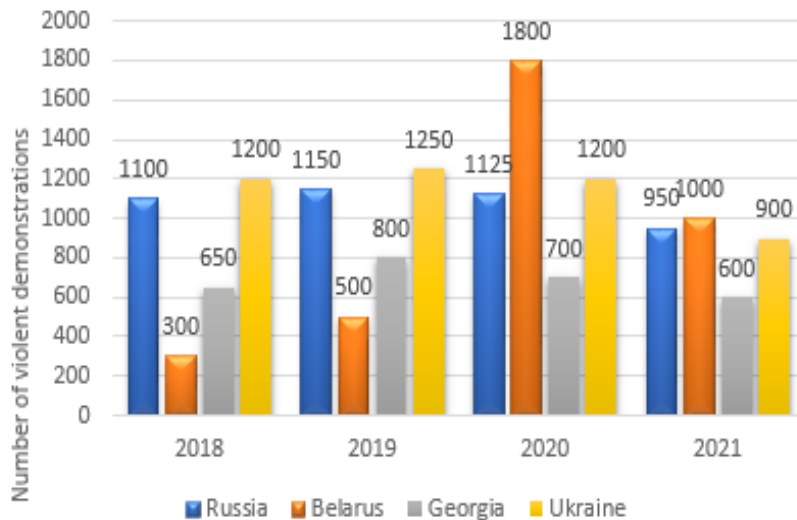
(Data analysed by The Institute for Economics & Peace were obtained from Dragonfly TerrorismTracker, IEP calculations)

As seen in Figure no. 1, terrorism in the three countries has decreased over the last six years under review. By 2016, 93% of terrorist attacks had taken place. The peak period took place around 2010, following the Russian-Georgian conflict.

The same study names the Shariat Jamaat group (also known as Vilayat Dagestan<sup>2</sup> and associated with Chechen and Ingush separatist actions), and its affiliates, as responsible for most terrorist attacks, most of them on the territory of the Russian state. The Dagestan Front is part of the terrorist group Emirate of the Caucasus.

The potential for terrorism in Ukraine and Georgia is also determined by the violent demonstrations. The same study of the IEP presents the following data:

<sup>2</sup>Dagestan Front of the Armed Forces of the Caucasus Emirate.



**Figure no. 2:** Violent demonstrations in Ukraine and Belarus between 2018 and 2021

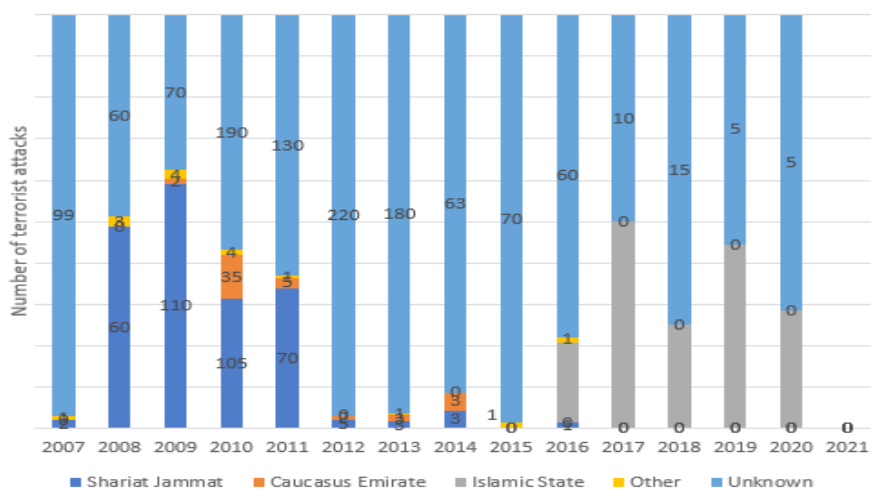
(Data taken from Ukraine Russia crisis: terrorism briefing conducted by The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), March 2022, p. 5.)

Despite a regime that aimed to eliminate any form of opposition, most of the violent demonstrations took place in Russia. In fact, in 2021, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus were the countries in the region that each recorded around 1,000 violent demonstrations. In the case of Belarus, the reason for the demonstrations was opposition to the regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which has been in power for over 25 years. The violent demonstrations in Ukraine resulted from the fact that the population no longer wanted a regime under Moscow and, after the government of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy took office, they were fuelled by conflicts in Donetsk and Luhansk (Peace 2022).

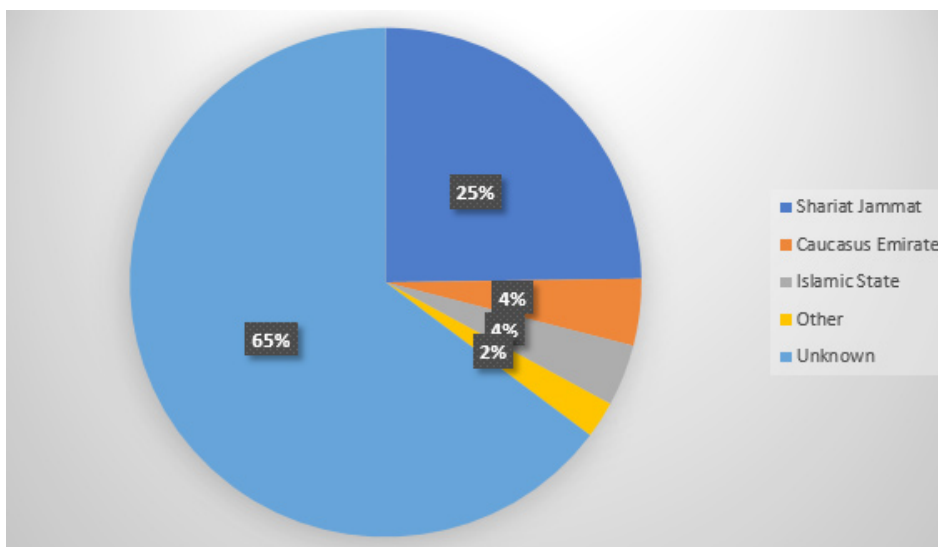
The main finding of the data presented is that the number of terrorist acts increases with the intensity of conflicts. Both the Georgian conflict of 2008 and the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 saw substantial increases in terrorist activity around the wars, and as the current war intensifies, terrorist activity is likely to intensify as well.

The share of attacks by terrorist groups operating in the Eurasian region, including in states listed as under Russian influence, is shown in Figure no. 4.





**Figure no. 3:** Number of attacks by terrorist groups in Russia and Eurasia region, 2007-2021  
(Data analysed by The Institute for Economics & Peace, p. 4)



**Figure no. 4:** Share of terrorist attacks in Russia and Eurasia region, 2007-2021  
(Data analysed by The Institute for Economics & Peace, p. 4)



Remarkably, most terrorist attacks in the Eurasian region are carried out by unknown groups. As their share is very high, over 65%, more suspicions arise.

They may be unorganized groups, different from known terrorist groups acting in a certain context. Another reason could be that the terrorist actions belong to the Russian state itself, all the more so as we have shown the terrorist actions of the Wagner group.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, mercenaries from the Middle East, primarily Syria and Libya, have been enlisted in the Russian army. This fact has not been hidden by the Russian authorities, Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said during a meeting of the Russian Security Council on March 11 that “more than 16,000 people from the Middle East volunteered to join Russian forces” (Brylov, Denis 2022), and Russian President Vladimir Putin has said they must be supported and helped to cross into the territory where hostilities are taking place (BBC 2022). Also, in March 2022, the Ukrainian General Staff reported on the possible recruitment by Russia of approximately a thousand militants from Syria and the Lebanese organization Hezbollah. The only condition for recruitment was experience in urban combat. The danger brought by these fighters is that it was not the desire to fight against Ukraine that was the basis of their decision to enlist, but the desire to enter member countries of the European Union (Brylov, Denis 2022).

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that at least 40,000 Arab mercenaries have been enlisted, of which 22,000 were part of the Russian armed forces and about 18,000 as part of the Wagner Group. At the same time, in recent weeks, about 700 troops of the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Division, known in Syria as the “Tiger Force”, under the command of General Suheil al-Hassan, have left for Russia (Mroue 2022). Ukrainian authorities confirmed that about 500 mercenaries from Libya and Syria participated in the hostilities in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Some of these forces were destroyed by the Ukrainian army on April 18, 2022 (In the east, the Armed Forces destroyed a detachment of Libyans and Syrians - Danilov 2022).

As the few available studies show, the subject of Islam and Muslims in the Russian military remains controversial. First of all, military sociologists indicate a constant level of religiosity in the army: in 1990, 14% of the military considered themselves believers, in 1992 – 22%, in 1996 – 34%, then in 2006 – already 68% (Brylov 2022). Some of these religious people are radicalized and can pose a real terrorist threat, not only in the Eurasian area, but also in Europe.

#### **4. Russia’s Terrorist Danger against the European Union**

Russia’s aggression is hybrid: it includes not only a military component, but also a religious, political and economic one. In essence, by attacking Ukraine, Putin has created an instrument for the comprehensive destabilisation of Europe that weakens



and divides the European geopolitical model without harming Russia. Such a threat to Europe has not existed since the end of the Second World War.

Attacks in previous years, such as the Paris attacks of 12 November 2015, have shown the EU's vulnerability to terrorism. In this attack, all three foreign fighters known to the authorities were able to escape surveillance and transmute from and to Europe and Syria unnoticed. Therefore, although they have been identified as a threat to state security and French citizens, the supervisory bodies failed to locate them on Belgian and French territory. This would have allowed security services to raise the alert level, and possibly prevent attacks. According to Turkish authorities, Turkey notified France twice of the presence on its territory of the suicide bomber Mostefai, in December 2014 and June 2015, but received no feedback from Paris (Ray 2022).

The Kremlin is recruiting mercenaries from the Middle East to be sent to war in Ukraine. When war crimes are committed, the mercenaries can be blamed for them, and when the mercenaries die, there is no obligation of the Russian state to pay pensions and no reaction of revolt in Russia from the families of the victims of the war in Ukraine (Brylov 2022). There are also opinions that Russia is destroying Ukraine just as it has destroyed Syria. In 2016, Russian troops virtually destroyed Aleppo, one of Syria's oldest cities and its cultural capital. In Syria, the Russian army has committed crimes against humanity. Today, they are committing the same crimes in Ukraine (Serban 2022).

Thus, at present, Russia presents several types of hybrid dangers, and the war in Ukraine represents a direct terrorist threat to European security. Moreover, as we have previously shown, Putin wants to destabilise Europe as much as possible, cause chaos and recession, and he is willing to go to any lengths to win as much as possible in the war in Ukraine, even if that means supporting war crimes.

Russia's terrorist threat is also an indirect one. Putin has created large-scale risks of a resurgence of terrorism in the Caucasus. In addition to the risk of a terrorist threat and further socio-political destabilisation, there will inevitably be the discrediting of Muslims around the world. Kadyrov sends the Chechens to wage an invasion war in Ukraine, while presenting it to his troops as a just cause (Kuczyński 2022).

Russia's historical relationship with terrorism, the use of terrorist actions to solve power problems and the use of the Wagner Group on several fronts of interest demonstrate that this country has no reluctance taking terrorist actions whenever it has an interest. The question is whether the European Union is able to cope with Russia's terrorist attacks on several fronts and whether the population of European countries would show solidarity in the fight against Russian terrorism, all the more so as there is a great deal of frustration amid the energy crisis.



## Conclusions

In its desire to become a great global power again, Russia also includes elements of terrorism in its actions. Putin has used terrorist attacks, even with dangerous chemical and biological agents, radioactive substances, to oust his opponents. In order to gain influence, he has collaborated with terrorist groups or other dictators who in turn have used terrorism to gain or maintain power. Moreover, he founded the Wagner Group, made up of people with radical orientations who, more often than not, underlie the ideologies behind various terrorist groups.

All of the above listed would not present such a threat to the security of the democratic world, if terrorism had not for a long period of time had a different meaning for Russia than in the free world, respectively of an instrument of power.

Russia poses an indirect terrorist threat by engaging heavily radicalised Muslims into the war. Even if they are not used by the Russian state, they themselves can organise themselves into terrorist groups that fight for their own state or religious interests. The revitalisation of Islamist terrorism in Europe not only means a deterioration of security in this area, but it can also lead to an escalation of the smouldering conflicts in the Balkans.

The conclusion is that Russia has the means and has shown that it is capable of carrying out terrorist actions when its power interests demand it. We have shown that most of the acts of terrorism in the Eurasian region belong to unknown terrorist groups and this, together with the hybrid war against the West, is a major risk to Europe's security.

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