



# RUSSIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 142,320,790 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 17,098,242 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Russian 77.7%, Tatar 3.7%, Ukrainian 1.4%, Bashkir 1.1%, Chuvash 1%, Chechen 1%, other 10.2%, unspecified 3.9% (2010 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.702 trillion (2019 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated June 2021)*

## INTRODUCTION

*According to the most recent Russian national census, Muslims represent Russia's second largest confessional group, numbering 20 to 21 million souls, or roughly 14 percent of the country's overall population of approximately 146 million.<sup>1</sup> It is also a group in ideological and societal transition. Although Islamic institutions were largely destroyed and believers forced underground under Soviet rule, Islam has experienced a quick and vibrant, if still ill-defined, revival since the collapse of the USSR, with various ideological tendencies competing for the support of society and state. Among Russia's Muslims, the explosion of ethno-nationalism sparked by the USSR's implosion in the late 1980s and early 1990s has given way to religious identification and the rise of faith-based politics.*

*Nevertheless, to date, only a small portion of Russia's Muslims has manifested Islamist tendencies, and just a fraction of those have been drawn into violence—either within Russia itself or abroad. However, Russia's ongoing involvement in the Syrian civil war, the rise of exclusionary, ultranationalist identity politics under the government of President Vladimir Putin, and expanding repression and discrimination on the part of the Kremlin have all contributed to disenfranchisement and radicalization among Russia's Muslims. The result is a dangerous distance between the Russian government and the country's Muslim minority—a dynamic that extreme Islamist organizations such as the Islamic State have sought to exploit.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

### *The Caucasus Emirate*

The primary Islamist terrorist group in Russia is known as the Caucasus Emirate (CE), or Imarat Kavkaz. Encompassing a network of terrorist cells spread across the North Caucasus, the organization is an outgrowth of the radicalization of the Chechen national separatist movement that took place in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The CE evolved from the Chechen separatist movement that emerged amid the Soviet collapse of the early 1990s. Before then, although some radical Islamic political elements existed within Chechen society—and the region’s first president, Dzhokar Dudaev, did implement elements of *sharia* law—the Chechen movement was predominantly nationalist in character. This state of affairs persisted through the first Russo-Chechen war (1994-1996), but following the 1996 Khasavyurt peace agreement signed between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Dudaev’s successor, Aslan Maskhadov, the quasi-independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) devolved into a state of permanent chaos, criminality, and civil strife. The resulting political vacuum was used by a small number of local Islamists, as well foreign extremist elements (including al-Qaeda), to establish a beachhead in the area.

As early as 1996, Ayman al-Zawahiri, then al-Qaeda’s second-in-command, attempted to visit incognito and establish a presence in Russia, but he was discovered and deported.<sup>2</sup> In a subsequently published book, he targeted Russia for violent *jihad* and the establishment of an expansive southern Eurasian caliphate.<sup>3</sup> At about the same time, Shamil Basaev, then a Chechen field commander, visited Afghanistan and received training there.<sup>4</sup> Omar Abu Ibn al-Khattab, an al-Qaeda operative, was in Chechnya then as well and, amid the inter-war lawlessness, established camps where perhaps as many as several hundred foreign fighters, as well as local militants, trained in terrorist tactics.<sup>5</sup> These units subsequently spearheaded the August 1999 invasion of the neighboring republic of Dagestan, which was organized jointly by Basaev and Khattab and aimed at creating an Islamist enclave there. It was this offensive that set off the second Chechen war.<sup>6</sup>

As during the first Chechen war, Russia deployed a brutal military response, and by 2002 had defeated the militants in conventional war, driving the bulk of the ChRI government and parliament into foreign exile, with many finding refuge in places like Washington, London, Istanbul, Baku, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. The more dedicated extremist elements retreated into the mountain forests in southern Chechnya and neighboring Georgia, where they began a classic guerilla insurgency campaign punctuated by occasional large-scale attacks. With national separatist forces isolated abroad, Islamists gradually consolidated power over the movement throughout the following half-decade.

In the summer of 2002, following the death of Khattab at the hands of Russian security forces, an expanded emergency meeting of the underground remnants of the ChRI government and armed forces convened in the mountains of Chechnya. The meeting served as a *coup d’etat* of sorts; as a result of the gathering, a *sharia*-based order was adopted, with the goal of expanding the insurgency across the North Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, Basaev began to travel across the Caucasus seeking out young radicals and establishing a network of combat cells in Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia.<sup>8</sup> The results produced a series of terrorist incidents in subsequent years, including the October 2002 Dubrovka Theater hostage-taking, a rash of suicide attacks in Moscow in 2003,<sup>9</sup> and the September 2004 seizure of School No. 1 in Beslan in early September—a terrorist incident in which 333 people, including 186 children, were killed. Subsequently, between 2006 and 2010, terrorist activity in Russia saw a significant uptick, rising from just 3 major terrorist attacks in 2006 to 22 in 2010.<sup>10</sup>

This radical activism continued for the next several years. The CE has been responsible for scores of high-profile attacks on Russian targets in the North Caucasus and beyond in recent years, including the March 2010 attack on the Moscow subway, the December 2013 bombing of the train station in Volgograd, near the site of the 2014 Olympic Games, and a coordinated December 2014 assault on historic landmarks in Chechnya’s capital of Grozny that left at least 20 dead.<sup>11</sup> While the pace of CE activity has waned significantly in recent years, Stanford University’s Mapping Militant Organizations project still classifies CE as an active terrorist organization.<sup>12</sup>

Russian officials have been quick to attribute the decline in the number of terrorist attacks carried out by the CE and its affiliates in Russia to the Kremlin’s robust counterterrorism policies.<sup>13</sup> However, this characterization is deeply misleading, because it discounts the extensive mobilization that has taken place among Russia’s Islamist cadres since the Kremlin’s military intervention into the Syrian civil war

in September 2015. In 2015, one-quarter of all foreign fighters that had joined the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria were estimated to have come from the territory of the former Soviet Union,<sup>14</sup> and Russian ranked as the third most frequently spoken language among fighters of the Islamic State.<sup>15</sup> This robust representation continued; in a 2017 report, the Soufan Group estimated that more than 8,700 foreign fighters from the territory of the former Soviet Union had by then traveled to join the ranks of the Islamic State. An estimated 3,417 of those fighters were from Russia itself, predominantly the North Caucasus region.<sup>16</sup> Rather than combatting this outflow of militants, however, Russian authorities did the opposite, with government agencies essentially facilitating the departure of terrorists as a way of “externalizing” the country’s religious militancy problem.<sup>17</sup>

This, however, appears to have been only a temporary solution. As of 2017, the Soufan Group estimated that a total of 400 foreign fighters had returned home to Russia.<sup>18</sup> More recent authoritative estimates are currently unavailable, but it is clear that a large-scale influx of mobilized militants is a matter of significant concern for Kremlin officials. Since the large-scale territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the Russian government has sought to establish significantly stricter laws for prosecuting returnees in an effort to avert large-scale returnee flows.<sup>19</sup> A notable exception in this regard has been Russia’s repatriation of women and children linked to the conflict, which has become a significant priority of the Kremlin. Russia now has “the most active program to return detainees from Iraq and Syria, notably children,” according to human rights NGO Human Rights Watch.<sup>20</sup>

The CE functions as a decentralized network, consisting of local combat cells loosely tied together and subordinate to sectors, which are in turn subordinated to the CE’s “provinces,” referred to by its fighters as *veliyats*. The CE is known to have five such *veliyats*: Veliyat Nokchicho (Chechnya); Veliyat Gyalgayaiche (Ingushetia and Ossetia); Veliyat Dagestan; the United Veliyat of Kabardia, Balkaria, and Karachai (the KBR, the KChR, and probably Adygeya); and Veliyat of the Nogai Steppe (Krasnodar Krai and Stavropol Krai).<sup>21</sup>

The CE is composed of members from each of the Muslim ethnic groups in Russia, as well as members of non-Muslim ethnic groups. Chechens, Ingush and various Dagestani (Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Nogais, Tabasarans, etc.) predominate, but the Muslim Alans (Karachais and Balkars) and Circassians (Kabards, Cherkess, and Adygs) are also well represented.<sup>22</sup> In short, the CE puts into practice the extremist principle that Islam is universal.

Publicly available information detailing CE’s financial sources is limited. It remains likely that Arab and other foreign Islamic governments, businesses, and philanthropists still provide funds to the group, despite the efforts of Russian authorities to prevent it. The local population is known to provide limited financial support in the form of the Islamic *zakat* (charitable contributions), as well as considerable logistical and other material support, such as weapons, safe houses, and food provisions.<sup>23</sup> Support is also generated through criminal activity—something that represents a legacy of the first Russo-Chechen war and the turbulent period that followed, when the ChRI received funding from elements of the Chechen mafia, narcotics trafficking, illicit oil exports, and the lucrative hostage-taking industry.<sup>24</sup>

The size of the CE’s network is extremely difficult to estimate. Official Russian estimates have tended to downplay the number of active members affiliated with the group,<sup>25</sup> but expert analysis suggests that it is reasonable to assume that there may be more than 1,000 CE fighters, and thousands of additional facilitators.<sup>26</sup> These figures have been affected by the Syrian civil war, which has drawn Russian Islamists to its cause in significant numbers. In the Fall of 2014, Russian security officials estimated that some 800 militants from the North Caucasus had traveled to Syria to take up arms against the Assad regime.<sup>27</sup> By September 2015, that number had swelled to an estimated 2,400—a threefold increase in less than a year.<sup>28</sup> It is unclear what percentage of these mobilized Islamists is made up of CE cadres, but the organization is believed to be heavily represented within the Islamic State.<sup>29</sup> (In turn, the collapse of the ISIS “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria since 2017 has seen at least some of these cadres begin to return to the Russian Federation,

as outlined above.)

While the CE has long been a prominent part of the global *jihadist* movement, it has traditionally served as an affiliate of the bin Laden network, having formally pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda back in April of 2009. However, in 2015, elements of the group broke ranks and formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. *Emirs* in Dagestan were the first to formally pledge allegiance to IS,<sup>30</sup> followed by the CE's leading military commander, and Chechnya's *emir*, Aslan Buytukaev, who declared allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on behalf of all Chechen fighters that summer. Other CE *veliyats* followed soon after. The move created a rift within the organization, with a minority of *veliyat* remaining loyal to the CE (and therefore al-Qaeda). Those that joined the Islamic State, however, were incorporated into an ISIS "governate" encompassing Russia's restive majority-Muslim regions of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachayevo-Cherkessia.<sup>31</sup> Then-ISIS *emir* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi subsequently named Abu Muhammad al-Kadari (Rustam Asilderov) leader of the newly declared Islamic State province, known as the Velayat Qawqaz.<sup>32</sup> Asilderov was killed in a December 2016 raid carried out by Russian authorities near Makhachkala, Dagestan.<sup>33</sup> No clear leader has emerged publicly since, which could signal the group's diminishing activity and a loss of morale among its fighters.<sup>34</sup> Al-Baghdadi, meanwhile, was killed in October of 2019 as part of a U.S. raid in Syria. He was succeeded by a little-known militant named Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi.<sup>35</sup>

There is no indication as of this writing whether the leadership change has led to a change in the group's outlook on Russia. Historically, IS has made a point of targeting Russia, if not for its treatment of Muslims internally then certainly for its activities in Syria. This has included high-profile attacks such as the October 2015 downing of a Russian commercial airliner flight from Sharm el-Sheikh to St. Petersburg (an attack that was orchestrated by the Islamic State)<sup>36</sup> and assorted terrorist incidents and plots on Russian soil.<sup>37</sup> IS has even threatened Russian President Vladimir Putin directly.<sup>38</sup> The Islamic State also leveled threats against the Summer 2018 World Cup Games, for which Russia was the host, but no attacks of note materialized.<sup>39</sup> In December 2019, the FBI shared information with Russia that aided in foiling a New Years' terror attack being planned by IS elements, for which Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his appreciation to the Trump administration.<sup>40</sup> As of this writing, the most recent successful attack claimed by IS took place on December 31, 2019, in Ingushetia, when two men hit a police officer with their vehicle and attacked several more others with knives. One police officer was killed in the incident, and three others were wounded.<sup>41</sup>

The degree to which Islamist militants in the North Caucasus are currently split between IS-Vilayat Kavkaz and the remnants of CE remains unclear, but both factions are believed to retain significant operational capability.

#### *Other Islamists*

In the past, suspected al-Qaeda operatives such as Omar Abu Ibn al-Khattab have joined the ChRI/CE, but there is no open source evidence indicating that al-Qaeda or other foreign *jihadist* groups operate in Russia independently from the CE. Russian law enforcement occasionally claims that al-Qaeda operatives number among killed and captured CE fighters, but such claims are never documented. Moreover, al-Qaeda's position in Russia (and elsewhere in the "post-Soviet space") has been largely supplanted in recent years by the Islamic State.<sup>42</sup>

The only other Islamic extremist organization reported to be active in Russia is the Uighur-Bulgar Jamaat (UBJ). The group was established between 2006 and 2008 in Bashkortostan by Pavel Dorokhov, an ethnic Russian converted and trained by Taliban camps in Afghanistan.<sup>43</sup> It has sporadically engaged in militancy in Russia's Volga region (encompassing the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan). In 2010, no fewer than 20 members of the UBJ attempted to blow up a gas line in Bashkortostan's Birsk district, and were subsequently killed in a shootout with Bashkir police.<sup>44</sup> In 2012, the group disrupted the long-

time peace between religious groups in Tatarstan when they severely injured the region's Grand Mufti, Ilduz Fayzov, and killed his deputy, Valliulla Yakupov.<sup>45</sup> The UBJ also makes up part of the contingent of foreign fighters in Syria, and as of 2013 numbered around 200 in that theater.<sup>46</sup> The UBJ may or may not be one and the same organization as the apparently ethnic Tatar Bulgar Jamaat, which fought in Afghanistan around 2009.<sup>47</sup>

Despite being banned in Russia, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) maintains a presence in the country as well. Many alleged HuT members are arrested annually, mostly in the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. By 2012, HuT and other Islamists had penetrated many autonomous mosques and official Islamic institutions in Tatarstan, carried out public demonstrations in tandem with nationalist groups, and organized several automobile caravans flying the HuT flag.<sup>48</sup> According to Memorial, a Russian human rights watchdog, HuT has become a non-violent organization in recent years.<sup>49</sup> Memorial considers 23 of the Muslims arrested in 2016 on charges associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir to be “political prisoners,” a term it uses to refer to those who have been wrongfully arrested to meet political ends.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Other domestic groups*

Several small Tatar groups have Islamist tendencies but are at least equally or predominantly national separatist in nature, confining their activity to the republic of Tatarstan and, to a lesser degree, Bashkortostan. They include: Azatlyk, Ittifak, Mille Mejlis, and elements within the All-Tatar Public Center.<sup>51</sup> These organizations have historically confined themselves to occasional declarations, conferences, and small demonstrations, but now increasingly engage in those activities in partnership with Islamist elements such as HuT. Some of their official statements and documents are sent to North Caucasus terrorist websites.<sup>52</sup> None, however, are at present believed to constitute a significant threat to the Russian state.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islam has undergone a revival among its traditionally Muslim ethnic groups. According to Russia's leading mufti, Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia (CMR) Ravil Gainutdin, the number of mosques in Russia grew from 150 in 1991 to some six thousand by October 2005.<sup>53</sup> From 2000 to 2015, mosque construction averaged just over one per day, according to expert estimates.<sup>54</sup> In 2019, Chechnya inaugurated the latest such structure; billed as “Europe's biggest mosque,” the facility boasts capacity for more than 30,000 worshippers and is located outside the regional capital of Grozny.<sup>55</sup>

This explosive growth has been propelled by the size of Russia's Muslim minority itself. While Russia's Muslims remain a distinct minority in Russia, differences in communal behavior—including fewer divorces, less alcoholism and a greater rate of reproduction—have given them a more robust demographic profile than their ethnic Russian counterparts.<sup>56</sup> Thus, according to the United Nations, the fertility of Russia's Muslims, at 2.3, is significantly higher than the overall Russian national fertility rate of 1.7.<sup>57</sup> Other estimates peg the reproductive rate of Russia's Muslims higher still.<sup>58</sup> As a result, a variety of projections have suggested that Russia's Muslims will account for a fifth of the country's total population by the end of this decade, and may make up a majority of Russians by as early as mid-century.<sup>59</sup> Russian religious authorities have more or less confirmed these estimates; in a 2019 interview, Russia's chief *mufti*, Ravil Gainutdin, stated that the Muslim population in Russia is expected to increase to 30 percent of the overall total over the next decade-and-a-half.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, migrants (the majority of them Muslim) continue to enter the Russian Federation in search of employment and economic opportunity. In 2019, the total number of migrant workers present on Russian soil was estimated to be approximately 11.6 million, some 8 percent of the country's total population.<sup>61</sup> This second cohort helps to augment the size and political reach of Russia's indigenous Muslim community.

Russia's Muslims are divided by geography, history, ethnicity, and divergent confessional movements (Sufis, Sunnis, and Shi'ites) and legal schools (*maskhabs*). The overwhelming majority of Russia's Muslims, however, are Sunni. Although Muslim communities can be found all across the length and breadth of the vast federation, the largest concentrations of ethnic Muslims (ethnic groups that traditionally have adhered in overwhelming numbers to the Islamic faith) are found in the North Caucasus's Muslim republics—Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria (KBR), and Karachaevo-Cherkessia (KChR)—and in the Volga and Urals republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. There are also large Muslim populations in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but these are more Russified, urbanized, and secularized than those in other regions, especially the North Caucasus. The Muslims of the North Caucasus remain largely rural, traditionally religious, and indigenously ethnic or clan-oriented.

Russia's other main ethnic Muslim groups, Tatars and Bashkirs, are concentrated to a great extent in the Tatarstan and Bashkortostan Republics. As of the 2010 Russian census, Tatars make up a slim majority in Tatarstan, while ethnic Russians outnumber Bashkirs in Bashkortostan. Both Tatars and Bashkirs are better integrated into Russian life than are the North Caucasians. Some historically non-Muslim ethnic groups are seeing some of their members convert to Islam, including ethnic Russians.<sup>62</sup>

In terms of political ideology, Russia's Muslims, much like ethnic Slavs, are divided among democrats, conservatives, Eurasianist and Islamist reactionaries. Since, under Russian law, political parties based on any communal identification are forbidden from participating in elections, it is difficult to attain a detailed picture of Muslims' distribution on Russia's political spectrum. Political Islam, however, is in evidence at both the official and unofficial levels. Media controlled by official Islamic structures carry numerous articles on introducing elements of *sharia* law in Russia, including the introduction of Islamic banking and insurance.<sup>63</sup> Also, there are strong anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israeli, and even anti-Semitic tendencies, not just among Russia's Islamists but among Russia's traditional Muslims as well.<sup>64</sup>

Generally, however, there is only limited support for violent Islamism in both Russia's Muslim and non-Muslim populations. The country's Islamic clergy feels threatened and virulently opposes manifestations of political Islam, and Islamists have found limited support in the Muslim community. That said, many young Muslims are increasingly fascinated by—and sympathetic toward—radical trends, including Islamism as represented by the charismatic fighters of the Caucasus Emirate and, more recently, by the Islamic State.

The Russian government is ill-equipped to deal with this trend. In recent years, the Kremlin has done precious little of substance to address the needs of the country's growing Muslim minority. To the contrary, the ultranationalist identity erected by the government of Vladimir Putin over the past decade has systematically shut Russia's Muslims out of contemporary politics and society, leaving them vulnerable to the lure of alternative ideologies—Islamism chief among them.<sup>65</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Russia's *Freedom of Religion Law of 1997* establishes Islam, along with Orthodox Christianity, Buddhism, and Judaism, as one of the four “traditional” faiths.<sup>66</sup> As of the 2010 Russian census, Muslims make up the second largest group of these (after Orthodox Christianity).

Russia's Muslims are not strongly self-organized. Rather, they are well organized “from above” by the Islamic clergy and the Russian state. Muslim communities must be registered with the government, and each is then incorporated into a regional Muslim Spiritual Administration (MSA), every one of which in turn is included under one of the three main Muslim umbrella organizations: the Council of Muslims of Russia (CMR), the Central Muslim Spiritual Administration (CMSA), and the Coordinating Council of the Muslims of the North Caucasus (CCMNC). The CMR at present is the most influential of the umbrella organizations, with its leader, the ethnic Tatar *mufti* Ravil Gainutdin, on good terms with the Kremlin. Two

smaller umbrella organizations—the MSA of the European part of Russia and the MSA of the Asian part of Russia—are subordinated to two of the abovementioned. In all, there are known to be approximately 60 regional MSAs, all of which are included under one or another of the umbrella organizations.<sup>67</sup> These various structures help organize the travel of Muslims to the *hajj* and to study abroad, support Islamic schools and universities in Russia, and recruit and train Islamic clergy. The various Muslim spiritual councils (Dukhovnyie Upravlenii Musulman, or DUM in Russian) receive state funding for muftis' salaries, university and school development, and the building of mosques. Independent Muslim communities and mosques persist but are illegal and are usually discovered by the authorities and incorporated into the official administrations. Typically, these have manifested Islamist tendencies, and some have produced terrorist organizations, leaders, and cadres.<sup>68</sup>

Both the Russian state and official Islamic clergy are strongly opposed to and greatly fear any manifestation of Islamism. As a result, the state has banned political parties based on religion (as well as on ethnicity and gender), and the Islamic clergy cooperates closely with the state apparatus in combating independent Islamic or Islamist groups and supporting reformist, Euro-Islamic, and other more secularized Islamic trends as an antidote to Islamism. Ravil Gainutdin, as well as the leadership of the Republic of Tatarstan, has led in this effort.<sup>69</sup>

Past experience has taught Russian authorities to treat Islamists severely, and they move quickly and often illegally to imprison them for long terms. Arrests of Islamists belonging to non-violent but illegal organizations such as HuT and Tablighi Jamaat are often accompanied by official charges of conspiracy to commit terrorist attacks and claims that searches produced not only extremist literature but also weapons and explosives.<sup>70</sup>

The extent to which these policies and practices lead to significant violations of Muslims' civil, political, and human rights, in turn, creates a catalyst for extremist recruitment. Putin-era amendments to Russia's laws "On Extremism" and "On Combating Terrorism" give the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), Justice Ministry, and General Prosecutor's Office broad leeway in holding suspects and determining what constitutes "extremist literature." In June of 2020, for instance, a Russian journalist was put on trial for the infraction of airing criticism of state policy relating to terrorism during an interview; she faces up to 7 years in prison.<sup>71</sup> Searches are frequently conducted on questionable pretexts, detention can often result in torture, and some convictions are based on exaggerated charges. These practices are more prevalent in the North Caucasus, especially in Chechnya under regional president Ramzan Kadyrov, where authorities have even carried out extra-judicial retribution against the families of suspected and actual terrorists, including the abductions of relatives and the burning of homes.

Imprisonment and detention on charges of extremism also continue in Russian-occupied Crimea.<sup>72</sup> Since Russia's annexation of the peninsula in 2014, Crimean Tatars have been prosecuted for alleged affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir.<sup>73</sup> Many of those arrested are activists who openly oppose Russian occupation. Moreover, Russia's Supreme Court has deemed the *Mejlis*, the "self-governing body of Crimean Tatars," to be an extremist group and banned its operation,<sup>74</sup> despite protests from the international community.

Federal counterterrorism policy has in recent years increasingly focused on "soft power" approaches. Moscow has increased federal contributions to the budgets of republics hardest hit by the CE. In 2014, the Russian central government was still funding the majority of the budget for the North Caucasus in return for the loyalty of local officials and businessmen.<sup>75</sup> As of 2016, the support percentage of the republic's budgets ranged from 46.7% (Kabardino-Balkaria) to 82% (Ingushetia).<sup>76</sup> As of 2016, some of those youth programs came in the form of media schools that taught students how to promote Russian interests and "standards in journalism."<sup>77</sup>

Russian support to the North Caucasus region has shifted in recent years. What began as a focus on socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure project support has increasingly shifted toward increasing investment opportunities and decreasing unemployment in the region under the label of "post conflict

reconstruction.”<sup>78</sup> One thing that has remained unchanged, however; the Kremlin’s continued support to the North Caucasus. Even in the aftermath of U.S. and international sanctions imposed following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Moscow continued and even expanded its support to regional republics, particularly Chechnya.<sup>79</sup>

These funding efforts have been supplemented by increasingly broad federal authorities to curb perceived terrorist activities. In 2016, Russia passed a series of laws, cumulatively referred to as the “Yarovaya Packet,” which expand the definition of “extremism,” allowing the criminalization of a highly subjective range of acts and authorizing the prosecution of any person or financier of an act that harms Russians worldwide.<sup>80</sup> The law further tightens the aforementioned organizational structure, requiring official permits for religious activities, including praying, that take place outside of officially recognized religious buildings. It targets outreach and missionary work, confining it to churches and other specific areas, and usually requiring permits. The “Yarovaya Packet” defines “failure to report crime” as a criminal act and sets the accountable age at 14 years for this and other “extremism” charges.<sup>81</sup>

Perhaps most notably, the “Packet” provides the Kremlin with broad oversight over the Internet domain. Under the law’s provisions, individuals can now be charged for inciting or justifying terrorism, as well as proselytizing on social media and in emails. “Yarovaya” likewise grants security agencies full access to private communications, as well as requiring telecommunications companies to store all data for at least six months, including conversations and text messages. Meanwhile, “organizers of information distribution” are required to store data for one year and help decrypt information, if necessary.<sup>82</sup>

These “soft power” efforts have been mirrored by a more concrete organizational reconfiguration. In 2016, Russia created a new super-security service known as the National Guard, ostensibly to help the Kremlin better fight terrorism and organized crime.<sup>83</sup> This body encompasses the country’s riot police (OMON) and SWAT teams (SOBR), as well as other relevant units, and will work “in close cooperation” with the country’s Ministry of Interior Affairs.<sup>84</sup> However, experts note that this new, militarized structure will likely have little actual role fighting terrorism, because its forces are predominantly public security forces, trained to control and deter.<sup>85</sup>

Each of the North Caucasus Muslim republics has carried out its own, and often very different, policies to counter violent Islamism. Chechnya’s strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, has traditionally suppressed Islamist groups with heavy-handed tactics, while simultaneously seeking to co-opt Islamist rhetoric and push Islamist social policies, such as imposing *sharia* law on the province as a method of reducing support for Islamist groups.<sup>86</sup> By contrast, Ingushetia’s former President Yunus bek Yevkurov, pioneered a continuous amnesty or “adaptation” policy that sought to draw fighters out of the forest and back to their families and civilian life by offering reduced or suspended sentences and educational and work opportunities.<sup>87</sup> Yevkurov resigned in July of 2019, and was succeeded as regional President by Mahmud-Ali Kalimatov, who previously served as a functionary in Russia’s Samara Oblast.

In 2010, Dagestan established an adaptation commission, which engages in the same work, and in 2011 Kabardino-Balkariya followed suit. In 2012, in an effort to isolate, divide, and rule radical Muslims, Dagestan’s authorities helped establish a dialogue between the official Sufi-oriented Muslim Spiritual Administration of Dagestan and the republic’s growing Salafi community, the main recruiting pool for the CE. These local policies are aimed at blunting the recruitment efforts of the CE and other radicals.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen a marked uptick in the radicalization and mobilization of elements of Russia’s Muslim minority. This is attributable to a number of factors, ranging from a lack of economic integration and opportunity to rising state xenophobia to the growing prevalence of Islamist groups and ideas within the Russian Federation.<sup>88</sup> This mobilization has been exacerbated by the Russian intervention into the Syrian civil war, which has made the country itself the target of various extremist groups. Al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (now rebranded as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), has called for terrorist attacks within Russia as a retaliatory measure.<sup>89</sup> So, too, has the Islamic State.<sup>90</sup> These threats have been



followed by concrete incidents of terrorist violence within Russia (detailed above). These statements highlight the risks inherent in Russia's current foreign policy. By wading into the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime, Russia's government has effectively exacerbated the mobilization—and the radicalization—of its own Muslims.

Despite the slowdown of terrorist activity in the Russian Federation in recent years, its resurgence remains possible under unfavorable circumstances. According to analysts, one such scenario might take the form of rising social unrest in the North Caucasus in response to state repression against protestors, civil society and political opposition.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, there is still evidence of an active Islamist operational presence within the country; the most recent successful attack claimed by the Islamic State in southern Chechnya—entailing a knife attack on a policeman by two assailants, leading to his death, and the injury of another policeman—took place on December 28, 2020.<sup>92</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. The last official census of the Russian population was taken in 2010, and it tallied the national population at 142.9 million. See *Vserossiiskii Perepis Naselenie 2010*, <http://www.perepis-2010.ru/>. Since then, various numbers have been floated for the overall size of the Russian population – as well as the proportional size of its Muslim minority. The figures cited above are estimates deemed credible by the authors, but are subject to revision. On Russia's overall population (incorporating that of the annexed Crimean Peninsula), see Marlene Laruelle, "How Islam Will Change Russia," in S. Enders Wimbush and Elizabeth Portale, *Russia in Decline* (Jamestown Foundation, 2017). The estimated size of Russia's Muslim minority is drawn from the author's conversations with Russian officials in Washington, DC in the Fall of 2015.
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