Russia's Counterterrorism Policy:
Variations on an Imperial Theme

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For over a decade, Russia has struggled with persistent domestic insurgency and terrorism. The country has experienced a multitude of terrorist and militant attacks, and the turn of the century was marked by a series of high-profile terrorist incidents involving a large number of civilian casualties. In response to this threat, Russian authorities adopted extensive counterterrorism legislation, established and modified institutions responsible for combating terrorism, and streamlined the leadership and conduct of counterterrorist operations. According to recent statements by the present Kremlin administration, the terrorist problem in Russia has finally receded, and the war on separatism had been definitively won. Yet, the daily reports on the shoot-outs and clashes between insurgents and Russia's security forces cast serious doubts on these official claims. Despite the signs of a slow normalization of life in Chechnya, the security situation remains tense there, and terrorist incidents and guerilla attacks have spread into the broader Southern region previously unaffected by terrorism.

Much ink has been spilled criticizing deficiencies of Russia's forceful, excessive, and poorly-coordinated responses. The state has been blamed for the lack of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy encompassing socio-economic approaches and an effective system of prevention and protection from terrorism. Yet, judging the Russian campaign's excesses and failures does not improve our general understanding of why it has always favored the tactic of force and suppression as the most appropriate methods of fighting terrorism. Stressing the futility of a short-term reactive approach does not explain Russia's choice of the military approach over the long-term socio-economic solutions for resolving complex security concerns.

It is my conviction that many aspects of Russia's counterterrorism policy can be explained from the position of Russia's imperial tradition. The latter had considerable impact on the policies and security measures adopted by the Tsarist and Soviet regimes. Rekindled recently by the fear of disintegration and reduced international standing, it has been shaping security policies and perceptions of the modern Russian state. In the essay that follows, I briefly delineate the contours of Russia's contemporary counterterrorism policy and demonstrate the continuity of Russian counterterrorism from pre-Soviet and Soviet, to post-Soviet regimes. Next, I define and demonstrate the endurance of the imperial tradition throughout the Tsarist, Soviet, and modern epochs, and apply the "imperial lens" for the analysis and interpretation of Russia's measures aimed at combating terrorism.

A Brief on Russia's Counterterrorism Policy

In the context of Russia, terrorism has been tightly associated with activities of Islamic militants in Chechnya and the broader North Caucasus region. The latter has been an area with the highest concentration of terrorist attacks, and Chechen guerilla fighters have been implicated in the vast majority of hostage-taking incidents and terrorist crimes in Russia. The development of Russia's counterterrorism legislation and institutional framework has trailed the government's experiences with fighting the Chechen resistance and coping with the

threat of terrorism in the North Caucasus.

As a result of the developments in Chechnya, the Russian government adopted the Federal Law "On Combating Terrorism" in 1998, which became the main legal pillar of Russian anti-terrorist efforts. The law attempted to define terrorist activity omitting political motivation as one of the defining characteristics of the crime. It also sketched out the legal regime of the counterterrorist operation, and defined organizational basis of counterterrorism placing Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Ministry of Interior (MVD) at the top of the list of agencies responsible for combating terrorism.

The troops of the FSB, MVD, and military units from other "power" ministries - the Defense Ministry, the Ministry of Emergency Situations, and the Border Service – were used in counterterrorism and "mop-up" operations in Chechnya as part of the Combined Group of Forces. To assist the military battalions in carrying out counterterrorism tasks, the FSB, the Interior Ministry, and the Main Intelligence Service of Russia created special task teams for the liquidation of terrorists and militants without trial.[1] With a lack of oversight and the virtual impunity of the military and special task forces, the counterterrorism operation in Chechnya has degenerated into the indiscriminate use of overwhelming military force, characterized by deplorable patterns of brutalizing the local population. Frequent abductions, summary executions, and torture have had a radicalizing effect on the population.

In 1999, Russia entered the second Chechen military campaign, and a new wave of terrorist violence and insurgency engulfed the country in the early 2000s. The government's reaction to a new wave of terrorism was similar to earlier policy responses. President Putin pledged to overhaul the system of Russia's security services and develop procedures for coordinating the activities of counterterrorism agencies. The Russian government vowed to re-assert its influence in the North Caucasus and restore order in the volatile Southern region. The military strategies were expanded outside of the Chechen republic, and the presence of military troops in the rest of the North Caucasus was substantially increased.[2] Under the pretext of combating terrorism, the Kremlin increased the powers of its security services, strengthened the "power vertical," and expanded controls over mass media and political life.[3] To streamline the changes in the leadership and conduct of counterterrorist operations, the Russian government adopted a new Federal Law "On Counteraction to Terrorism", which replaced the earlier version. Entered into force in 2006, the law legalizes the application of armed forces for counterterrorism operations inside and outside of the country, but provides only scant description of prophylactic measures aimed at defending the Russian people and infrastructure against the threat of terrorism. As the 1998 act "On Combating Terrorism," the 2006 counterterrorism law allows for suspension of certain individual liberties and media freedoms in the zone of counterterrorist operations, and authorizes counterterrorism units to carry out searches and demolition of suspicious airplanes and ships.

Extensive legislative measures and institutional reforms all point to the Russian desire to learn from its experiences of managing horrific acts of terrorism. Notwithstanding the changes at the tactical level of counterterrorist operations and development of new means for combating terrorism, the basic principles of tackling security threats in Russia have remained essentially the same. The striking similarities of the current views on the most effective and appropriate ways of combating terrorism to those of the Soviet and Tsarist regimes suggest the palpable continuity of Russian counterterrorism. The resemblance of contemporary measures to Soviet and pre-Soviet responses is indicative of an age-old understanding of the

terrorist threat that Russia inherited from the previous regimes.

The Continuity of Russia's Counterterrorism

Since the first terrorist campaign set up by the Russian revolutionaries in the late 19th century, terrorism in Russia has been regarded as an assault against the state personified by the Tsar, the communist party, or the central government and leadership of the modern state, respectively. In the epoch of Tsars, terrorism was coterminous with the revolutionary movement against absolutism.[4] During the early years of the Bolshevik rule, it was tantamount to counter-revolutionary anti-Communist actions. Two decades later, terrorism was viewed as subversive activities of foreign intelligence services, or acts of resistance to the Soviet government orchestrated by secret services from Western states. Neither the Soviet Union nor contemporary Russia has clearly defined terrorism or distinguished it from other crimes of a violent or political nature.[5] This ill-defined legal construct allowed the government full discretion to bring forth charges of alleged terrorist crimes. The vague definitions created uncertainty in the application of law, which allowed for politically motivated enforcement of the criminal legislative provisions.

The scope of Russia's counterterrorism measures has been traditionally confined to military operations and security services' efforts. This follows from Russia's understanding of terrorism as an attack on the state rather than an assault on individual rights. Subsequently, in Russia, concerns over human rights have always receded to the background of counterterrorism planning and operations. The very first counterterrorist campaign launched by the Tsarist regime was exemplar in this regard. The extent of oppression and violations of individual freedoms was incommensurable to the revolutionaries' attacks that the Tsarist government sought to deter and combat. Hundreds of "politically untrustworthy" people were sent to exile, placed under strict surveillance, or kept in the long-term pre-trial detention for having "intent" to commit terrorist crimes. The secret police monitored societal "moods," and exercised control over the theater, literature, and print media. It was also responsible for surveillance of intelligentsia in Tsarist Russia.[6]

The Bolsheviks, who replaced Tsarist agents, employed terror tactics to counter bourgeois terrorism. Since the latter was viewed as a bi-product of class struggle, the annihilation of the bourgeoisie was deemed essential for eradicating terrorism.[7] For the Soviet government, terrorism became a continuation of struggle launched by the capitalist governments against the communist regime. Subsequently, neutralization of "enemies" suspected in collaboration with the Western nations was considered a necessary dimension of counteraction to terrorism. In modern Russia, the ruthlessness of the Russian security forces and impunity with which its troops committed their crimes against ethnic Chechens were tantamount to the brutal practices employed against the peoples of the Russian Empire, whether under Tsarist or Soviet rule.

The "security departments" ["okhrannye otdeleniya," known in the West as Okhrana) that carried out counter-revolutionary and counterterrorism functions in the Tsarist administration became a prototype for the Soviet-era secret police. The "All-Russian Emergency Commission" ("Vserossiiskaya Chrezvychainaya Komissiya"), or VChK, became the main tool of the Bolshevik terror and a precursor of the Committee of State Security (KGB) created in 1954.[8] Modern Russia has largely inherited the Soviet-era structure of counterterrorism institutions, and the FSB's anti-terrorism office was a direct successor of the KGB's depart-

ment for the fight against terrorism. Many officers of the contemporary security organs continue to rely on Soviet-style work methods, and believe in the effectiveness of a security model emphasizing short-term, reactive, and coercive responses instead of exploring alternative long-term measures for preventing the threat of terrorism. A long-term strategy integrating preventive, prophylactic and reactive measures had not been developed in the Soviet Union and is in a rudimentary stage in Russia. In 2006, the FSB chief, Nicholai Patrushev, evaluated Russia's system of terrorist attack prevention as very poor, giving it a score of "2" on a 5-point scale, which is a failing grade in the Russian educational system.

The reason for this lack of a comprehensive preventive strategy is that in each regime neither the secret services nor the law-enforcement agencies of Russia have systematically examined their counterterrorism experiences for preparing recommendations regarding improvements of methods and tactics of combating terrorism.[9] The Russian security agencies, like their Tsarist and Soviet counterparts, carry out little analytical work and have a minimal understanding of complex scientific and methodological tools for the systematic processing and evaluation of data with the purpose of assessing strategic situations in the region, identifying patterns of crimes, as well as the causes and consequences of criminalization.

Russia's Imperial Tradition and Its Impact on State's Responses to Terrorism

It is my conviction that the continuity of the Russian counterterrorism program can be explained from the position of Russia's imperial tradition. The latter refers to a practice of extension and retention of the state authority over culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse populations by means of force and accompanying this practice with a set of beliefs regarding the greatness and inviolability of the empire.

Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were both imperial states formed by conquest and military force, retained by power and centralized control, and ruled by a Moscow-based bureaucracy. Geographical expansion was the essence of imperial existence in the epoch of the Tsars. In the Soviet time, territorial aggrandizement became commensurate with the extension of the Soviet Union's national power. [10] Both the USSR and its predecessor were multi-national states in which ethnic cultures and indigenous traditions were subordinated to "high" Russian culture and language. Although, neither entity had succeeded in building a nation, both undertook measures to develop a sense of "Russianness" in the diverse population. The Russian settlers colonized the vast territories inhabited by the non-Slavs, and occupied the key military, security, political, and economic posts in the non-Russian regions. Russian language and traditions were imposed on other ethnic groups, and myths about Russia's leading role in their present and past were actively disseminated.[11]

Contemporary Russia has all of the trappings of an imperial state. It encompasses most of the territory of Soviet and Tsarist Russia, and many regions located on its territorial fringes still bear the scars of the colonial past. In this multi-ethnic state, a predominantly Slavic political elite rule over a multitude of disempowered ethnic cultures and groups.[12] The Russian government, elite, and general public perceive their country as the successor of both the USSR and the Russian empire. Vladimir Putin, upon assuming his post as a Russian president, attempted to build a historical bridge from the present to the past including the Soviet time. The ideas of Russia's greatness and its destined superpower status have been used as a centerpiece of the seemingly continuous Russian identity.[13] The notions of "gosudarstvennost'" and "derzhava," associated with strong statehood and great power, have

firmly entered public discourse and have become a staple of the ruling United Russia party's platform.

Thus, the history of Russia has been that of an imperial state. Yet, it has also been an empire with a different tradition. It has never evolved into a national empire with a strong sense of national consciousness. On the contrary, Russia's nationhood has always been bound with imperium, Tsarist or Soviet, and citizens -- regardless of their nationality -- owed allegiance to the Tsar, the Communist party, or the state.[14] Contemporary Russia reveres this tradition. "For the Russian, a strong state is not an anomaly, not something with which he has to struggle, but, on the contrary, a source and a guarantee of order, as well as the initiator and main moving force of any change," declared Putin.[15] A strong state with direct and decisive command over the people has been viewed as a key to resolving Russia's mounting economic and political concerns. Strengthening the state through centralization and the erection of the "power vertical" has become a marker of Putin's eight-year rule.

The imperial tradition and myths about Russia's preordained status of super power have had considerable impact on its perceptions of the threats to security and the ensuing security policies. The decline and collapse of the USSR struck a severe blow to Russian status internationally and its image as a super-power. The loss of the former Soviet Republics not only reduced the size of Russian territory, but also significantly damaged its strategic position with regard to access to the high seas and strategic resources. The deteriorating military-industrial capabilities that could not compete with the military and economic performance of the West were a source of significant unease. Like imperial Russia and the Soviet Union before, contemporary Russia has been insecure about the openness and indefensibility of its new borders as well as encirclement by what it perceives to be, at least moderately hostile states. Internally, a wave of nationalist and separatist claims that threaten a further disintegration of Russian territory have exacerbated this post-imperial frustration.

Faced with imminent decay, Russia was in no position to perform its imperial function of continual geopolitical expansion. It only sought to preserve its landmass and retain the state on a vast area of land that was in danger of shrinking away.[16] Russia's handling of the Chechen conflict has been a product of its imperial policy, a "test of Russia's imperial will."[17] The Chechen war and concomitant counterterrorism operations have been used to preserve the Russian "imperial body" against all odds of further degeneration. The policy toward Chechnya has been invigorated by several elements: the archaic views on the backwardness of the Chechen people; primordial beliefs in the historical enmity of the Chechen toward Russians and their supposed propensity for violence; and Russia's "calling" to protect the Slavs, Orthodoxy, and the West from the grip of Islamic radicalism.[18] According to Putin, Chechnya was an "irresponsible quasi-state" that became a "gangster enclave while the ideological vacuum was quickly filled by fundamentalist organizations".[19] This kind of rationalization employed by Russian leadership is not unique to the Chechen conflict. It is a frame commonly used by imperial incumbents to justify their fight against anti-colonialism.[20]

It should be noted, however, that the Chechen resistance forces have always posed variable levels of threat to security of the Russian state. The first Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev let various armed groups to carry out attacks on the Russian security forces and engage in a range of criminal activities under his watch. Aslan Maskhadov, elected as a President of Chechnya in 1997, had limited success in curbing the growth of radical Islamic groups,

which continued insurgency campaign against Moscow. Yet, the first military campaign in Chechnya was instigated by fear of the Chechen precedent for other discontent republics, and the primary motive for the Chechen war was to prevent disintegration of Russia. The second Chechen war was launched in response to insurgents' operations in Dagestan and a series of bombings in the heartland of Russia. The latter attacks were blamed on the Chechen resistance groups, a fact that has never been fully confirmed, and many analysts pondered over the role of the second war in boosting legitimacy and support for Putin. Furthermore, no level of threat can justify the extent of atrocities committed by the Russian military against the Chechen, official tolerance, if not outright support for, their discrimination, and demonization of the entire Chechen population in statements of some politicians and Russian mass media. Not only did these practices expand the support base for guerilla fighters and terrorists, they also prompted the change in the tactics of the Chechen insurgents who resorted increasingly to terrorist attacks inside and outside of Chechnya.

The Tsarist and Soviet empires were held together by strong authoritarian rule. The preservation of Russia's territory by means of the war and counterterrorism also revived authoritarianism. Against the backdrop of the military and counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus, the government launched extensive political and administrative reforms carried out under the guise of restoring order, reducing lawlessness, and combating terrorism.

The first in a series of the state-wide transformations was aimed at eliminating dysfunctional features of Yeltsin-style federalism. Russia was divided into seven federal districts likened to the six Governorate Generals established by Alexander II in the wake of an assassination attempt in 1879.[21] The presidential envoys, heading each federal district and accountable directly to president, have been tasked with the restoration of the preeminence of federal law and order, and coordination of federal agencies' activities in the districts they head. Yet, their unofficial assignment – to monitor the threats to state security and assist in the consolidation of Putin's regime – was similar to the tasks of the Governorate General formed in the epoch of the Tsars.[22]

The 1866 assassination attempt by a young Russian revolutionary, Karakozov, gave the Tsar an excuse to take away certain municipal freedoms, and clamp down on the democratic press.[23] The Dubrovka theater crisis of 2002 and the 2004 Beslan tragedy supplied the Russian government with a pretext for abolishing direct popular elections of regional leaders. The curtailment of media and political freedoms, and establishment of barriers for electoral competition have further strengthened the powers of the ruling regime.

The reliance on repressive and simplistic military-bureaucratic solutions to complex security problems falls in line with the imperial practices of coercion and the related belief regarding the effectiveness of the use of force. The Russian government has traditionally had a low threshold for the use of violence and few scruples about using coercion over negotiation as a policy tool. The Russian security agencies have frequently been on par with the "terrorists" in terms of their indifference for human lives and disdain for individual freedom. The impunity with which crimes were committed by the Russian troops and security services' units over the course of the war and counterterrorist operations resembled the measures of the Soviet security forces and practices of the Tsarist secret police, which also operated unchecked by any law.[24] In modern Russia, as in Soviet or Tsarist times, Russian citizens have rarely had legal protection if pressure was exerted to force their collaboration, confession was extracted under duress, or arrests were made on the basis of false information.

To conclude, in the context of Russia's counterterrorism policy, the imperial tradition manifested itself in the notion of terrorism as an attack on the state, its interests and territory. Further, the protection of the state required the resurrection of sophisticated forms of authoritarianism. The forceful means of control is the essence of authoritarian rule. This explains the primacy of coercive, retaliatory, short-term counterterrorism responses that have been adopted by the Russian regime. The unrestricted expansion of the state's repressive powers for protection and preservation of state interests has rarely yielded good results. Instead of resolving security problems, the imperial tradition calls for their suppression. Inevitably, they re-emerge.

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NOTES:

[1] Perovic, J. 2006. "Moscow's North Caucasus Quagmire." ISN Security Watch, January 6. http://www.isn.ethz.ch/news/sw/details.cfm?ID=16070.
[2] Perovic 2006/
[3] Many of Putin's administrative reforms have been inspired by the idea of consolidating Russia's strength and political unity. Putin's fortification of the "power vertical" refers to a series of administrative measures aimed at bolstering Russia's federal structure and institutions severely weakened during Yeltsin's regime.
[4] Lieven, D.C.B. 1989. "The Security Police, Civil Rights, and the Fate of the Russian Empire, 1855-1917." In Civil Rights in Imperial Russia, eds. O. Crisp and L. Edmondson. Oxford University Press, p.238.
[5] The 1998 law "On Combating Terrorism" did not differentiate between terrorism as a complex socio-economic phenomenon and individual manifestations of terrorism. It conflated goals with methods of terrorism, thus, failing to differentiate between terrorism and other types of violent crime. The 2006 law "On Counteraction to Terrorism" defines terrorism as "practice of influencing the decisions of government, local self-government or international organizations by intimidating the population or using other forms of illegal violent action" as well as the "ideology of violence". According to some legal experts, the definition of terrorism as practice and ideology lends itself to broad interpretations. There are legitimate fears about the possibility of "stretching" the definition to any offensive ideology or political agenda.
[6] Kikot', V.Y., and N.D. Eriashvili, eds. 2004. Терроризм: Борьба и Проблемы Противодействия [Terrorism: Combat and Problems of Prevention]. Moscow, Russia: UNITI, p.103; Shumilov, A.Y. and Yakushev, V.V. 2002. "Развитие Правового Регулирования Борьбы с Терроризмом в России" [Development of Legal Regulations of Combating Terrorism in Russia]. In Современный Терроризм: Теория и Практика [Contemporary Terrorism: Theory and Practice], ed. V.I. Marchenkov. Moscow: Voennyi Universitet Ministerstva Oborony RF, p.144-6.
[7] Shoumikhin, A. 2004. "Deterring Terrorism: Russian Views." National Institute for Public Policy. http://www.nipp.org/Adobe/Russian%20Web%20Page/February% 20webpage.pdf
[8] Khlobustov, O. 2005. Gosbezopasnost' ot Alexandra I do Putina [State Security from Alexander I to Putin]. Moscow: Eksimo.
[9] Shumilov, A.Y. and Safonov I.I. 2005. "Типичные Оперативно-Розыскные Версии по факту совершения террористической акции " [Typical Scenarios of Investigation and De-

tection after the Commission of a Terrorist Act]. In Терроризм: Правовые аспекты борьбы [Terrorism: Legal Aspects of Counteraction], ed. I.L. Trynov. Moscow: Eksmo, pp. 247.
[10] Trenin, D. 2001. The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p.75.
[11] Barber, J. 1995. "Russia: A Crisis of Post-Imperial Viability." In Contemporary Crisis of the Nation State, ed. J. Dunn. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 35-6.
[12] Pain, E. 2005. "Will Russia Transform Into a Nationalist Empire?" Russia in Global Affairs 3(2):71.
[13] Putin, V.V. 1999. "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" as translated in R. Sakwa. 2002. Putin: Russia's Choice. London: Routledge, pp.251-62.
[14] Barber 1995, p. 35.
[15] Gavin, S. 2007. "The Russian Idea and the Discourse of Vladimir Putin," CEU Political Science Journal, 1, p. 52.
[16] Pain 2005. In his address to the Federal Assembly, Vladimir Putin described the "retention of the state on a vast area" as Russia's thousand-year project (Putin 1999).
[17] See "Russia's Future: Whither the Flying Troika," The Economist, 7 December 1991, p. 19.
[18] Hughes, J. 2007. Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. xi.
[19] Hughes 2007, p. 111.
[20] Hughes 2007, p. xi.
[21] Hughes 2007, p. 123.
[22] Petrov, N. and D. Slider. 2007. "Putin and the Regions," In Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain, ed. D.R. Herspring, 3rd edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.; Trifonov, A.G., and Mezhuev B.V. 2000. "Генерал-губернаторство в Российской Системе Территориального Управления" [Governorate Generals in the Russian Territorial Administrative System]. Politicheskiye Issledovaniya 5:22-30.
[23] Bordyugov, G.A., ed. 2001. "Политическая Полиция и Политический терроризм в России (Вторая Половина XIX – начало XX вв.)" [Secret Police and Political Terrorism in Russia (Second Half of the 19th – Beginning of 20th c.). Collection of Documents. Moscow: AIRO-XX, p.10.
[24] Lieven 1989, p. 256.