

RUSSIA'S USE OF PSEUDO-ANTI-TERRORIST NARRATIVES TO PURSUE AGGRESSIVE IMPERIAL POLICIES – THE CASE OF CHECHNYA

Abstract

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent launch of the Global War on Terror were among the most transformative moments in human history, fundamentally altering the political trajectory of the world map. Most scholarly works on this topic primarily focus on the U.S.-led military campaigns and their outcomes or influence on the modern world. However, the relevance of the issue extends beyond the Middle East, which is why it is important to examine other key political actors and their actions - in this case, Russia.

This paper explores how Russia exploited the Global War on Terror, launched in the aftermath of the attacks, to pursue its own imperialist objectives. Given the complexity of the subject, the research focuses specifically on the case of Chechnya and examines the multifaceted ways in which Russia employed pseudo-anti-terrorist narratives, laying the foundation for the spread of Kremlin's aggressive propaganda. Using Chechnya as an example, the paper analyzes how Russia portrayed itself as a victim of terrorism in order to justify its expansionist and violent actions and to secure international support.

Key words: Pseudo-anti-terrorism, 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, Imperial Policy, Russia, Chechnya.

Introduction

Following the September 11 attacks, the President of Russia Vladimir Putin introduced an entirely new narrative aimed at framing the confrontation with Chechen rebels as an integral part of the Global War on Terror. According to him, Russia had long been fighting international terrorism and had consistently urged the international community to unite in this struggle (East Asian Strategic Review 2007). Through this narrative, Russia sought to portray itself as the defender of “civilized humanity,” standing in stark opposition to “terrorist barbarism” (O’Loughlin, Tuathail, & Kolossov 2004).

A core element of this strategy was to present Russia as a victim of terrorism in order to gain international sympathy and support for its domestic counterterrorism operations. This is evident in Putin’s statement: “Russia knows at first hand what terrorism is. So, we understand as well as anyone the feelings of the American people. Addressing the people of the United States on behalf of Russia I would like to say that we are with you, we entirely and fully share and experience your pain. We support you.” (Putin 2001)¹. The primary purpose of

¹ «Россия не понаслышке знает, что такое террор. И поэтому мы лучше всего понимаем чувства американского народа, и, обращаясь от имени России к народу Соединенных Штатов, хочу сказать, что мы с вами, мы целиком и полностью разделяем и чувствуем вашу боль. Мы поддерживаем вас».

this statement was to universalize America's struggle, framing it as Russia's own, to evoke compassion from the international community and foster a sense of "shared victimhood." It was part of a carefully calculated, well-orchestrated narrative designed to legitimize Russia's actions in Chechnya.

The Kremlin actively leveraged this narrative to consolidate domestic power and shape public perception. Internal military actions were presented as legitimate responses to external threats against Russia's territorial integrity and security. State-controlled media played a decisive role in reinforcing this message, demonizing opposition figures and human rights defenders by framing them as agents seeking to destabilize the nation. Over time, this propaganda cultivated a public belief that restricting civil liberties was a necessary compromise to safeguard national security (Abraham 2001).

Portraying the Chechen conflict as part of the Global War on Terror was a highly deliberate political maneuver. In the post-9/11 era, Putin's rhetoric strategically expanded Russia's domestic struggle, constructing the notion of a so-called "Global Chechnya" (O'Loughlin, Tuathail, & Kolossov 2004). This reframing transformed the perception of the conflict from a regional separatist movement into an international fight against terrorism. Moreover, Russia actively sought to associate Chechen rebels with al-Qaeda. This action shielded Moscow from criticism over human rights violations in Chechnya, while granting it international legitimacy to justify its actions. Such narrative made it increasingly difficult for both domestic opposition and external critics to challenge the actions of Russian government without appearing sympathetic to terrorism. As a result, the Kremlin succeeded in tightening its domestic control and disseminating propagandistic rhetoric that fundamentally reshaped public discourse.

The Case of Chechnya as a Tool of Imperial Policy

The Chechen Republic has a long and turbulent history of resistance against Russian imperial domination, which began as early as the 18th–19th centuries (Seminar 2021). This deep hostility was further aggravated by historical traumas such as the mass deportation of the Chechen population to Central Asia and Siberia in the 1940s during Stalin's rule (Forteith 2022). The constant desire for independence from Russia remained an inexhaustible source of motivation for Chechen fighters throughout history. In 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union pushed Chechnya to declare independence, something Russia categorically refused to recognize. This confrontation led to the First Chechen War (1994–1996), which brought Russia a humiliating defeat and ended with a period of de facto autonomy for Chechnya.

The Second Chechen War began on August 7, 1999, after a group of Islamist Chechen fighters led by Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab invaded Dagestan. Their main goal in this incursion was to establish an Islamic state in the North Caucasus (Drolet-Duguay 2023). This was followed in September 1999 by a series of apartment bombings in Russian cities (Nogee 2023). Although no Chechen field commander claimed responsibility for these bombings, Russian authorities quickly blamed Chechen separatists. Vladimir Putin's rise to power was significantly bolstered by his response to these events.

Prior to September 11, 2001, the international perception of the Chechen conflict was largely focused on harsh condemnation of Russia's actions. The UN and Western countries drew particular attention to widespread human rights violations and the humanitarian consequences of the war. Criticism centered primarily on the disproportionate use of force by Russian troops, including mass bombings of towns and villages, killings, torture and inhumane treatment, arbitrary detentions, and more. Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International documented these violent acts in detail and produced comprehensive reports on the suffering endured by civilians (Amnesty International 2000). The international community placed significant constraints on Russia, hindering its efforts to present its military campaign as legitimate.

The conflict was widely understood as a separatist struggle, with international actors repeatedly calling for political dialogue and genuine negotiations. In 2000-2001, for example, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) adopted resolutions explicitly condemning human rights abuses in Chechnya and urging Moscow to establish an independent investigative commission (UN Commission on Human Rights 2000). In 2000, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson publicly criticized Russia's actions, stating: "Russian investigations into atrocities in Chechnya have simply not been credible. The United Nations must seize the initiative here - not hand it back to Moscow."

Western leaders echoed this criticism. U.S. President Bill Clinton warned Russia that its actions could result in severe consequences, including international isolation (U.S. Senate 2000). The European Union likewise urged Moscow to halt its disproportionate use of force (Guardian 2000), while policymakers even debated the possible imposition of economic sanctions (Politico 2000). Consequently, in the pre-9/11 period, most Western observers viewed Russia's assertions of Chechen ties to al-Qaeda with skepticism and suspicion.

However, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the shift in international approaches significantly weakened external pressure on Russia - an opportunity the Kremlin was quick to exploit. President Vladimir Putin swiftly linked the ongoing conflict in Chechnya to the Global War on Terror (Gilligan 2010). He declared that Russia had long been fighting international terrorism, framing Chechen fighters as indistinguishable from al-Qaeda and other global terrorist networks. This narrative aimed to legitimize Russia's military operations. The Kremlin consistently asserted that the "anti-terrorist operation" in Chechnya was a necessary step to restore order (Felshtinsky & Litvinenko 2004) and to destroy terrorist groups allegedly sheltered in the region (Abraham 2001). Equating the Chechen conflict with the broader Global War on Terror was a deliberate, carefully crafted strategy. In his post-9/11 statements, Putin explicitly tied the two together, seeking to reframe what had been a separatist conflict as part of a larger, global struggle. By equating Chechen rebels with al-Qaeda, Russia was able to justify numerous human rights abuses. In this way, the Kremlin strategically capitalized on international counterterrorist sentiment to portray itself as both a victim of terrorism and a crucial ally in the global fight against it. This positioning substantially reduced criticism of Russia's actions in Chechnya, secured its international support, and allowed Moscow to present itself as a responsible power defending global security, rather than an aggressor.

By the mid-2000s, Russia launched a policy known as "Chechenization" (Russel 2005), aimed at transferring day-to-day law enforcement and counterterrorism responsibilities to pro-Russian Chechen forces (Hedenskog 2020). This became formal policy following the assassination of Chechnya's leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, on May 9, 2004, after which his son, Ramzan Kadyrov, assumed power. The paramilitary units under his control, known as the "Kadyrovtsy," soon became the regime's main instrument of repression (Mustaffa 2022). Through this strategy, Moscow was able to gradually withdraw federal troops and maintain effective control over the region. Any opposition to Kadyrov's regime was subsequently branded a "terrorist" threat, providing a permanent justification for the suppression of dissent. The ultimate objective was to integrate Chechnya into Russia's broader nationalist narrative.

Equally notable is Russia's rapid establishment of a special legal and political framework for counterterrorism measures in the aftermath of 9/11, designed to align with international trends. New legislation - most prominently the 2002 Law "On Combating Extremist Activity" (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis 2010) and the 2006 Law "On Countering Terrorism" - was characterized by vague, overly broad definitions of "terrorism" and "extremism." This ambiguity was not a flaw but a deliberate mechanism to legalize the use of force both domestically and abroad under the guise of counterterrorism (International Humanitarian Law Databases 2006). It granted the Kremlin sweeping powers, enabling the criminalization of peaceful protest and even routine criticism of the government under the pretext of protecting national security.

These laws posed a serious threat to civil rights and freedoms. They were systematically used to restrict civic space, suppress political opposition, and marginalize minority groups. The legislation imposed sweeping limitations on fundamental freedoms - including speech, religion, and movement. According to Amnesty International, the misuse of these laws to punish dissent increased dramatically (Amnesty International 2024). Individuals were charged with “supporting terrorism” without any judicial review, and those with dissenting views were labeled “terrorists” or “extremists.” Their bank accounts were frozen, depriving them of any means of livelihood (Geneva Academy 2024).

Control also extended to the media. The 2006 counterterrorism law prohibited the “promotion of terrorist ideas” and effectively banned journalists from reporting on counterterrorist operations (Bless 2011). Subsequent amendments imposed even tighter restrictions, fostering self-censorship and criminalizing the dissemination of so-called “unreliable information” or the expression of “incorrect attitudes” toward the authorities. Under these laws, various organizations, including media outlets, faced the risk of liquidation (Ingannamorte 2024).

These legislative changes were explicitly designed to reinforce the objectives of the ruling regime and to consolidate political power. For instance, the 2006 law expanded the authority of the Federal Security Service (FSB - Федеральная Служба Безопасности), concentrating power in the hands of its director, who simultaneously assumed leadership of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee. This centralization enabled the unilateral deployment of military forces and the mobilization of state resources, including armed forces, to the Kremlin’s advantage (Amnesty International 2024). The absence of robust mechanisms of checks and balances in Russia thus created fertile ground for extensive corruption schemes. This illustrates how global crises - such as the fight against terrorism - may be strategically exploited to erode democratic norms and entrench authoritarian governance.

Beyond legislative reforms, additional strategies are notable to mention. In Chechnya, Russian forces extensively employed so-called “zachistki” (“cleansing operations”) and established “filtration camps” as primary counterterrorism tactics (Wheeler 2011). These operations typically involved the encirclement of entire villages, the imposition of severe restrictions on residents’ movement, and mass detentions. Russian authorities, including President Putin and Foreign Minister Ivanov, consistently framed these actions as counterterrorist military operations rather than full-scale war. They argued that such measures were necessary to restore order, eliminate “hotbeds of international terrorism” (Bindig 2000), and protect civilians.

Human rights organizations, however, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have documented in detail how official narratives diverged sharply from lived realities on the ground. Their reports reveal systematic and widespread human rights violations within both operations and camps. These accounts describe torture and degrading treatment, including prolonged beatings with blunt objects, burning of victims with fire or heated metal, the use of electric shocks, psychological abuse, mock executions, threats against family members, and other forms of cruelty (Human Rights Watch 2006). Arbitrary detentions were widespread, frequently carried out without legal justification, and often in secret or extrajudicial facilities. Thousands of detainees subjected to the so-called “filtration” process subsequently disappeared, with many later discovered in mass graves bearing evidence of torture and brutal mistreatment (Amnesty International Publications 2007).

The systemic nature of this violence and the prevailing climate of impunity demonstrate that Russia’s intervention cannot legitimately be characterized as a counterterrorist operation. Perpetrators were rarely, if ever, prosecuted, and investigations were either perfunctory or not undertaken at all. The stark contradiction between official explanations and empirical evidence underscores that the counterterrorism discourse functioned primarily as a facade for large-scale human rights abuses and state-sanctioned violence. Framing these measures as counterterrorist imperatives enabled Russia to leverage global anti-terrorist sentiment as a shield against international accountability. The absence of meaningful punishment for serious crimes further

reinforced the perception that these were not legitimate counterterrorism measures, but rather instruments of state repression and coercive control.

Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, international perceptions of the Chechen conflict shifted markedly, producing a dramatic transformation in Western responses to Russia's actions. Although human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International continued to document and condemn violations in Chechnya, Western governments - most notably the United States - became far less vocal in their criticism of abuses in the region (Stent 2021).

The attenuation of international criticism can be attributed to several factors. After 9/11, global attention was redirected toward counterterrorism, elevating Russia's status as a strategic partner in the eyes of the United States and its allies. As a result, the imperative of cooperation with Russia - including intelligence sharing, access to Russian airspace, and use of bases in Central Asia - was prioritized over human rights concerns. Western states also sought to avoid direct confrontation with Russia given its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, which Moscow could use to block serious deliberation of the Chechen issue (Denber 2004). Moreover, Western governments were themselves preoccupied with the development of new counterterrorism legislation and operations, which frequently entailed significant compromises on civil liberties (Geneva Academy 2024).

The shift in the West's position - from harsh criticism to silence - created a critical opportunity for Russia to pursue its imperial goals of maintaining territorial integrity and demonstrating power. The Kremlin fully exploited the reduction of international pressure. By the end of 2002, Russia had closed the office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Chechnya and refused to invite UN special rapporteurs who were meant to address issues of torture and punitive measures (Denber 2004). This retreat by the international community dealt a serious blow to human rights protection mechanisms.

The strategic redefinition of the Chechen conflict played a key role in shaping Russia's broader geopolitical objectives. By presenting the conflict as a domestic counterterrorist operation, Russia managed to justify its military intervention and significantly reduce international involvement. Moreover, Russia also exploited the anti-terrorist narrative for economic purposes - specifically, by strengthening its control over oil and gas resources and over strategic pipelines passing through Chechnya (Drolet-Duguay 2023).

The Kremlin tactically took advantage of the international anti-terrorist climate that emerged after September 11, 2001, using the situation to reshape the narrative of the Chechen conflict. This period became a model for internal control in Russia - ambiguous "national security" arguments turned into a powerful tool for suppressing political opposition, and silencing critical voices, effectively transforming anti-terrorist frameworks into instruments of authoritarianism. This set a dangerous precedent for the Kremlin's future actions, as it revealed how a "war against minorities" could be legally justified under the guise of fighting terrorism.

All in all, Russia strategically exploited the situation and managed to suppress criticism at the international level. The silence of the West meant that Russia had the opportunity to act unhindered in pursuing its geopolitical objectives.

Thus, the case of Chechnya serves as one of the clearest examples of how Russia used the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent Global War on Terror to justify its imperialist actions. This is only one part of Russia's chronically recurring pseudo-anti-terrorist narrative, which Moscow continues to employ today - allowing it to justify its aggressive actions both domestically and internationally through the dissemination of a false narrative.

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