

CAN RUSSIA AND THE WEST COOPERATE MORE CLOSELY ON COUNTERTERRORISM?

DAVID VAINO | DECEMBER 2013

Russia and the West both consider terrorism one of their gravest security threats. To what extent are they cooperating in the fight against terrorism, and what are the prospects for strengthening this cooperation?

The Boston bombings of April 15, 2013, brought the mutual U.S.-Russian interest in counterterrorist cooperation into sharp relief. While the bombers do not seem to have belonged to a transnational network, there was nonetheless a clear international aspect to the attack. That conclusion stems from what is known about suspected bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev's travel to the North Caucasus and the communications the Russian security services and the FBI had about him. Russia, moreover, has a clear interest in limiting instability and terrorist violence in the lead-up to the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and in the wake of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan—aims that would especially benefit from close coordination with Western powers.

However, after a brief spate of media attention and official statements this past April, the issue of U.S.-Russian counterterrorism cooperation has faded from the headlines and been largely replaced by various controversies in the bilateral relationship.

Russia, the United States, and NATO have been cooperating on counterterrorism for some time, since before the events of last April. All parties agree that terrorism is a major transnational threat—a Russian expert, for example, called it a common threat to all civilized nations, and Western officials concur. As a result, the counterterrorist sphere is one of the most “politically correct” for cooperation, in the words of a NATO official, and is often cited as one of the brightest spots in Russian-Western relations. Both camps are quick to highlight a variety of continuing joint efforts in the field, including common Russian-European airspace alerts, technical programs, bilateral information sharing, Afghan counter-narcotics programs, and a Russia-NATO program to equip the Afghan security services with Russian helicopters. Experts and officials of all parties lament the fact that these generally successful programs are not better known in order to counteract the apparent perception that nothing is happening. Finally, both sides readily admit that a closer counterterrorism relationship would be desirable.



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The main questions, then, are where this relationship is going and why it has not become deeper. Two issues in particular seem to lie at the root of the answers.

First, and unsurprisingly, is the general state of relations between Russia and the West. In both public and private statements, frustration with Russia seems to be the norm for Western actors. On the U.S. side, the most obvious example of this tendency is the official statement canceling U.S. President Barack Obama's planned meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin this past August, which cited a "lack of progress" on the bilateral agenda, putting a positive spin on what really amounted to a major breakdown in mutual relations. Similarly, NATO officials have privately expressed frustration with a Russia that they perceive as essentially uncooperative on major issues, from missile defense to efforts to revive the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe.

Meanwhile, Russia seems alternately frustrated or mystified by policy decisions it views as naive at best and actively threatening at worst. For example, past U.S. concern over alleged human rights abuses by Russian forces in the North Caucasus—and a corresponding tendency for Chechen separatists to be labeled "freedom fighters" in the Western press—is still remembered by the Russian foreign policy community, which considers these groups to be unqualified terrorists. The general Western support for the Syrian uprising (and the Arab Spring more broadly) is also frightening to Russian experts, who fear a major center of instability that could spread Islamic extremism throughout the region. Russians believe precisely this situation occurred in Libya, despite their warnings. In sum, while relations on a lower, functional level seem essentially adequate, relations on a higher level are problematic.

Perhaps more fundamentally, the Western and Russian camps have generally different perceptions of the terrorist threat. NATO, by its nature, deals with international terrorism, which the alliance's 2010 Lisbon Summit Declaration cites as a "real and serious threat to the security and

safety of the Alliance and its members." Similarly, the U.S. government regards the threat as transnational, emanating particularly from al-Qaeda and its affiliates. By contrast, the Russian foreign policy community considers terrorism a substantially more internal issue: for example, the 2009 "Concept of Counterterrorism in the Russian Federation" describes the emergence and spread of terrorism in Russia as based primarily on internal conflicts but with certain links to transnational threats. Moreover, while the West appears to consistently regard terrorism as one of the most pressing extant security concerns, and therefore gives it the lion's share of attention, conversations with Russian experts suggest that the Russian foreign policy community, at least officially, views it as less important than the question of strategic balance between great powers and global stability.

In light of these cleavages between Russia and the West, the future of counterterrorist cooperation looks somewhat bleak. Whether publicly or privately, there is essentially unanimous agreement that current programs will persist. Relevant parties on both sides confirm that the programs are useful, going well, and too valuable to cut off. In other words, these programs have enough obvious utility—especially given upcoming events such as the Sochi Olympics—to have a momentum of their own. They should not be particularly affected by the general ups and downs in the relationships between Russia and its Western partners. Where there has been progress, it has generally occurred on a bilateral level, where relations may be simpler; for example, NATO was not invited as a body to the international counterterrorism meetings hosted by Russia on Sochi security.

Less clear, however, are prospects for deepening this cooperation. Political will for a serious effort is deeply lacking on both sides as higher-level relationships are worsening, promoting a general stagnation in this area. The basic question is whether these disagreements will act as a brake on counterterrorism cooperation or whether good relations in the functional sphere can moderate the tendency for the general tone of relations to worsen. The answer, unfortunately, is far from clear.

Efforts at deepening counterterrorism cooperation will be complicated further by different perceptions of the terrorist threat. Western proposals run the risk of being taken as intrusions on Russian interests as a result, and Russia is unlikely to accept those efforts in a climate of poor relations. At the same time, since Russia places terrorism lower on its list of priorities, it is more likely to pursue easier bilateral agreements than the kind of deep, multilateral accords many in the West might prefer. As a result, efforts to pursue joint counterterrorist action on a truly deep level may be stymied by fundamental disagreements on what needs to be done. Negotiators and officials from both camps should keep this difference in mind.

Finally, the Russian government has responded well to formal, written mechanisms in the past, even when the overall political climate has been poor. However, numerous bilateral and multilateral frameworks for counterterrorism already exist, such as the NATO-Russia Council and its Action Plan on counterterrorism. While some sort of formal dialogue about deepening joint counterterrorism efforts might help maintain and develop contacts between officials and may be worth pursuing, it runs the risk of being redundant. In any event, it would ultimately mean little without the political will for serious cooperation.

In the end, the change most needed is also the most fundamental and elusive—a general improvement of Russian-Western relations. Otherwise, efforts to cooperate more seriously on counterterrorism will continue to founder in the face of minimal political will and divergent threat perceptions.

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