

# Dynamics of Nuclear and Radiological Terrorism Threats to Post-Soviet Russia

Dr. Simon Saradzhyan

Presentation at the 1st Nuclear Threats- Information Gathering Meeting  
of the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine study  
group for

Assessing and Improving Strategies for Preventing, Countering, and  
Responding to Weapons of Mass Destruction Terrorism

June 21, 2022

**Historically, Russians have not been strangers to political violence.**

Some of the major rebellions in tsarist-Russia since the 17<sup>th</sup> century:

- Stepan Razin's Rebellion of 1667-1671
- Periodic rebellions in the North Caucasus in the 18-20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chechnya's last anti-Russian abrek, Khasukha Magomadov, was not killed until 1976 at the age of 71)
- Yemelyan Pugachev's Rebellion of 1773–1775
- Decembrist Revolt of 1825
- Polish Revolt of 1830-1831 (Russian-Polish War)
- Revolution of 1905-1907
- Revolution of 1917

# Attempts to assassinate just one tsar: Alexander II

- April 4, 1866
- May 25, 1867
- April 2, 1879
- November 19, 1879
- February 5, 1880
- March 1, 1881 (2 consecutive attempts)

# Terrorism in the Soviet Union

Suspected and confirmed terrorist attacks in the post-Stalin Soviet Union that resulted in casualties (not excluding attempted hijacking of planes which took place in 1958, 1961, 1964, 1969, 1970, 1977, 1978, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1988):

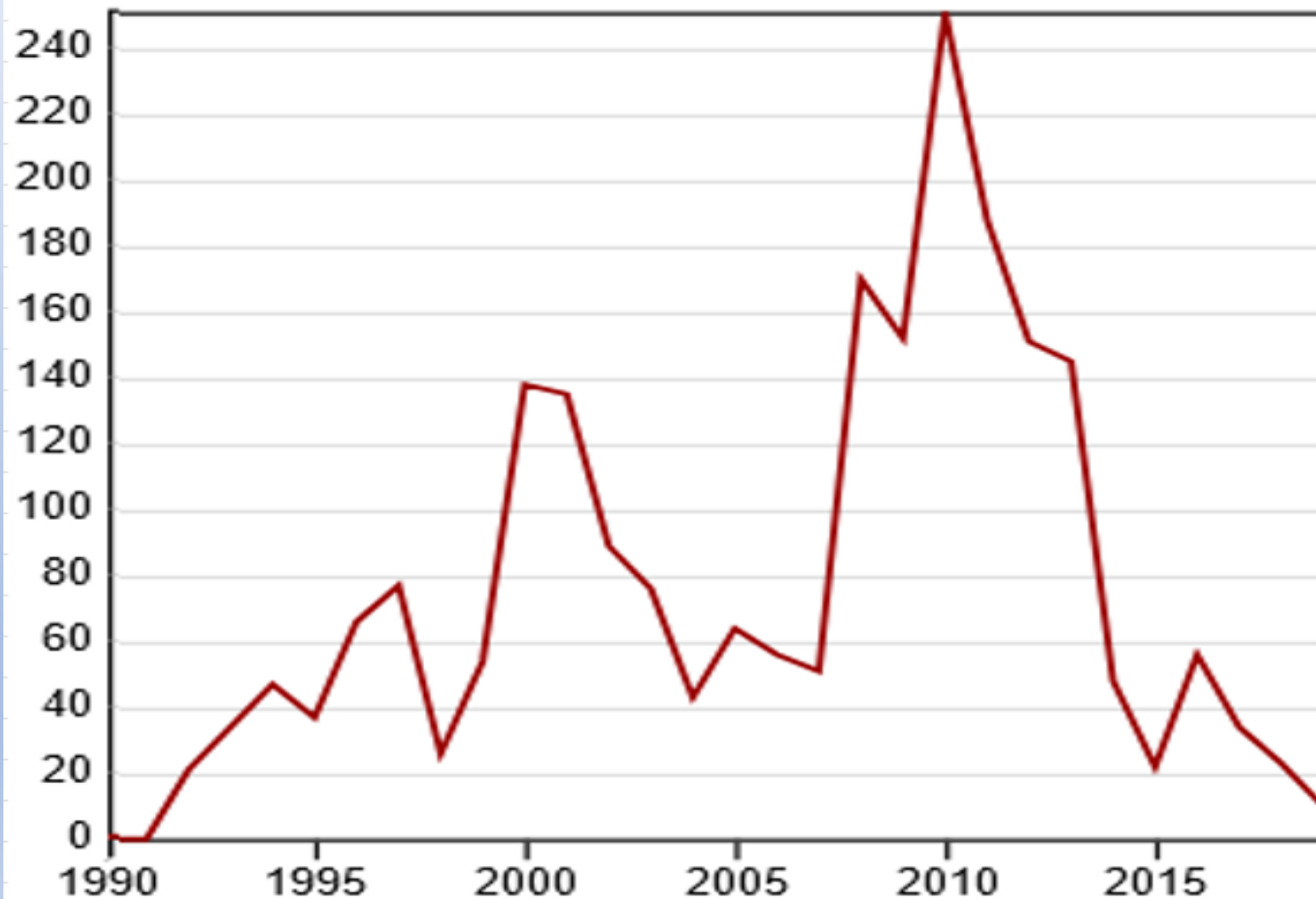
- September 1967: Krysanov, a resident of Kaunas, detonated a bomb near the entrance to Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow. Several people died, including Krysanov. No motive established, but the choice of target indicated it might have been a politically motivated act.
- January 22, 1969: Soviet Army Lieutenant Viktor Ilyin tried to shoot Leonid Brezhnev. A driver in one of the cars was shot instead and a motorcyclist from the escort group was wounded.
- May 1, 1970: During a Soviet demonstration in Arkhangelsk, a local resident burst onto the stage where the region's party leadership had amassed and opened fire. Several people were killed, many were injured.
- June 14, 1971: Pyotr Volynsky bombed a passenger bus in the southern city of Krasnodar. Volynsky bore a grudge against tall people and against authorities for designating him with schizophrenia and banning him from working as a doctor. Five died instantly, five died later due to injuries.

# Terrorism in the Soviet Union, continued

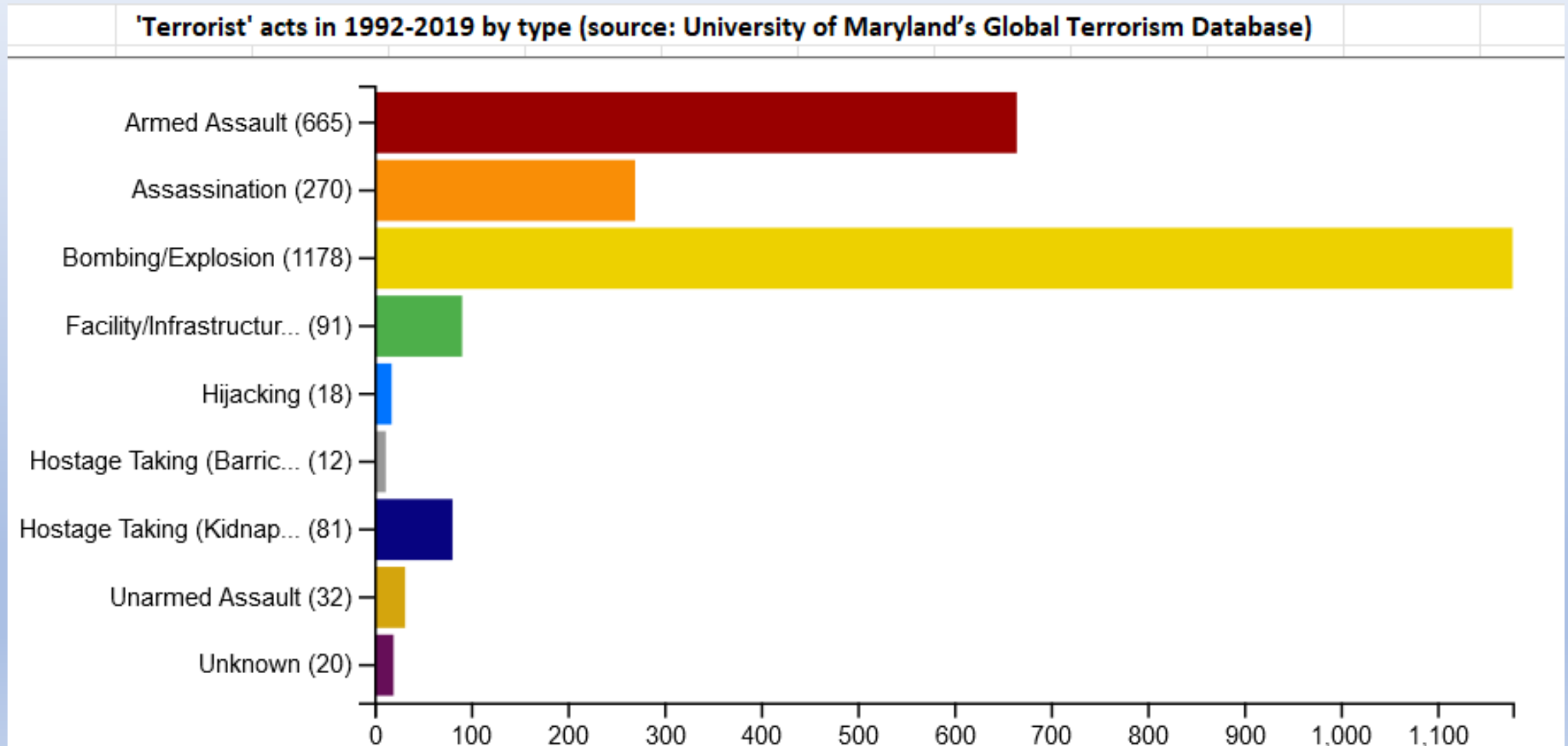
- **September 1, 1973**: Bombing of the Lenin mausoleum by Nikolai Savrasov, killing three, including himself, and injuring 16. No motive established, but the choice of target indicated it might have been a politically motivated act.
- **1975**: Three explosions occurred in Soviet Georgia: in Sukhumi (near the regional committee of the CPSU, 1 person died), in Tbilisi (on Rustaveli Avenue in front of a government building) and Kutaisi (in a park). V. Zhvania was subsequently caught, convicted and executed for the explosions.
- **January 8, 1977**: Series of three bombings in Moscow staged by Stepan Zatikyan, Hakob Stepanyan and Zaven Baghdasaryan to avenge what the suspects saw as the oppression of the Armenian people by the Soviet/Russian authorities. Seven died and 37 were wounded.
- **June 8, 1979**: An explosion near the Mir cinema in Klin (Moscow region). Two people were injured. The bomber was a pediatric surgeon who, dissatisfied with the policy of the authorities, decided to embark on a path of individual terror.

# The surge in political violence in post-Soviet Russia

'Terrorist' acts in 1992-2019 (source: University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database)

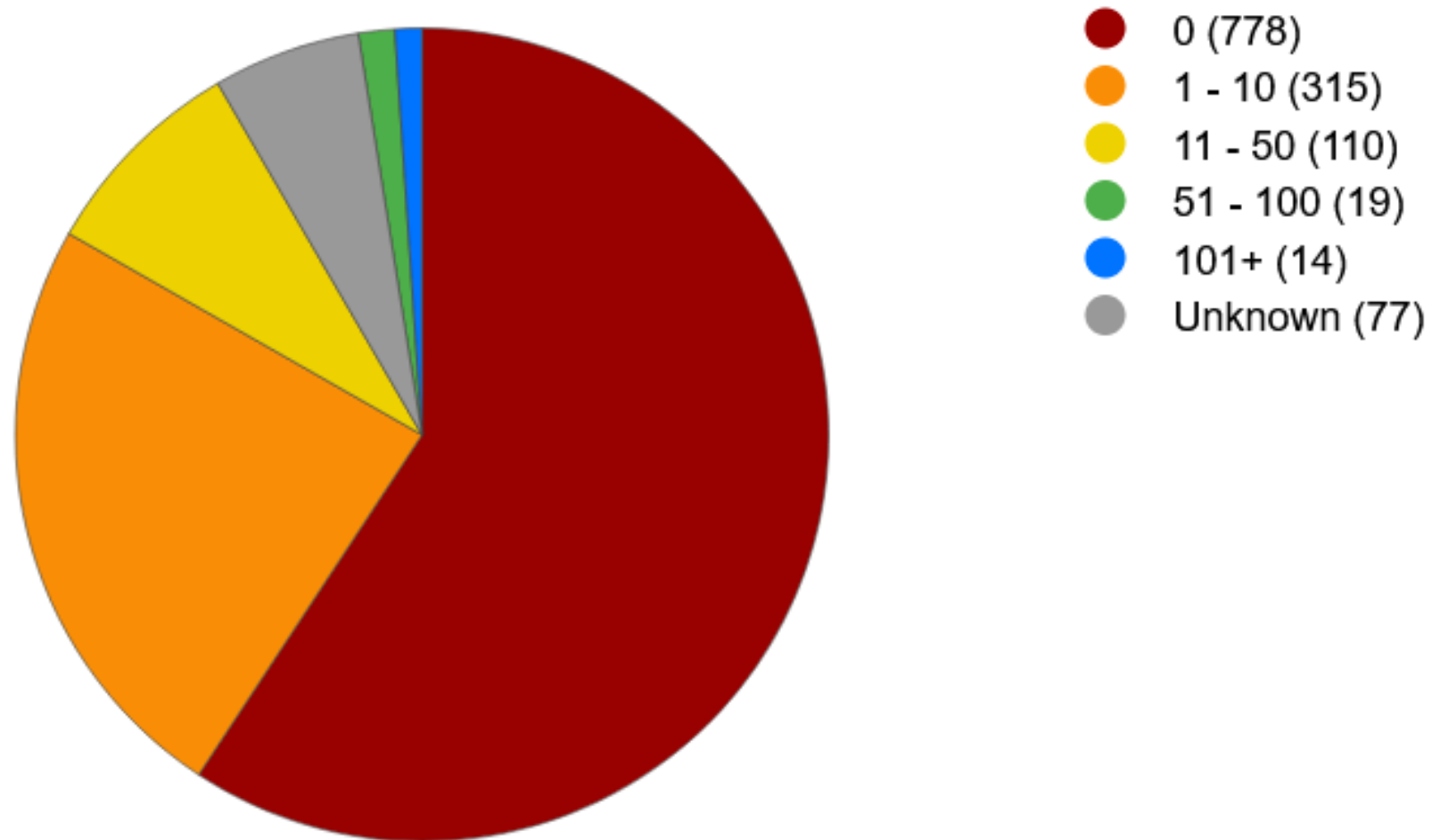


# The surge in political violence in post-Soviet Russia



# Casualties from political violence in post-Soviet Russia

Casualties caused by 'terrorist' acts in 1992-2019 (source: GTD)





## Political violence in post-Soviet Russia: main actors

1. Followers of various strains of revolutionary socialism, such as the National-Bolshevik Party and the New Revolutionary Alternative
2. Ethnic Russian ultranationalists
3. Non-Russian ethnic ultranationalists, including Ingush, Ossetian, Chechen, Tatar and other ultranationalists
4. Salafi-jihadists
5. Doomsday cults
  - Of these five, No. 3, No. 4 and No. 5 reportedly displayed interest in WMD/mass casualty attacks.

# **1. Followers of various strains of revolutionary socialism, such as the National-Bolshevik Party and the New Revolutionary Alternative**

- Participated in ethnic conflicts (NBP)
- Bombed government buildings (NRA)
- No known WMD aspirations

## 2. Ethnic Russian ultranationalists

- Some have chosen to target Russian authorities, which they viewed as an “occupational regime” preventing them from turning Russia into a racially homogenous state.
- No known WMD aspirations, but:
  - In March 2007, six members of a skinhead group were detained in St. Petersburg on suspicion of having been responsible for the bombing of a McDonald’s restaurant. Authorities also claimed that this sextet acquired mercury and planned to spray or spill it to contaminate targeted facilities.
  - Also in 2007, the Moscow Regional Court sentenced Vladimir Vlasov, a former employee of Rosatom’s Bochvar National Research Institute for Inorganic Materials, to 18 years in prison for the June 2005 bombing of a Moscow-bound passenger train from Chechnya in what the verdict said was an ethnic hate crime.
  - A group of young men were convicted in May 2008 by the Moscow City Court of a series of hate crimes, including bombings. One of the attackers, Oleg Kostyrev, was a fourth-year student at the Dmitry Mendeleev Russian Chemical-Technological University in Moscow. According to police, it was there that he acquired the diagram for the bomb used in the attack on a market.

### 3. Non-Russian ethnic ultranationalists, including Ingush, Ossetian, Chechen, Tatar and other ultranationalists and

#### 4. Salafi-jihadists

- During Russia's first military campaign in Chechnya in 1994–96, Chechen separatists acquired radioactive materials, threatened to attack Russia's nuclear facilities, plotted to hijack a nuclear submarine and attempted to put pressure on the Russian leadership by planting a container with radioactive materials in Moscow and threatening to detonate it.
- During Russia's second campaign in Chechnya in 1999, Chechen separatists and their allies planted explosives in chemical storage tanks, scouted Russian nuclear facilities and established contacts with an insider at one such facility.
- Evidence of ethnic ultranationalists and Salafi-jihadists' preparedness for mass casualties among non-combatants:
  - Actions:
    - Budyonovsk raid of 1995
    - Apartment bombing in Buinaksk in 1999
    - Dubrovka raid of 2002
    - Beslan raid of 2004
    - Pledging allegiance to AQ (e.g. in 2013) and IS (2014)
  - Words:
    - The Caucasus Emirate's first qadi, Anzor Astemirov, in his 2019 lecture "On Tawhid," argued that those who "out of [their] own free would subordinate" themselves to "pagan" authorities were, in fact, pagans themselves, and therefore, were not protected by the Islamic jus in bello that prohibits targeting innocent civilians of Muslim faith.

## **5. Doomsday cults (Aum Shinrikyo, White Brotherhood, New Generation Church)**

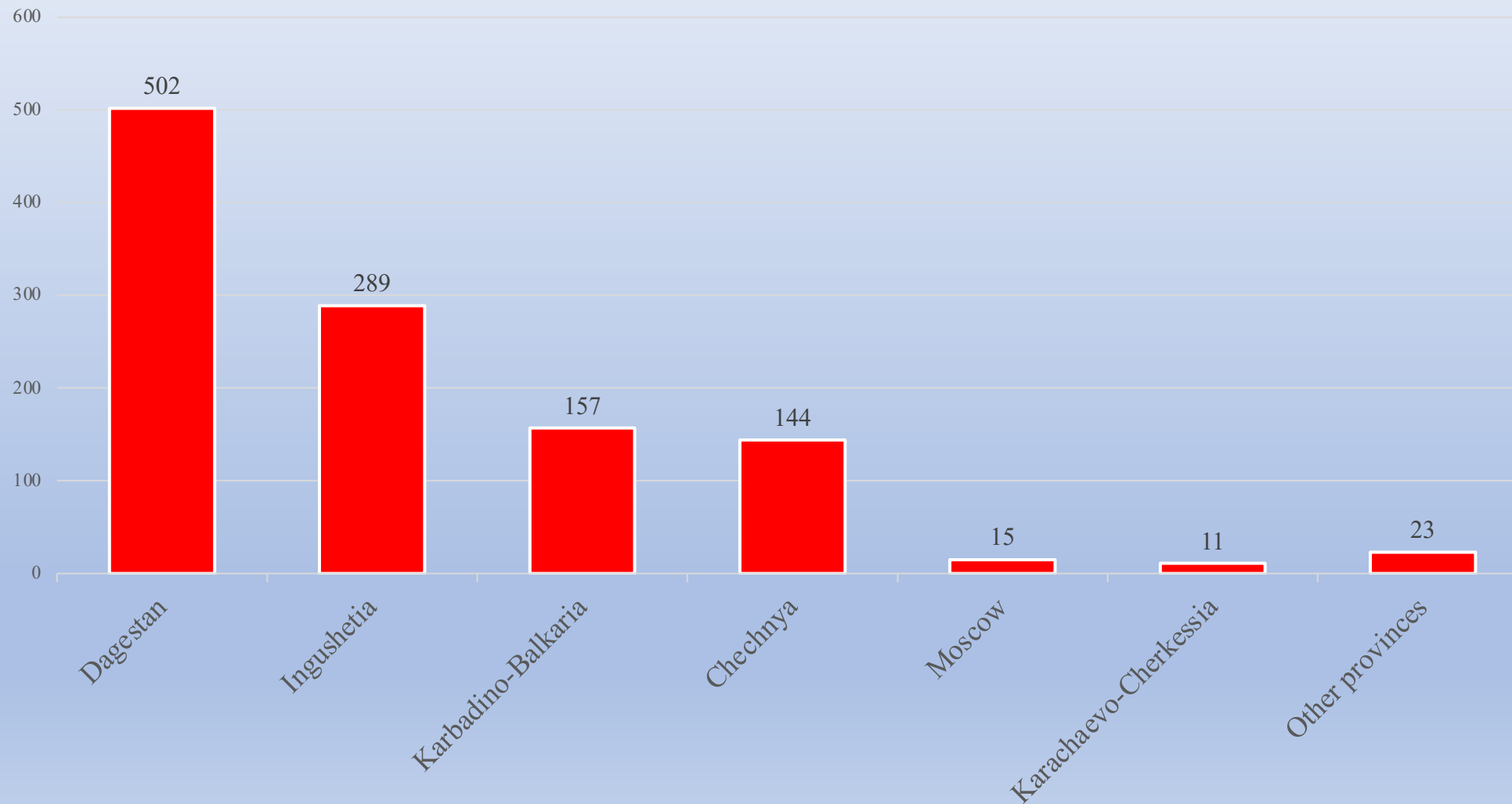
- In the early 1990s, Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo, which dispersed anthrax spores in Tokyo in 1993 and sprayed sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, had more followers in Russia than in any other country.
- Aum actively recruited scientists and technical experts in Russia (among other countries) in order to develop weapons of mass destruction. Aum allegedly managed to recruit followers even among employees of the Kurchatov Institute.

# Abettors

- Insiders who may have no political agenda, but may, nevertheless:
  - Cause havoc to vent their grievances
    - In 1998, a young Russian sailor, Alexander Kuzminykh, [locked himself in one of Russia's nuclear-powered submarines](#), threatening to blow it up.
    - In 2019, Russian conscript soldier Ramil Shamsutdinov killed eight military servicemen. They all served in Military Unit No. 54160, which is located in the closed town of Gorny and which handles nuclear warheads, according to [Novaya Gazeta](#).
  - Or abet terrorists
    - Conspiracies to steal weapons-grade material in Russia in the 1990s (e.g. attempted theft of [18.5 kg of HEU in 1998](#)).
- Russia-based actors of political violence can also be abetted (knowingly or unknowingly) by:
  - Other terrorist groups (IS, AQ)
  - Organized crime groups
  - Turncoats among law-enforcers
  - The negative impact of discontinued Russian-Western cooperation on enhancing nuclear security/preventing nuclear terrorism.
  - Risks associated with the Russian-Ukrainian war:
    - Nuclear security threats in the zones of fighting
    - Incremental weakening of the Russian state because of sanctions, etc.

# Potential drivers of political violence in Russian regions: the case of Dagestan

Figure I.1. Number of acts of anti-state violence in Russia, by attackers' home region in 2005-2015:

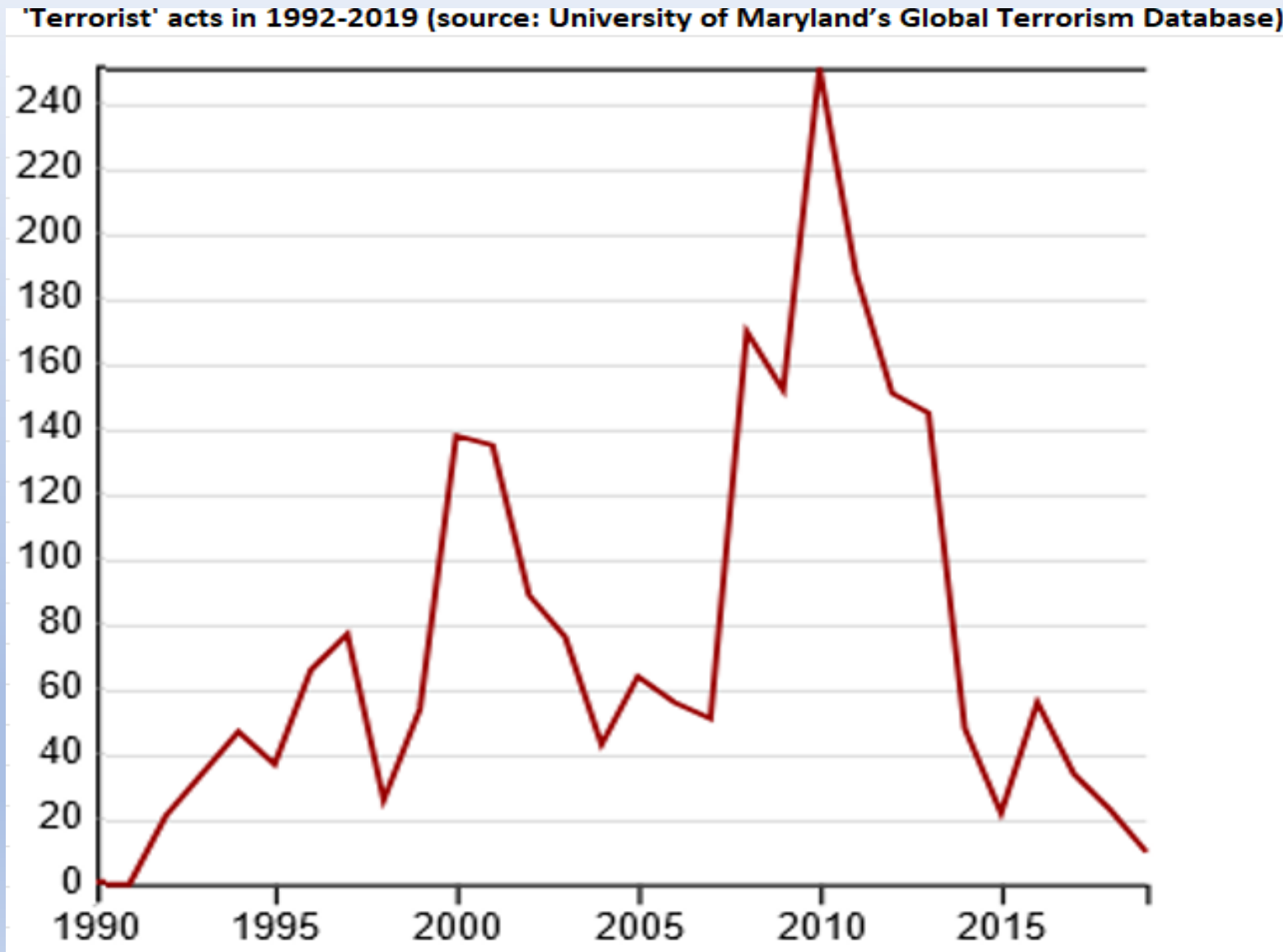


# Potential drivers of political violence in Russian regions: the case of Dagestan

- **Direct motivator: State-sponsored abuses** (declined due to exodus to Middle East in 2010s)
- **Facilitator: Violent ideologies**
- **Facilitator: Youth unemployment**



# Decline in political violence in post-Soviet Russia after 2010



**The decline in political violence in Russia after it peaked in 2010 led to a decline in Russian authorities' and the public's concerns about terrorism in general and nuclear terrorism, in particular, but these concerns endure, as evidenced by the following statements:**

# Statements on nuclear terrorism by Russian officials

**2010: Russian President Dmitry Medvedev:** “At the beginning of nuclear history, it was about the use of nuclear arms in the confrontation between certain countries. At present, the danger of them being used is much higher. It is possible to urge countries to behave in a responsible manner but impossible to urge or call terrorists to do it.” (Izvestia, April 15, 2010)

**2010: Director of Russia’s Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov:** “We have information which indicates that terrorists are continuing to try to get access to nuclear materials as well as to biological and chemical components.”

**2011: Then- Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov:** If missiles armed with WMD warheads “end up in the hands of terrorist organizations, then consequences could be really horrendous.” (Prime-Tass, May 20, 2011)

**2013: Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation:** “Russia ... stands for strengthening of technical and physical nuclear security on the global scale, and, in particular, for strengthening of international legal mechanisms of ensuring nuclear security and preventing nuclear terrorism acts.” (Mid.ru, February 18, 2013)

**2015: Russia’s 2015 national security strategy** refers to “activities of terrorist and extremist organizations, aimed at forcible change of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation as well as destabilizing the work of the organs of state power... through acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, radioactive, poisonous, toxic, chemically and biologically hazardous substances as well as through acts of nuclear terrorism.”

# Statements on nuclear terrorism by Russian officials

**2015: Commander of the Russian Strategic Missile Forces Col. Gen. Sergei Karakayev:** “In the context of the continuing terrorist threats, one of the major tasks that the Strategic Missile Forces are accomplishing is prevention of nuclear terrorism attempts.” (Interfax, December 17, 2015)

**2016: The Russian foreign policy concept** says Russia stands for the “strengthening of political and legal foundations of the regime of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and other kinds of weapons of mass destruction as well as means of their delivery, taking into account the risk that components of such weapons can fall into hands of non-state actors, foremost terrorist.”

**2018: Russia’s Principles of the State Nuclear and Radiation Safety Policy Through 2025** refers to “the emergence in the world of new technologies that can be used to commit unauthorized actions (including terrorist acts) against nuclear facilities ... as well as illegal manufacturing of components of nuclear weapons and devices.”

**2019: Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council Yuri Kokov referred to** “the incessant attempts to gain access to information on manufacturing of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, their increased attention to issues related to the possibility of using pathogenic biological agents and toxic chemicals for terrorist purposes.” (TASS, June 19, 2019)

**2021: [Russia’s new National Security Strategy](#).** Compared to the [previous strategy](#) adopted in 2015, the new document omits any references to U.S.-Russian partnership in general and in counter-terrorism in particular. The document contains references to WMD threats by non-state actors and refers to terrorism only twice, declaring that “the level of terrorist activities has been substantially reduced” in Russia.

# Russian public's views on nuclear terrorism in 2017-2019

When [asked](#) by the state-owned Russian Public Opinion Research Center to assess which actor is most likely to use weapons of mass destruction against their country, Russians gave the following answers (%):

Rank		Jan-06	Oct-06	Aug-09	May-17	Rank		Aug-19
<b>No. 1</b>	USA	33%	37%	38%	50%	No. 1	USA	60%
<b>No. 2</b>	Al-Qaeda	38%	27%	24%	32%	No. 2	China	13%
<b>No. 3</b>	Chechen terrorists	55%	41%	46%	15%	No. 3	Great Britain	6%
						...No.16	ISIS/other terrorist organizations	1%

# Russian public's views on terrorism in 2019

In your <a href="#">opinion</a> , which of the following global threats that humanity could face in the 21st century are the most dangerous? (respondents were presented with a card with a list of answers and could choose more than one and/or name their own; answers are ranked in descending order) (source: Levada Center)	Dec 2019
1. Environmental pollution	48%
2. International terrorism	42%
3. Armed conflicts, wars	37%
4. Climate change, global warming	34%
5. Man-made disasters and accidents	31%
6. Proliferation of nuclear weapons and the threat of their use	25%

## Selected actions that indicate Russian leaders remain concerned about nuclear terrorism, though these concerns have declined:

- **Annual** anti-nuclear terrorism drills, including recently [Atom-2021](#) in Chechnya.
- **2017:** Russia's National Guard worked on establishment of special units that would protect key Russian installations, including nuclear power stations, from drone attacks.
- **2017:** The National Anti-Terrorist Committee (NAC) of Russia convened a meeting to discuss countering nuclear terrorism in Russia.
- **2018:** A NAC discussion of the national system on counteracting nuclear terrorism. "Additional measures aimed at the improvement of the state system of countering nuclear terrorism were developed," the NAC said in a [statement](#).
- **2020:** Rosatom conducted a series of unscheduled inspections of nuclear facilities in September 2020 after Russian authorities had been notified by the U.S. embassy in Moscow that it was possible that Islamic State terrorists would try to gain access to radioactive substances in Russia. This follows from Rosatom's annual report for 2020, Interfax reported in [July 2021](#). [The report](#) said Rosatom registered no instances of embezzlement of nuclear materials, terrorist attacks or sabotage of nuclear plants in 2020.

# Quo vadis, Russia?

Relative demographic decline: The medium variant of a recent pre-war U.N. demographic forecast foresees Russia's share of the world's population (a key component of national power) declining from 1.91% in 2017 to 1.32% in 2050.

Relative economic decline: Russia's share in world GDP (another key component of national power) will decline by 23% by 2050, according to a pre-war forecast by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

But will these and other factors of Russia's national power decline in absolute terms as much as they did in the early 1990s? If they do, the Russian state may weaken, allowing a resurgence in terrorism, insurgency and other forms of political violence. However, even short-term forecasts should be taken with a pinch of salt, to say less of attempts to predict how countries might fare demographically and economically a quarter of a century from now. The forecasts are based on the continuation of existing trends and cannot account for events that may seem unlikely, but can significantly alter these trends, such as the Kremlin's decisions, for instance, to sue for peace in Ukraine and/or to pursue deep structural reforms to improve the governance system and replace the economic model.