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Foreign Threat(s): Vladimir Putin's Securitisation of Separatism, Terrorism and the West

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Abstract

Relying on securitisation theory and analysing 115 televised statements by Vladimir Putin, this article shows how the Russian president securitised the threats of separatism, terrorism, and Western political, military and cultural interference with Russia's independence and cultural singularity in the course of seven securitisation moves that occurred between 2000 and 2023. Moreover, this study reveals how Putin wove together these threats by building on their shared foreign nature and using similar linguistic techniques. The article argues that by 2022 Putin had managed to subsume the terrorist and separatist threats under the umbrella of 'Western interference'. This strategy reinforced the potency of the securitisation process.

IN OCTOBER 2023, AMIDST RUSSIA'S CONTINUING INVASION of Ukraine and the conflict between Hamas and Israel, anti-Jewish pogroms took place in Dagestan, a Muslim republic in Russia's North Caucasus. After a day of silence, Vladimir Putin responded to the crisis by accusing the West. 'Agents of Western special services', including 'from the territory of Ukraine', had staged the pogroms to destabilise Russia, he claimed.[1] By blaming the incidents on foreign intervention, Putin fell back on a tactic he had honed over the past 20 years, namely that of attributing Russia's problems to interference from abroad.

Since Putin became president in 2000, Russia has drifted towards authoritarianism. He changed the country's constitution and introduced laws curtailing Russians' individual rights, arguing that existential threats to Russia's territorial integrity and cultural specificity justified breaking the 'normal rules' of politics. Russians were asked to forfeit their political and other rights in exchange for protection from these threats.

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[1] '"Mraz'da i tol'ko". Putin vyskazalsya o pogromakh v Dagestane i nazval ikh organizatorov', *Lenta.ru*, 30 October 2023, available at: https://lenta.ru/news/2023/10/30/mraz-da-i-tolko-putin-vyskazalsya-o-pogromah-v-dagestane-i-nazval-ih-organizatorov/, accessed 3 December 2024.

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Relying on securitisation theory, this article demonstrates how Putin developed narratives about the threats of separatism, terrorism and the West. The last was presented as both a military threat to Russia's 'territorial integrity', an expression used in Russian official statements, and a cultural challenge to Russia's civilisational singularity. Putin securitised these threats during seven securitisation moves that occurred between 2000 and 2023. This article explains how he wove together the threats of separatism, terrorism, and Western political and cultural interference in his securitising discourse, building on the common 'foreign' nature of these threats. By 2022, he had subsumed the terrorist and separatist threats into a generalised Western threat.

On the methodological front, this article analyses 115 televised statements—approximately 3,700 pages of text—by Putin, including his yearly Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly (AFA), Russia's parliament, interviews (including the annual 'Direct Lines' where Putin answers questions from selected Russian citizens), New Year's messages and crisis addresses between 2000 and 2023.

The article is organised in three parts. The first discusses securitisation theory and its application to Russia. The second part presents the data about Putin's televised statements and highlights his seven securitisation moves. Finally, the article reveals Putin's evolving narratives about the threats of separatism, terrorism, and Western political and cultural interference in Russia and shows how these have become part of the same securitisation process.

Securitisation and Russia

Securitisation theory emerged in the wake of the Cold War's end. It answered the question of what an existential security threat to Western democracies would look like, given that the longstanding and universally accepted communist threat had vanished. At the juncture of neorealism and constructivism, Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan and other scholars of the Copenhagen School argued that the approach to threat identification had to be rethought (Buzan *et al*. 1998; Buzan & Wæver 2003; Salter & Mutlu 2012). Threats, they maintained, were not simply objective reality but were constructed through discourse. A politician, a military leader or any figure with a dominant position within a polity and access to resources could declare an issue to be an existential threat to a referent object, for example, to the state's security or its cultural identity, and propose exceptional measures to a target audience, for example, the general population or some of its elites, to address that threat. The securitisation would be deemed successful if the securitising actor received approval from the audience to enact the proposed exceptional measures. Accordingly, de-securitisation was deemed to be the reverse process of returning an issue to normal politics.

Securitisation theory has received significant attention in the twenty-first century. The debates around the theory have focused on three aspects. First, Bigo and other scholars articulated a sociological strand to securitisation theory. They analysed the behaviour of the people involved in the management of security issues (the police, the military, private security companies, border guards) and showed how these 'professionals of insecurity' could normalise measures of social control and surveillance independently from democratic oversight (Amoore & De Goede 2008; Bigo *et al*. 2008; Karyotis 2012).

Second, there has been a redefinition of the components of securitisation theory, with a stress on the challenges in assessing the audience's approval of the proposed exceptional measures (Côté 2016), and the importance of the context in the success of securitisation (Stritzel 2007; Huysmans 2011; Balzacq *et al*. 2016). Third, the boundaries of securitisation theory have been expanded to show how it can be applied to non-Western, authoritarian and historical cases (Wilkinson 2007; Vuori 2008), happen as an incremental process over time, and occur in relation to domestic counter-securitisations and international macro-securitisations (Buzan & Wæver 2009; Stritzel & Chang 2015). Overall, a more robust second-generation securitisation theory has emerged following these revisions.

Securitisation theory has been applied to Russia quite regularly. Scholars have relied on the discourse-driven strand in the theory to study the Russian authorities' instrumentalisation of the Chechen, Islamist and terrorist threats in relation to the conflicts in the North Caucasus to promote authoritarian reforms and push regime consolidation (Snetkov 2007; Wilhelmsen 2016; Gaufman 2017). Additional research has looked at the securitisation of HIV/AIDS (Sjöstedt 2008), the economy (Connolly 2016), Russian 'moral-civilisational' values (Østbø 2017), Western countries such as Norway (Wilhelmsen 2021), and the official memory of the Great Patriotic War and other past conflicts during the Putin era (Bækken & Enstad 2020; Makhortykh 2020). As part of their research, these scholars have explored how the sociological strand of securitisation theory can account for the creeping securitisation of Islamism and Muslims by the Russian security forces, especially after the passing of multiple surveillance and repressive laws by the Federal Assembly in the 2010s (Snetkov 2017).

This growing literature has led to important insights into the propaganda and functioning of Putin's regime. As the unique securitising actor in Russia, Putin has been the one to 'speak security', even when Dmitrii Medvedev was president (2008–2012). Threat construction has been central to Putin's political platform and the scholarship has stressed how his securitisation moves have built upon one another over time (Baev 2004; Wilhelmsen 2016). Moreover, Putin's securitisation of the terrorist threat has become increasingly self-referential, emphasising the effectiveness of his government's response (Campana 2013).

Securitisation theory is, however, not without its blind spots. It lacks clarity on how a securitising actor can connect the securitisations of different threats to the same referent object to make the securitisation process more effective over time. Tackling this issue, this article demonstrates how a securitising actor can combine seemingly different threats through discourse using key words, images and repetitive grammatical structures. These techniques serve as a shorthand to trigger associations in meaning with previous threats and acceptance of the new securitisation by the audience. When the securitising actor introduces a new threat, they link it discursively to already existing securitisations. The new threat can then take advantage of the securitising context already in place. The securitising actor may then partly de-securitise a previous threat as the new threat takes precedence or subsume the previous securitisation under the current one, introducing a continuity between threats.

Linking securitisations together presents advantages to the securitising actor. The latter can be more flexible in switching between threats based on the domestic and international context: they can build on the same repertoire of 'heuristic artifacts', enumerated by

Balzacq as 'metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions', thus increasing the success chances for new securitisations (Balzacq 2011, p. 3); they can de-securitise threats to show the effectiveness of previous exceptional measures; they avoid audience fatigue regarding the continuing securitisation of the same threat; and they can target different audiences with different securitisations.

In the following sections, this article demonstrates how this process has worked in Putin's Russia. It argues that Putin has not only simultaneously securitised the threats of separatism, terrorism and the West but that he has also linked them, making them part of the same threat. The central connection is that the three threats are presented as exogeneous, that is, coming from abroad. Putin has also securitised them to the same referent object: Russia's survival as an independent and distinctive state, with the right to maintain its political system and its own cultural and moral values. Ultimately, he has presented the Western threat as encompassing the separatist and terrorist threats.

Threat narratives in Putin's televised addresses

This article examines 115 televised statements made by Putin between 2000 and 2023. Televised presidential statements are the political content most seen by Russians and most influential in shaping public opinion. As of 2021, despite the importance of social media, 42% of Russians still received their political news from state television.[2] Televised presidential statements were therefore the ones containing definitions of threats and securitisation moves. Of note, fewer presidential statements were recorded for the period when Medvedev was president and Putin was prime minister.

NVivo software was used to analyse the statements. The text was coded to identify dominant definitions of threats and highlight moments when Putin called for special measures to deal with the threats. Three threats have dominated Putin's discourse since 2000: terrorism, separatism and the West. Specific key words were associated with them, including 'terror', 'terrorism' and 'counter-terrorism' for the terrorist threat; 'separatism' and 'territorial integrity' for the separatist threat; and the 'collective West' and the 'West' for the military and cultural threat from the West. Interestingly, the expression 'colour revolution', which has become widely associated in Russia with the Western threat, was mentioned in only four speeches. Its conspicuous absence suggests that Putin may avoid terminology he finds dangerous, refusing to directly associate the expression 'colour revolution' with Russia. Beyond this, at the difference of separatism and terrorism, Putin did not initially describe the West as a threat. Based on this coding, it is possible to identify how many of Putin's speeches refer to one or the other of the threats, and how much a given speech dwells on a particular threat.

Figure 1 shows how many speeches and interviews each year refer to the different threats. The terrorist threat was by far the most prevalent in Putin's discourse during the period under study. He referred to it every year, save for 2010, and often across multiple speeches and interviews. Talk of terrorism was especially frequent from 2000 to 2004, at the height of the Second Chechen War and from 2013 to 2017 at times of high-profile terrorist attacks

[2]'VTSIOM vyyasnil glavnye istochniki novostei dlya rossiyan', *Rbk.ru*, 23 September 2021, available at: https://www.rbc.ru/society/23/09/2021/614b810f9a794706e3dd3ad8, accessed 3 December 2024.

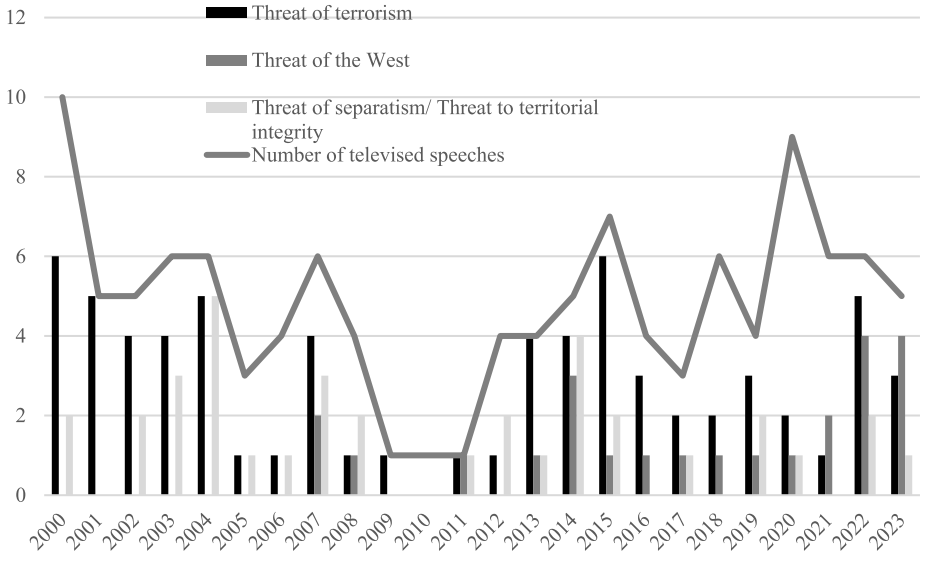

FIGURE 1. PUTIN'S TELEVISED SPEECHES MENTIONING SEPARATISM, TERRORISM AND THE WESTERN THREAT (2000–2023)

and during the intervention in Syria. The separatist threat is also present across the entire period but references to it are rarer, and there are many years when Putin did not invoke it. While the Western threat fleetingly entered Putin's discourse in the late 2000s, it only became prevalent in 2014 and even more so after 2020, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine put it in direct opposition with the West.

Figure 2 shows all mentions of the key word or combination of words relating to the threats across the documents. It shows that not only did Putin discuss terrorism more often than the other threats, he also did so in more details in his speeches and interviews. Key words relating to terrorism are again abundant between 2000 and 2004 and between 2013 and 2017. The theme returns after 2022. Separatism and the Western threats were mentioned less frequently. Reference to separatism was, nonetheless, more prevalent between 2002 and 2004 at the time of 'terrorist spectaculars', large-scale terrorist attacks that led to dozens of casualties each time organised by North Caucasian terrorists in Russia, between 2011 and 2014, and in 2022, in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. The Western threat spiked in 2014 and, again, after 2020.

Figures 3 and 4 offer more granularity to this analysis by highlighting the discussion of threats in specific documents—AFAs and New Year addresses. The AFA, akin to the State of the Union in the United States, is the forward-looking programmatic speech on domestic and foreign policy made yearly by the president of the Russian Federation to the Federal Assembly. The AFA has never been the platform for Putin's securitisation moves, but he has used it to develop narratives about existential threats. The New Year address, by contrast, is a brief speech made by the president before midnight on 31 December. It is the most watched presidential address in Russia—over 46% of Russians saw it in 2023—

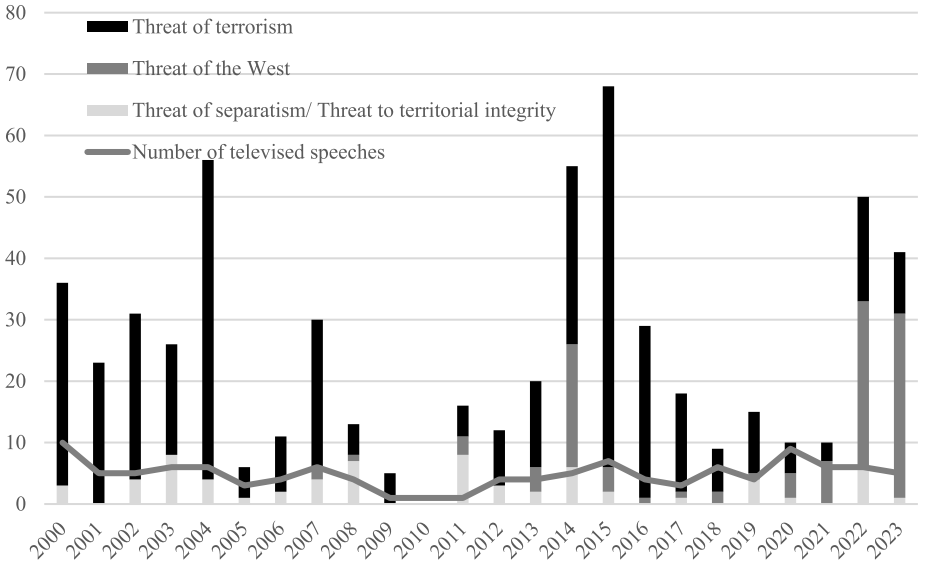

FIGURE 2. MENTIONS OF SEPARATISM, TERRORISM AND THE WESTERN THREAT IN PUTIN'S TELEVISED SPEECHES, 2000–2023

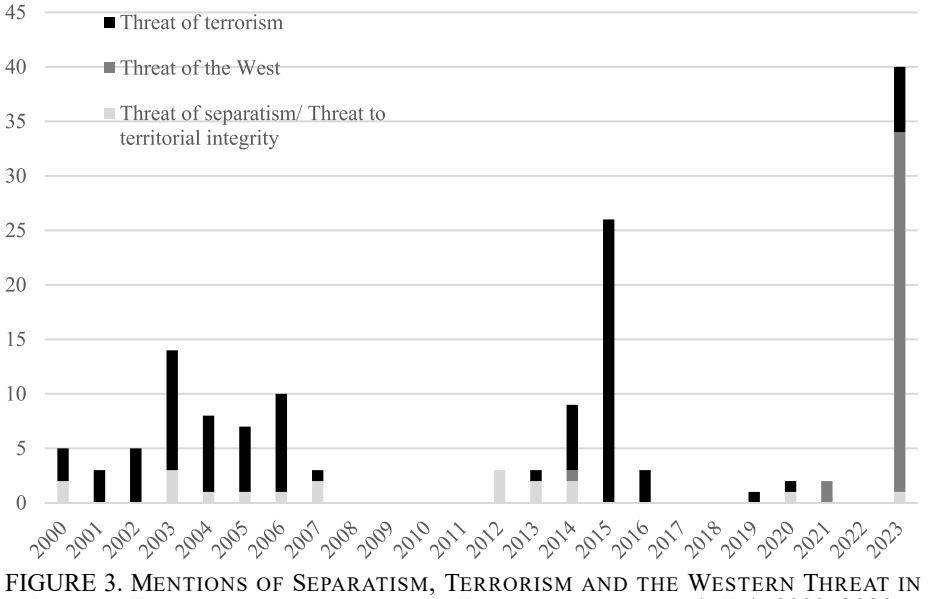

FIGURE 3. MENTIONS OF SEPARATISM, TERRORISM AND THE WESTERN THREAT IN PUTIN'S TELEVISED ADDRESS TO THE FEDERAL ASSEMBLY (AFA), 2000–2023

Note: In 2008–2011 Putin was Prime Minister, and Medvedev gave the Address to the Federal Assembly. In 2017 and 2022 Putin did not give an Address for unspecified reasons.

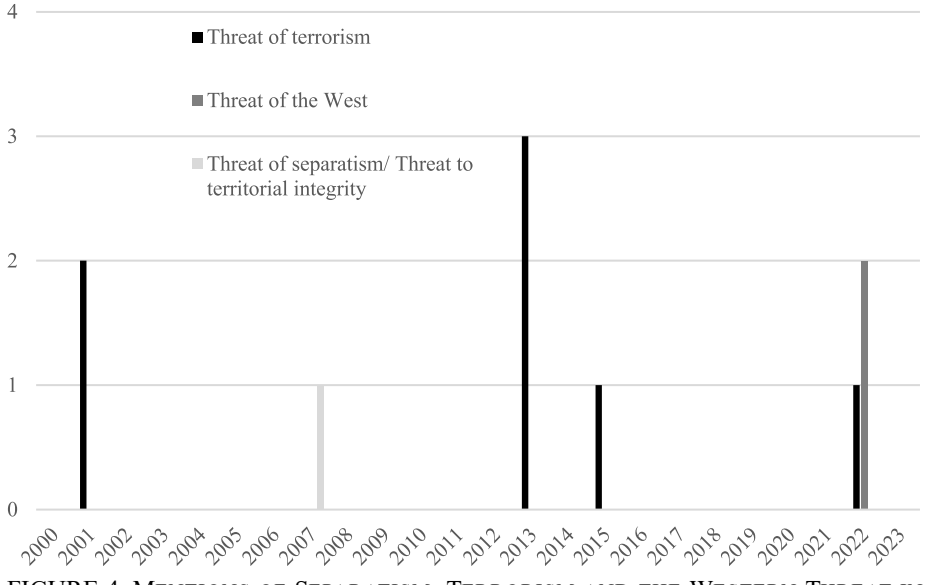

FIGURE 4. MENTIONS OF SEPARATISM, TERRORISM AND THE WESTERN THREAT IN PUTIN'S TELEVISED NEW YEAR ADDRESSES, 2000–2023

Note: In 2008–2011 Putin was Prime Minister, and Medvedev gave the New Year address.

and rarely features discussions about threats.[3] It is a celebratory exercise, emphasising Russia's accomplishments. Conversely, when it does mention a threat, it is the sign that the authorities either want to play that threat up or reassure the population.

Figure 3 shows that discussions about terrorism have regularly featured in the AFA. This was especially the case between 2000 and 2006 and in 2015. The frequency of mentions diminished after the winding down of the Second Chechen War in the mid-2000s. By contrast, the separatist threat rarely made it to the AFA, being mentioned a few times only in 2000 and 2003, and between 2012 and 2014. The Western threat, barely mentioned before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, was prominent in the 2023 AFA.

Figure 4 shows how rarely Putin discussed threats in his New Year addresses. The exceptions are, in turn, telling. Only in 2001, 2013, 2015 and 2022 did he talk about terrorism, reacting to international developments including 9/11, terrorist attacks in Volgograd shortly before the speech in 2013, and Russian military operations in Syria and in Ukraine. Only in 2007 did Putin talk about separatism; and only in 2022 about the Western threat.

Beyond this, a qualitative analysis highlights when the discourse about threats to Russia's security and cultural specificity was associated with calls for exceptional measures. Table 1 identifies seven such moments that mirror the intensification of the discourse about threats identified in Figures 1–4. As the next section shows, each of them was a watershed in

[3]'TV-reiting novogodnego obrashcheniya Putina stal rekordnym za poslednie pyat' let', *Vedomosti.ru*, 10 January 2024, available at: https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/articles/2024/01/10/1014337-tv-reiting-novogodnego-obrascheniya-putina-stal-rekordnim, accessed 3 December 2024.

TABLE 1
VLADIMIR PUTIN'S SECURITISATION MOVES, 2000–2023

Date of securitisation move	Threat	Exceptional measures
17 May 2000	Separatism, terrorism	Political reforms, including the right of the president to dismiss elected governors and other regional leaders
4 September 2004	Terrorism, separatism	Political reforms, including the right of the president to appoint governors and other regional leaders without elections
18 March 2014	Western military and civilisation	Annexation of Crimea, support to separatist forces in Donbas
30 September 2015	Terrorism	Military intervention in Syria
30 June 2020	Western military and civilisation	Changes to the constitution, including an amendment allowing Putin to be elected for another two terms as president of Russia
22 February 2022 24 February 2022	Western military and civilisation	Annexation of Donbas and invasion of Ukraine
21 September 2022	Western military and civilisation	Partial mobilisation of the Russian male population for the war in Ukraine

Russian society leading to far-reaching political reforms at home or military campaigns abroad.

From separatism and terrorism to the Western threat

Four periods can be distinguished in Putin's discourse on threats: the Second Chechen War (2000–2005); stabilisation in Chechnya and the Medvedev presidency (2006–2012); the Syrian and Donbas wars (2013–2019); and the invasion of Ukraine (2020–2023). As Figures 1 and 2 show, while mentions of terrorism, separatism and territorial integrity were always present in the discourse, they peaked in frequency during the Second Chechen War. A partial de-securitisation of the terrorist and separatist threats occurred during Medvedev's presidency. As Putin had to share power, his capacity to securitise the separatist and terrorist threats diminished, as did the frequency of his televised addresses (Sakwa 2011). This suggests that Putin's capacity to launch securitisation moves is at least in part related to the centrality of the president's position in Russia's regime: Putin thus made no securitisation moves as long as Medvedev was president (see Table 1). Likewise, the Western threat was first securitised in 2014, partially de-securitised in the late 2010s and then re-securitised in 2022. In summary, this securitisation of the Western threat built on and, eventually, came to encompass previous securitisations.

Separatism masquerading as terrorism

The terrorist and separatist threats to Russia's security were central to Putin's original political platform, featuring heavily in his televised speeches between 2000 and 2004 (see Figures 1 and 2). When he rose to become Boris Yel'tsin's prime minister in August and acting president in December 1999, Putin exploited his security background as a former intelligence chief to present himself as the only politician able to pacify Chechnya (Baev 2004). Playing on Russians' fears of violence spilling over from the North Caucasus,

Putin argued that to pacify Chechnya, direct central control had to be established across the Russian Federation.

Putin made his first securitisation move—the introduction of the presidential right to remove governors and other regional leaders—right after his election as president on 7 May 2000. He then linked the terrorist and separatist threats: 'One-fifth of legal acts adopted in the regions contradicts the country's main law … the result of such violations is catastrophic. From such seemingly unique cases, separatism matures drop after drop, sometimes becoming a bridgehead for an even more dangerous evil—international terrorism' (Putin 2000c). To protect Russia's 'unity'—a term understood to mean Russia's territorial integrity and social cohesion based on shared values—Putin claimed it was necessary 'to institute a system to remove from office the heads of regions and dissolve the [local] legislative assemblies that were adopting acts, running counter federal laws' (Putin 2000c). The president of the Russian Federation obtained the right to dismiss governors and heads of national republics—the local executive authorities. This reinforced central control over the regions and Putin's personal power. The reforms were meant to implement the 'dictatorship of the law' so that Russians could 'live in one strong, unified state' (Putin 2000c).

This first—and often overlooked—securitisation move upended Russian politics, even though the democratic institutes of the Yel'tsin period restrained the reforms' scope (Hyde 2001). Indeed, while Russia's political system in the 1990s was flawed, marked by corruption, connections with criminal structures in some regions and irregularities during elections, it was nonetheless a democracy. The country had a multiparty system; the State *Duma*, the lower house of the Federal Assembly, saw lively debates and criticism of the authorities; and regional governors were elected by popular vote. Russia also had a vigorous media environment that, although controlled in part by oligarchs, allowed for diverging opinions, criticism and satire of the authorities (Sakwa 2011; Fishman 2022). In 2000, Putin recognised that specific limitation by claiming that his advisers had recommended the 'adoption of a system of direct appointment of the governors by the president of Russia', but that he did not go for that (Putin 2000c). With the securitisation process having just begun, the public was not ready for such far-reaching transformations.

Terrorism and separatism featured heavily in Russia's domestic politics and public discourse until the mid-2000s, always making it into the AFA. They did so as North Caucasian terrorists conducted high-profile attacks across Russia, leading to crisis televised addresses by Putin following terrorist spectaculars (Putin 2002a, 2004a). Until the 2010s, both threats were associated with Chechnya. Putin effectively amalgamated them, with separatism being largely subsumed under terrorism. This stratagem conveniently allowed Putin to build on the pre-existing negative perception of separatism dating back to the First Chechen War (1994–1996), while centring the securitising discourse on terrorism, a more universally condemned evil than separatism. The separatist threat, nonetheless, lingered in indirect ways in the president's discourse. Putin repeatedly used analogies about the Yugoslavian breakup and the USSR's invasion by Nazi Germany, arguing that the loss of Chechnya to terrorists would mean the partition of Russia (Putin 2000a, 2002b, 2003c). Like separatism, Putin presented international terrorism as endangering Russia's survival as a state. He explained that

'international terrorism' had 'declared war on us to tear away considerable territories from Russia. … [The terrorists] will try to rock the situation in Russian regions where you have the dense presence of Muslim populations' (Putin 2002b). That existential threat to Russia became the bedrock for the securitising discourse. It made the pursuit of an all-out war in Chechnya acceptable to Russians after the defeat of the main Chechen forces in 2000 (Wilhelmsen 2016).

The second securitisation move—the direct appointment of regional governors by the president—happened after the hostage takeover in Beslan (North Ossetia), which led to the deaths of 330 people, including 186 children. Putin described the attack, in September 2004, using words recalling both the terrorist and separatist threats. The 'inhumane' and 'unprecedently cruel' terrorists represented an existential threat because they wanted to 'dismember' Russia. The taking of hostages was 'not a challenge to the president, to the parliament or the government' but 'a challenge to all of Russia; to all of [its] people', Putin claimed (Putin 2004a). Russia had been 'confronted with a direct intervention of international terror' and had to respond by 'creating a much more effective system of security'. 'The nation's mobilisation against this common danger' was critical. Therefore, Putin called upon the government to 'prepare a series of measures to reinforce the country's unity' (Putin 2004a).

Ten days later, Putin outlined a political reform in a meeting attended by Russia's decisionmakers, some 136 people, including the Prime Minister and ministers, heads of regions and republics, the presidential administration, the general prosecutor, the directors of intelligence and security agencies, the head of the Central Bank, and presidential representatives from across the country. It was the first meeting ever held in such a format. As he made another explicit connection between terrorism and separatism, Putin said that Russians must not forget that 'the people who inspire, organise, and execute terrorist attacks are attempting to tear apart the country'. To counter that, it was essential to 'strengthen the state' by reinforcing 'the unity of the system of executive power'. It was, amongst other things, necessary for 'the highest authorities of the subjects of the Russian Federation … to be elected by the territories [local] legislative assemblies upon suggestion by the head of state' (Putin 2004b). After the introduction of this reform by the State *Duma* in December 2004, Putin acquired the right to appoint local executive authorities, embracing the larger break with normal politics that he had avoided in 2000. This change was made possible by the already well-established securitisation of terrorism and separatism by that time.

The 2004 reform is a cornerstone of Putin's political legacy. In his 2011 Direct Line, Putin explained that he had 'personally invented the current system of appointing governors to office' because many governors had gained power by 'relying on local semi-criminal structures' and also 'on nationalist groups, and separatist groups'. Thus, 'it was very easy to create that separatism in the Russian Federation's regions' (Putin 2011).[4] The 2004 reform, while linked to international terrorism in the North Caucasus, was therefore also tackling the separatist threat.

[4]See also Putin (2010).

The post-Beslan securitisation move was, moreover, the first time Putin had suggested a connection between international terrorism, separatism and a Western threat. As he complained after the attack:

> some wanted to tear down a 'meatier' bit from us, others were helping them, thinking that Russia—as one of the largest nuclear powers in the world—still represented some kind of threat. For this reason, this threat had to be removed. And terrorism—it is, of course, only an instrument to attain such goals. (Putin 2004a)

Putin thus hinted that foreign masterminds were behind the Chechen terrorists as part of a Cold War-type confrontation with Russia. No Russian could doubt that Putin was here pointing at the United States, the traditional geopolitical enemy. The idea that the West was behind terrorist and separatist violence in Russia would become more central in Putin's discourse in the 2010s, when it came to represent a key rhetorical device linking together the different securitisations.

The Second Chechen War period established the repertoire of signs and markers that was later mobilised vis-à-vis terrorism and separatism, and, strikingly, co-opted in the late 2010s to describe the Western threat. The conflict's developments and associated martial discourses became part of the regime's founding myth. Recuring themes and words included the crude and colourful language used by Putin about insurgents and terrorists: they were a 'pest' that could 'spread' to the rest of the country (Putin 2000b) and 'scumbags' and 'bandits' (Putin 2000a, 2002a).[5] Putin, moreover, hailed Russia's civilisational superiority (Putin 2001b), claiming that it would never 'capitulate' to the insurgents and terrorists. Across multiple discourses, he especially insisted that terrorism was international, a foreign threat that went beyond Chechnya (Putin 2000d, 2003c), and that it had to be mercilessly crushed (Putin 2000a, 2006a).

The foreign nature of terrorism has remained central to Putin's securitisation discourse over his quarter-century in power. Across the entire sample, 35 speeches and interviews out of the 69 with mentions of terrorism had a variation of the expression 'international terrorism'; 22 others explicitly qualified terrorism as 'global', 'foreign' or linked to Syria or Ukraine. There was little acknowledgment that other factors could have explained political violence in the North Caucasus. In the 2000s, terrorism was also regularly presented as a transnational threat to the West European civilisation of which Putin saw Russia as an integral part. Consequently, the 'civilised' West needed to collaborate with Russia against terrorism in the spirit of George W. Bush's War on Terror (Putin 2001a, 2002a, 2003b). That call remained present in Putin's discourse afterward even though the United States and many European countries were reluctant to ally with Russia. In the 2010s, the narrative of presenting Russia and the West as allies against Islamist terrorism increasingly contradicted Putin's more frequent accusations of the West as supporting terrorism against Russia. Between the lines, this tension questioned the European identity of Russia and led to a redefinition of the Russian self in the context of the terrorist and Western others.

[5]See also Russell (2005) and Campana (2013).

The end of Putin's second term and Medvedev interlude

The second period in Putin's discourse on threats began in the late 2000s and continued until 2012 (see Figures 1 and 2). It saw the relatively reduced importance of terrorism and separatism at the end of Putin's second term and during Medvedev's presidency. The first timid signs of that decrease in prominence appeared already in 2003–2004 and paralleled the Russian authorities' emphasis on the political stabilisation in Chechnya. A landmark event was Putin's address before the vote on the new Chechen constitution in 2003. Putin spoke of 'clan fighting' and 'civil war' but mentioned terrorism only in passing (Putin 2003a). In 2003–2004, suicide terrorism outside of the North Caucasus and the Beslan hostage takeover forced the terrorist and separatist threats back to the forefront of Putin's discourse. By 2005, helped by the drop in terrorist attacks across Russia, Putin moved the terrorist threat decisively into the background.

The mid-2000s saw a further de-emphasis of terrorism and separatism. Statements about the severity of the threat and the necessity for an unwavering military response were accompanied by comments highlighting how 'serious steps had been taken in the war on terror' (Putin 2005a) and how 'separatism and terrorism had been supressed' (Putin 2011). In the 2007 New Year address, in a rare mention of a security issue in this format, Putin congratulated Russians on 'having restored the territorial integrity' of their country (Putin 2007c). Moreover, the period saw a rare more balanced take on the root causes of violence in the North Caucasus. Putin even acknowledged that social and economic factors also played a role in triggering violence there (Putin 2005b, 2007b). This de-securitisation of terrorism and separatism was, however, partial. Putin never allowed the threats to fully leave the spotlight. Two discursive strategies were employed to maintain terrorism and separatism's relevance.

First, Putin regularly stressed that the threats could always come back. In 2007, he reminded Russians of how 'separatism used to be a real threat to the security of Russia' (Putin 2007a). Likewise, as Prime Minister, he pointed out that 'while [Russia] had done a lot to "break the back" of terrorism, the threat was still not eliminated' (Putin 2009). While the word 'separatism' remained mostly absent from the discourse (see Figures 1 and 2), the lingering background threat was made clear through the use of discursive markers, including talk of the need to strengthen the 'unity' of Russia. Separatism was also no longer only about Chechnya. 'Separatist forces' could come to power in the 'national republics' and threaten Russia's integrity and survival, Putin warned during a 'Direct Line' as Prime Minister (Putin 2011).

Second, Putin referred with increasing regularity to key episodes and battles of the Second Chechen War, through self-referential statements highlighting his role in the events. A 'Direct Line' typically featured questions from villagers from Botlikh in Dagestan, a place Chechen and foreign fighters had attacked in 1999 (Putin 2007b). The Second Chechen War thus passed into the mythology of the Putin regime, becoming useful context for future securitisation moves. After the war in Ukraine started in 2014, Putin would draw parallels between the two conflicts to present himself as a successful *chef de guerre* and suggest to Russians that all the country's problems had the same foreign source, namely the West.

Following the end of the Second Chechen War, Medvedev's presidency effectively marked a lull in the securitisation process while the new president stressed economic development and technological innovation in his AFAs. Interestingly, Russia's military intervention in South Ossetia, a breakaway region in Georgia, in 2008 did not result from a securitisation move in a presidential address and feature heavily in Putin's speeches. While Russia supported the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it abandoned other occupied Georgian territories in late 2008 and quickly improved relations with the West afterward as part of the 'reset' of Russian–US relations during Barack Obama's presidency. Unlike Putin, Medvedev was keen to reach out to the United States and develop a personal relation with Obama (Sakwa 2011; Obama 2020, pp. 460–65). Meanwhile, as Medvedev took over the AFA and New Year addresses, Putin reduced the frequency of his televised speeches, demonstrating that even for him, the loss of the presidency had meant a loss of influence. The latter may also help explain why the period saw no new securitisation moves.

Military interventions in Ukraine and Syria

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 coincided with protests in Moscow over electoral fraud in the legislative elections. In response, Putin launched a new programme of authoritarian reform and resumed his discourse on foreign threats. Continuing to frequently remind Russians about the early days of the Second Chechen War, he celebrated his 'active measures against the international terrorist bands after the attack on Dagestan' (Putin 2015c). He claimed he had 'preserved the sovereignty, territorial integrity' of Russia and had prevented the terrorists from 'realising their plans' (Putin 2019). Meanwhile, 'Direct Lines' continued to connect the president to Botlikh, a place where, loyal journalists repeated, 'everything was a reminder of war' (Putin 2019). The official discourse thus increasingly presented a nostalgic image of the Second Chechen War, emphasising the successful wartime leadership of the younger Putin. That discourse echoed two major developments.

First, in February 2014, regime change in Kyiv made the Kremlin fear a definitive loss of its influence in Ukraine in favour of the West (D'Anieri 2019). The event led to Putin's third securitisation move and a turnaround in Russian foreign policy. Putin stressed that Ukraine moving West, like separatism and terrorism, was an existential threat to Russia. Because Crimea was, according to Putin, the locus of Russia's civilisational-moral values, its coming under Western influence as part of Ukraine was a particular problem. 'Crimea had always been and remained an inalienable part of Russia' (Putin 2014a), all the more so given that 'in Ukraine, and in Crimea, millions of Russians lived' (Putin 2014a). Putin expanded on this idea in his AFA, 'it is [in Crimea] that one finds the spiritual source of the founding of the multifaceted but monolithic Russian nation and the centralised Russian state' (Putin 2014c). While it was not as central to Russia's national narrative, the issue with eastern Ukraine—the Donbas—was the same as with Crimea in Putin's view.

Beyond the cultural aspect, Ukraine's rapprochement with the West and the possibility of NATO expanding to Russia's border posed a security threat according to Putin. As Putin explained, in a rare use of the expression, Russia's 'Western partners' had engineered 'a chain of controlled "coloured revolutions"' and had now 'launched into action an army of

armed men that had been prepared and well equipped in advance. … These actions were directed against Ukraine, and [against] Russia, and against integration on the Eurasian territory' (Putin 2014a). The Western threat was therefore existential at two levels: Ukraine moving closer to NATO threatened Russian security and Ukraine turning to the West meant that historically Russian dominated and populated lands would come under Western influence. In short, 'Russia had ended up at a red line from which it could not retreat', Putin explained in March 2014 (Putin 2014a).

To deal with this new threat, Putin annexed Crimea and launched undercover military support to separatist forces in Donbas. Both military actions were major breaks with politics as usual and were presented as defensive moves. In the words of a loyal journalist during a Direct Line, Crimea's annexation was the 'third defence of Sebastopol' (Putin 2014b), a comment referencing emblematic past conflicts over the city during the Crimean War (1853–1856) and World War II. Up to 2014, Russia had never tried to annex territories populated by ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics, including in Crimea; back in 2006, Putin had referred to it as 'a part of the Ukrainian state' where 'Russia could not interfere' (Putin 2006b). Likewise, the contrast with how Russia had handled Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Medvedev in 2008 was striking.

The rise of the Western threat in Putin's discourse moved separatism and terrorism into the background, partially de-securitising them. These were dangers with which Putin had successfully dealt. At the same time, Putin began connecting these past securitisations to the new one through three rhetorical devices. First, separatism, terrorism and the Western threat were all 'foreign' threats that targeted the same referent object: Russia. Securitising the Western threat was easier for Putin because he could build on the longstanding narrative about foreign interference by separatists and terrorists in Russia. The image of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' and the bastion of true Christendom, which dated back to tsarist times, was particularly powerful. The opposition with the West, moreover, recalled Soviet propaganda, seen in old movies still broadcast on state television, which portrayed the capitalist world as constantly plotting to undermine the Soviet regime (Carleton 2017). Alongside Putin, Russian ideologues such as Sergei Karaganov would expand on the idea of the 'Fortress Russia' in spring 2022.[6]

Beyond this, Putin could use the same key words in describing how the Western threat, like separatism and terrorism, aimed at dismembering Russia, jeopardising its territorial integrity, and how it was impossible to negotiate with the forces that threatened Russia (Putin 2014b). Likewise, he used identical rhetorical devices, relying on appeals to Russians 'common sense' about the fact that clearly only the plotting of foreign forces could explain Russia's difficulties, as he had during the Second Chechen War, to blame the West for its actions in Ukraine. As he explained in his 2016 Direct Line, the West should stop 'blabbering about Moscow needing to do something' about eastern Ukraine, that is, stop its support to the separatists for example, and instead put pressure on the authorities in Kyiv, which were under the West's patronage (Putin 2016). Such colloquial

[6]'Sergey Karaganov: "We are at War with the West. The European Security Order is Illegitimate"', *Corriere.it*, 8 April 2022, available at: https://www.corriere.it/economia/aziende/22_aprile_08/we-are-at-war-with-the-west-the-european-security-order-is-illegitimate-c6b9fa5a-b6b7-11ec-b39d-8a197cc9b19a.shtml, accessed 3 December 2024.

language would progressively become commonplace amongst Russian officials, including Sergei Lavrov, who mimicked Putin's way of talking.[7]

Third, Putin increasingly suggested that the Western threat encompassed separatism and terrorism because the West had instrumentalised these evils against Russia. As he noted in his 2014 AFA, 'we remember, how in high corridors, at the high level, [people] welcomed terrorists as fighting for freedom and democracy' (Putin 2014c). The same theme surfaced in his Direct Line that year: 'We completely opened up ourselves in front of our [Western] partners [after the Soviet collapse]. And what did we see? Direct and entire support to terrorism in the North Caucasus' (Putin 2014d). The West's image was now associated with support to North Caucasian terrorists.

The other development was Russia's September 2015 military intervention in Syria, which returned the terrorist and separatist threats to the forefront. This happened with little preparation. Violence in the North Caucasus had been on the decline for years and terrorist attacks in Russian regions outside the Caucasus had all but stopped (Klimentov 2021). Furthermore, Putin had downplayed the threat represented by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) months before, claiming that 'there was no direct threat to [Russia] from ISIL' (Putin 2015a). Russian intelligence was 'concerned' about Russian citizens 'appearing [in the Middle East], getting some training, and being able to return [to Russia]' but this was under control (Putin 2015a). Then, suddenly, Putin's discourse changed. He re-securitised the terrorist threat to Russia's security, threatening Russians with a replay of the Second Chechen War:

> Russia had been on the frontline of the fight against terror for a long time. It was a fight for freedom … for the future of all civilisation. … It took [Russia] almost ten years to break the back of the bandit bands. [Russians] had almost pushed the terrorists out of Russia but they still conducted an implacable fight with remaining underground groups. (Putin 2015d)[8]

Putin now argued that Russian citizens in Syria and Iraq represented an existential threat for Russia itself because they could eventually return an attempt to spread Islamism in Russia.

Syria too marked a break in Russian foreign policy. It was the first time since the Soviet–Afghan War, which had led to a national trauma and accelerated the Soviet collapse, that Moscow had sent its military to fight outside the former Soviet Union (Klimentov 2024). The intervention was legitimised as a response to the terrorist and separatist threats. It was about fighting 'international terrorism' abroad—in a 'proactive' way—before it could 'come home to Russia' (Putin 2015b). This had to be done, Putin explained in his fourth securitisation move, because nefarious forces had 'unceremoniously [interfered] in the affairs of the region' and destabilised Syria (Putin 2015b). The Syrian intervention was about separatism and terrorism born out of Western interference in the affairs of a sovereign state. Putin thus presented Syria as a cautionary tale for Russia. As Putin had claimed many times before, Russia too suffered from Western interference that was trying to destabilise the ruling regime by spreading democracy. Intervening in Syria helped

[7]'Lavrov prizval Zapad soblyudat' "ponyatiya"', *Kommersant"*, 18 February 2022, available at: https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5226915, accessed 3 December 2024.

[8]See also Putin (2020d).

'protect' 'Russian independence and sovereignty' by preventing the spread of Islamism to Russia and righted the wrongs of Western-engineered destabilisation (Putin 2015c).

The Syrian intervention updated the discourse on the separatist and terrorist threats to Russia's security. First, despite the intervention being positioned as necessary to fight exiled North Caucasian fighters, Chechnya itself was discursively side-lined, save for the use of Second Chechen War-related discursive markers, including references to its glorious battles such as in Botlikh and Putin's crude language. As Putin explained, Russia could not allow terrorists to '"slurp up" [*skhomyachit'*] Syria' (Putin 2015c). In parallel, the international and ideological character of terrorism was reinforced in the discourse by contrast to the connection to social-economic and political conditions in the North Caucasus which had led to so many people leaving for Syria. No mention was also made of the fact that intervening in Syria could heighten (as it did) the terrorist threat to Russia.

Second, Putin called for a global coalition against terrorism, a jarring contrast against his concomitant accusations that the West was supporting terrorism in Russia and destabilising countries around the world, thus creating more terrorism. Putin emphasised the necessity of a Western civilisational front against terrorism (Putin 2015d). Following the Boston marathon attack, he typically played up the linkages between the North Caucasus and global terrorism (Putin 2013). Russia appeared to be offering the West a partnership, taking the high road despite the West's deceptiveness towards Moscow over the years. In doing so, Putin was partly de-securitising the Western threat in relation to Ukraine (Putin 2017, 2020d).

At the same time, Moscow presented itself as leading the fight against terrorism, asserting its moral superiority over the West, which it continued to blame for destabilising the Middle East and not supporting Moscow on Chechnya. Russia was both part of Western civilisation and a civilisational unit on its own. Like the United States, Putin claimed, Russians 'were themselves victims of international terrorism, one of the first victims' (Putin 2013). Russia had a special duty because of its frontline exposure to terrorism and because the West had discredited itself by providing 'help, information support, financial, [and] political [backing], sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly' to the terrorists that had attacked Russia (Putin 2013). The fight against terrorism thus took on a special character for Putin, highlighting the unique values of the Russian people and of its security forces (Putin 2015e). Russia's identity and distinctiveness were defined in contradistinction against the terrorist threat and, increasingly, against the West's complacency in dealing with the threat. In Putin's discourses, this was a sign of how the West's values had diverged from Russia's and of how the Western and terrorist-separatist threats were merging. This argument took on a special meaning as Russia and the West directly confronted each other following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The new Cold War

The fourth period in Putin's discourse on threats started after 2020. In this discourse, the Western threat overtook the threats of terrorism and separatism as Russia entered into a new Cold War with the West. Separatism and terrorism were, however, not fully de-securitised but were referenced as past threats with which Putin had successfully dealt and as lingering threats that could resurface because the West, which Russia was now fighting, had supported them.

Putin's fifth securitisation move in spring 2020—the extension of the terms of the presidency—exemplified this dual logic. By that point, Putin had been in power for over 20 years, having started his fourth presidential term in 2018. According to the 1993 Russian constitution, this had to be his last unless he left the presidency for one term. Putin had used that constitutional loophole to return to the presidency after Medvedev's term in 2012. Arguing that he had to consolidate Russia's unity and stability, Putin supported constitutional changes that, amongst other things, would allow him to remain president until 2036. The proposed amendment broke with two decades of promises by Putin, including as recently as 2018, to not change the constitution.[9]

Laying the ground for these constitutional changes in his AFA, Putin explained that they were 'important' and ensured that 'Russia could be and remain only as a sovereign country'. To achieve that, Putin explained in a reference to his successful handling of separatism and terrorism, Russians 'had already accomplished a lot: they had restored the unity of their country'. The North Caucasus was no longer a hotbed of international terrorism (Putin 2020a). Now, his argument went, it was time to take the next step and pass the constitutional amendment to reinforce central power and prevent the threats from returning.

As voting for the referendum on constitutional change began on 30 June 2020, Putin further explained how the reform was needed to uphold Russia's security and civilisational values. The reform defended 'the country where [Russians] wanted to live … the country for which [they] worked, and wanted to transmit to [their] children and grandchildren' (Putin 2020c). The words 'terrorism' and 'separatism' did not appear in Putin's speech. Instead, he hinted at another foreign threat to Russia's stability and security: the West. He did so by making his speech in front of a new monument celebrating the victory over Nazi Germany in Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad. World War II had, by that point, itself become a shorthand for the West's deceptiveness towards Russia as the Kremlin accused the United States and the European Union of having supported anti-Russian forces in Ukraine since 2014. Putin's publication of 'historical' articles dealing with World War II reinforced the parallel (Torbakov 2011; Wood 2011; Putin 2020b, 2021). After 2022, Putin further stressed the connections between the Russian–Ukrainian War, World War II and terrorism as he denounced the 'Ukrainian neo-Nazi regime's' use of 'terrorist methods' against Russia.[10]

Moreover, the long running securitisation process had made statements about the respect of Russia's history and 'unique civilisation' and the need for 'effective authorities under the society's supervision' to protect it, evocative of foreign interference, especially amidst ongoing wars in Ukraine and Syria. An intense campaign in the state media emphasised how constitutional reform would achieve this, countering a supposed Western cultural threat. Gay marriage, which was banned under the amendment, was one such

[9]'"Seichas u menya vtoroi srok podryad". Putin poobeshchal ne ballotirovat'sya v prezidenty na sleduyushchikh vyborakh', *Meduza.io*, 25 May 2018, available at: https://meduza.io/news/2018/05/25/seychas-u-menya-vtoroy-srok-podryad-putin-poobeschal-ne-ballotirovatsya-v-prezidenty-na-sleduyuschih-vyborah, accessed 3 December 2024.

[10]'Putin obvinil Kiev v ispol'zovanii terroristicheskikh metodov—obstrelakh gorodov', *Interfax.ru*, 19 March 2024, available at: https://www.interfax-russia.ru/main/putin-obvinil-kiev-v-ispolzovanii-terroristicheskih-metodov-obstrelah-gorodov, accessed 3 December 2024.

manifestation of this threat. Russians had to remain alert to foreign interference because 'on their responsibility, on their sincere patriotic feelings, care for the motherland laid the sovereignty of Russia', Putin explained (Putin 2020c). The 2020 constitutional reform marked a momentous step towards a more autocratic regime. It showed how effective the long running securitisation process had been at legitimising far-reaching authoritarian reforms. It also reversed the hierarchy of threats in Putin's securitisation discourse. Separatism and terrorism, which had cohabited with the Western threat, were now subordinated to it. After 2020, Putin insisted even more on the Western threat in his televised speeches (see Figures 1 and 2).

Putin's sixth securitisation move happened at the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine through two connected speeches on 21 and 24 February. In the first, Putin called to recognise the independence of the separatist republics of Luhansk and Donetsk, where Russia had militarily intervened in 2014 and controlled ever since. After explaining that large swathes of Ukraine constituted 'an integral part of [Russia's] history, culture, spiritual territory', Putin argued that Ukraine had passed under the control of the West. The West was not only interfering in Ukraine but it was preparing to use it as a springboard to attack Russia. 'Western sponsors may facilitate the appearance of such weapons in Ukraine in order to create another threat to our country' (Putin 2022a). Beyond this, the West and its clients in Ukraine were supporting separatism in Russia through involvement in Chechnya. Putin denounced 'the participation of Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis in the bands of terrorists in the North Caucasus, and in the increasingly louder calls about territorial claims toward Russia' (Putin 2022a). The West and Ukraine had used 'extremist cells, including of radical Islamic organisations' to attack Russia (Putin 2022a). Given this threat to both Russia's cultural and political influence in Ukraine and its security from US-dominated Ukraine, Putin claimed that Russia had no choice but to intervene in Donbas.

In the follow-up speech on 24 February, Putin expanded on these themes. Talking about the threat of Western interference in Ukraine and the instrumentalisation of Ukraine against Russia, he proposed even more radical measures. Russia had to answer the 'fundamental threats' created by 'irresponsible politicians in the West against our country' (Putin 2022c). It had no choice: 'The military occupation of the lands adjoining to our borders … will remain for decades ahead, and maybe forever and will create for Russia a constantly increasing, completely unacceptable threat' (Putin 2022c). After this Putin speech, Russia invaded Ukraine, starting the largest and deadliest conflict on the post-Soviet space to date. Unlike in 2014, Russia's military action was overt and large-scale, taking most foreign observers and ordinary Russians by surprise.[11]

During his sixth securitisation, Putin also connected the Western actions in Ukraine with its support for the Arab spring. Complaining again how 'the collective West had most actively supported separatism and the bands of mercenaries in the South of Russia', Putin attributed to the West a broader responsibility for supporting international terrorism originating from the Middle East (Putin 2022c). In this narrative, Russia had, in fact,

[11] 'Den', kogda ne sluchilas' voina', *Novaya Gazeta*, 16 February 2022, available at: https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2022/02/16/den-kogda-ne-sluchilas-voina, accessed 3 December 2024.

always been fighting Western-backed terrorists, from the North Caucasus to Syria. As before, the reliance on familiar linguistic devices, such as rhetorical questions, alleged off-the-record comments from foreign politicians and key words, such as 'territorial integrity' and 'foreign meddling', reinforced the conflation between different threats (Putin 2020d).

Putin's seventh securitisation move, the mobilisation of the Russian population, happened on 21 September 2022. In a special speech whose topic was not announced in advance, Putin expanded on the Western civilisational and security threat to Russia to justify the need for the 'partial mobilisation' of the Russian population for the war in Ukraine. No such mobilisation had occurred in the country since World War II. The decision thus broke not only with post-Soviet military interventionism but even with Soviet precedent. Although it had sent conscripts to fight in Afghanistan in the 1980s and in Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s, the Kremlin had not mobilised the general population during these conflicts. In February 2022, Putin presented the threat in even more apocalyptic terms. He claimed, 'high-ranking policymakers of leading NATO countries' had commented on 'the possibility and the relevance of using weapons of mass destruction—nuclear weapons—against Russia'; their goal was to 'weaken, disunite, and eliminate, in the end, our country' (Putin 2022d). As the war in Ukraine was increasingly conflated with World War II in Putin's discourse, the alleged Western threat was proclaimed to have risen to levels unseen since the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. This narrative continued to build on the altered memory of World War II. Such an existential threat justified a further escalation of acceptable measures, including the sending of more people to war despite the rising number of casualties. Putin also emphasised how, as during the Second Chechen War, there could be no negotiation or compromise with the enemies of Russia. Meanwhile, terrorism was now associated with attacks, including assassination of high-level military personnel, sabotages and drone strikes, by Ukraine in the Russian-occupied Donbas and on Russian territory rather than with attacks by North Caucasian groups, as made explicit in Putin's 2022 New Year address (Putin 2022e).

Terrorism and separatism were now very firmly under the umbrella of the 'Western threat' in Putin's narrative. The West was responsible for breaking up the Soviet Union. Now, decisionmakers in the West believed 'it was time for Russia' to 'break up into multiple regions and units and fight each other to the death', Putin claimed (Putin 2022d). The West had had 'such plans for a long time' and had 'encouraged bands of international terrorists in the North Caucasus' (Putin 2022d). Terrorism and separatism now acted in support of the securitisation of the Western threat, and a number of familiar images and metaphors resurfaced. The Second Chechen War became again prominent in Putin's discourse, and Russians were reminded about the West's deceptiveness over NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe and the military intervention in Kosovo (Putin 2022b). Whatever the threat, Putin always used the same repertoire of heuristic artifacts.

The securitisation of the Western threat rose to new levels, as demonstrated by the increasing pace of the securitisation moves. Moreover, the description of the threat not only featured in crisis addresses but also took centre stage in speeches that used to be centred on social and economic issues. Almost all Putin's televised speeches in 2022 and

2023 mentioned the Western threat (see Figure 1) and did so at great lengths (see Figure 2). Strikingly, while Putin skipped the AFA in 2022, his AFA in 2023 had no fewer than 33 mentions of the danger represented by the West to Russia (Putin 2023) (see Figure 3). Another indication that the securitisation process was now exceptionally intensive was the mention of the Western threat in the New Year address in 2022 (Putin 2022e). Even at the height of the terrorist attacks in Russia in the 2000s, with the notable exception of 2013, the year of the terrorist attacks in Volgograd, Putin avoided talking of domestic security issues on this significant holiday (see Figure 4).

Conclusion

Contra to what observers had anticipated, Russia proved unable to build on the democratic experiment of the 1990s and went back to its authoritarian past. Although Putin's regime is different from the Soviet one, including due to the absence of a clear ideology in today's Russia, the two regimes are similar in their repressive methods, the pervasive influence of the security services, the blurring between the ruling party and the state, and the government's control of the media. Because Russia's rapid transformation into an autocracy is closely linked to Putin's personality and worldview, analysing his discourses is crucial to understanding it.

To identify and explain turning points in Russia's transformation, this article has analysed Putin's discourses on threats to Russia over 23 years. It has identified seven successful securitisation moves in domestic and foreign policy. Each time Putin wished to pass an exceptional measure—something that would have been up to that point unthinkable in Russian domestic and foreign policy—he updated and expanded his discourse on threats. In that sense, it is appropriate to see Russia's transformation from a democracy into an autocracy as a succession of successful securitisations. During each successful securitisation move, Putin passed ever more exceptional measures while keeping previous measures in place. This escalation was made possible by the continuing securitisation process.

Putin has focused on three threats—separatism, terrorism and the Western threat. He has securitised them in successive order and, at times, in parallel. He has, on occasion, partially de-securitised these threats to show his successful handling of them while not rolling back previous securitisation moves. As this article reveals, there has been an accumulation of threats in Putin's securitisation process. While separatism and terrorism dominated in the 2000s and gradually merged into the same threat, the Western threat emerged in Putin's discourse in 2014. While all three coexisted beyond this, the Western threat overtook separatism and terrorism in the 2020s. Interestingly, this did not mean that separatism and terrorism were de-securitised. Instead, their securitisations were subsumed under the new securitisation of the Western threat because they were presented as targeting the same referent object: Russia's territorial and cultural integrity. Putin thus created a network of threats in which a new securitisation built on pre-existing ones. According to Putin, the West had always been behind separatism and terrorism in Russia, so in countering the Western threat he was still managing the other two. Therefore, when a terrorist group affiliated to the Islamic state in Afghanistan conducted a terrorist attack at a concert hall in Moscow in March 2024, Putin and other Russian officials were quick to suggest that Ukraine and the West were behind the attack (Putin 2024).

Putin's use of the same repertoire of key words and linguistic techniques, such as deliberately crude expressions, reinforced the continuity between the securitisations of terrorism and separatism and that of the Western threat. Moreover, the Western threat appeared already familiar to Russians because, like previous threats, it was connected to foreign intervention—forces operating from abroad to destabilise Russia. Here the Putin regime could draw on the Soviet playbook of vilifying the capitalist West. Ultimately, because the securitisations were linked, Putin could continue to escalate his exceptional measures as if the same securitisation was continuing.

Finally, as the article demonstrates, the securitisation of the Western threat to Russian values and state security in the 2020s has reached a different level from the securitisation of terrorism and separatism in the 2000s. Putin's televised discourses are saturated with discussions about the danger posed by the West, as is the content on Russian state media in general. Even at the height of the Second Chechen War, terrorism and separatism never occupied such a prominent place in Putin's public discourse, which was generally positive and focused on Russia's development. The intensity of the current securitisation process can be explained both by the necessity for Putin to win Russians' support for especially abhorrent exceptional measures—the invasion of Ukraine and the mobilisation of the population—and by the fact that success in the war in Ukraine, if not truly vital to Russia's survival, is arguably critical to the survival of Putin's regime.

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