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## Russia's approach to counterterrorism. Need for a more comprehensive framework towards Central Asia

El enfoque ruso al contraterrorismo. La necesidad de un marco más completo hacia Asia Central

### Abstract

In recent years, the post-USSR countries of Central Asia have witnessed a remarkable development in the resurgence and radicalization of Islam, due to the socio-economic problems and instability in Afghanistan. This trend exacerbates Russian internal and external security problems. Thus, the country carries out eradication activities, in the national and regional framework, but these are mainly approached from the counterintelligence perspective. This document advocates the need for a more comprehensive approach that includes socio-economic factors and alleviates institutional and coordination gaps.

**Keywords:** Russia, Central Asia, counterterrorism, comprehensive approach.

### Resumen

En los últimos años, los países post-URSS de Asia Central han presenciado un desarrollo notable en el resurgimiento y en la radicalización del islam debido a los problemas socioeconómicos y la inestabilidad en Afganistán. Esta tendencia exagera los problemas internos y externos de seguridad rusa. Así pues, el país lleva a cabo actividades de erradicación, en el marco nacional y regional, pero estas principalmente se abordan desde la perspectiva de contrainteligencia. Este documento aboga por la necesidad de un enfoque más holístico que incluya los factores socioeconómicos y palle las brechas institucionales y de coordinación.

**Palabras clave:** Rusia, Asia Central, contraterrorismo, enfoque comprensivo.

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## 1. Introduction

The Central Asia region consists of the former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, together with Afghanistan. The recent years, these five post-USSR republics have experienced a notable development in the revival and radicalization of Islam. The threat from radicalization is exacerbated by the violence in nearby Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>, having an important impact especially in Tajikistan; the repressive policies of Central Asia's authoritarian regimes, with Kazakh policies being among the most strict; the increasing Chinese presence in the region (Scarfo, 2018: 3-4), awaking the sympathy for Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uighur Muslim minority groups being detained in "re-education" camps in Xinjiang (Cumming-Bruce, 2018); as well as the socio-economic threat that represents the climate change to the region with water scarcity and long devastating droughts. Central Asian states share some common characteristics such as a poor socio-economic level and projection, authoritarian political systems and corruption, discrimination of minorities, and strict state control of religious practices. These factors, together with the shared history of political opposition, make their population vulnerable to terrorist activities (Cronin, 2019: 3).

The "stans"<sup>2</sup>, except Afghanistan, did not witness many terrorist attacks in their territories; however, together with the Russian Federation, they are significant exporters of foreign fighters. Along the same line, the shift in any trend can cause an increase in political violence and terrorist activity in the region. For instance, the Afghan peace process<sup>3</sup> can have a negative future impact on the region: if the terrorist groups cannot operate outside of Afghanistan, taking into consideration the porosity of the Tajik-Afghan border that is used for drug trafficking and smuggling, they can move to another weak state in Central Asia. Moreover, most of the terrorist groups in the Central Asian region are interlinked and affect multiple countries; that is the reason why the Russian Federation is trying to perceive security and development in the region from a "Great Central Asia"<sup>4</sup> approach.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia emerged as the main player in Central Asia, but its geo-strategic interests are challenged by extremism and terrorism. Taking into consideration the problems that Russia faced in Dagestan and Chechnya<sup>5</sup>, the presence of many Central Asian migrants in its territory, and the radicalization of those, the Kremlin is trying to eradicate the extremist movements in Central Asia. This paper advocates a need for a more comprehensive approach, within the national and regional frameworks, to counterterrorism. Thus, it introduces firstly, a general overview of the five "stans" together with Afghanistan; secondly, the security problems which arise for Russia; thirdly, the general domestic and regional frameworks that the Kremlin is using for counterterrorism to, finally, withdraw some conclusion and make recommendations for the improvement of the aforementioned challenges.

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1 After the 9/11 attacks, the launch of the War on Terror by the U.S. impacted not only Afghanistan but also its five Central Asian neighbours. The war in Afghanistan has led to an increasing flow of refugees to former Soviet Central Asian republics, imposing a significant economic burden, and strengthened organized crime networks. Also, greater repression on the political opposition was carried out, radicalizing existing Islamic groups, and fuelling support for militant Islamist groups. The military cooperation with the U.S. made those states a target for terrorist groups, both within and without the region, as well as increased regional tensions.

2 Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

3 Negotiations and proposals between the Taliban and Afghan government and U.S. to end the Afghan war. The last agreement includes guarantees such as the withdrawal of all U.S. and international forces by May 2021 and unspecified Taliban actions to prevent other terrorist groups from using Afghan soil to threaten the U.S. and its allies.

4 While the concept of "Central Asia" often refers to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, the "Great Central Asia" approach includes Afghanistan in the geopolitical region (Ismailov and Papava, 2010: 63-64).

5 Russia faces the threat of religious radicalization in the Northern Caucasus that can lead to anti-Russian Islamist upheavals.

## 2. Central Asia region and its importance for Russia

### 2.1. An overview of Central Asian states

#### 2.1.1 Kyrgyzstan

Due to the difficult socio-economic situation after the civil war, the Kyrgyz state is especially vulnerable to the activities of radical Islamist organizations. The first clandestine terrorist cells appeared on its territory in the 1990s, reaching the highest levels of activity during the 1999-2016 period (START, 2021) when the detachments of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)<sup>6</sup> entered the southern regions of the country, Hizb ut-Tahrir<sup>7</sup> created ramified structures on the territory of Osh, Batken and Jalal-Abad regions allowing it to proceed with active practical actions. In the last years, the activist of the group created an association of jihadists from ISIS.

Since 2005, another type of Islamic group has emerged, the activities of which pose an increasing threat to the constitutional system of Central Asian states: the so-called Salafi jamaats (communities) spread wildly and have an increasing presence in Russian territory. Salafism in Kyrgyzstan is not as strong as traditional terrorist organizations, but the dynamics of its development inspire concern. The main distributors of Salafism in the republic are graduates from religious universities in Arab countries. Recruitment into Salafi communities often takes place on the Internet through popular social networks and the distribution of literature. Between 2014 and 2016, in its southern regions, the jihadist movements have intensified<sup>8</sup>. It is from the supporters of this movement that recruitment into the ranks of ISIS was conducted. Following the ICSR report (Cook and Vale, 2018:17), there are 863 affiliates (most of them are ethnic Uzbeks) to ISIS, from which 63 returned to Kyrgyzstan. To prevent terrorist recruitment activities, the government established a prison sentence of up to 12 years for those citizens who took part in armed conflict abroad (Karin, 2017:17). However, due to the reform of the criminal code that decreased criminal penalties for several terrorism-related crimes, the arrests have dropped sharply since 2019.

#### 2.1.2. Tajikistan

Tajikistan, with significant levels of poverty and highly dependent on Russia, is also influenced by radical Islam. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, there was an increase in extremist sentiments among the population of the Republic of Tatarstan. Thus, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan was created; however, it was banned in 2015 with a government crackdown on Islamic fundamentalism which contributed to the radicalization of some local Muslims (CSIS, 2017:5). For many years, Islamic fundamentalists tried to fight the official government by organizing rallies, forcibly removing the former president of the republic, R. Nabi-

6 Formed in 1998, the IMU is a Salafi-jihadist militant group seeking to overthrow the Uzbek government and install an Islamic, Sharia-driven government. Following 9/11 and the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom, the IMU shifted its focus to battling US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, an effort that strengthened collaboration and ideological ties between the IMU, Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. In 2015, after a period of declining relations with the Taliban, the IMU pledged loyalty to the Islamic State (US Department of State, 2019: 264-265).

7 Formed in 1953, the Hizb ut-Tahrir is an international pan-Islamist and fundamentalist political organization whose aim is the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate. In Central Asia, the organization carries out activities since the 90s through propaganda, infiltrations in society, and the use of force (Ramezani Bonesh, 2020).

8 In the period 2014-2018, ten attacks were held in the Kyrgyz territory (START, 2021).

yev, taking hostages of deputies of the Supreme Council of the republic, and terrorist acts. An important fact remains that these organizations are supported by the Taliban and neighbouring Pakistan.

It should be noted that the IMU also operates on the territory of Tajikistan. In 2010, some members of this group escaped from prison and moved to the Rasht valley in eastern Tajikistan. After this event, the activities of this organization resurged. From 2010 to 2011, seven terrorist attacks were recorded (START, 2021). Nowadays, due to the proximity to Afghanistan and the presence of insufficiently protected borders, there are fears that the state will be subject to increasing influence, violence, and unrest from terrorist and extremist groups located in Afghanistan<sup>9</sup>.

The total number of Tajiks fighting in Syria and Iraq reached 1502 people. Of the 200 persons who returned 111 did it voluntarily, what gives them the right to be free under Tajiks law due to the pardon-extended policy. Nevertheless, as it was shown by the case of the returnees to the Sught region, where 34 out of 72 returnees rejoin the IS, this policy is not wholly effective (Cook and Vale, 2018:25). Moreover, the country was one of the first states in the region to strengthen its law related to the participation in armed conflicts outside the country (Karin, 2017:17). Nowadays, 1899-2000 individuals are affiliated with ISIS.

### 2.1.3. Kazakhstan

In comparison with its neighbours, Kazakhstan is the most peaceful state in the region due to its higher GDP derived from the exploitation of oil and natural resources. The fact that the country also has a diverse population, pushes the Kazakh government to maintain strict control over freedom of assembly and religion. Nonetheless, in recent years, it became one of the first targets of jihadist propaganda, especially through videos, where the life of Kazakh fighters in Syria was described, focused on the juvenile population (Karasnidze, 2018:3). Approximately, 700 citizens were recruited by ISIS and 524 of them returned to Kazakhstan, and 1136-1236 individuals are affiliated with ISIS (Hassan, 2021). To prevent the recruitment of its citizens into terrorist organizations, the law related to the imposition of a prison sentence of 3 to 7 years for deliberate illegal activities in armed conflicts outside Kazakh territory was signed in 2014.

### 2.1.4. Turkmenistan

Despite having the sixth-largest reserves of gas in the world, the repressive government and high levels of corruption do not allow the Turkmen citizens to enjoy the benefits from gas exploitation. In recent years, the socio-economic problems, isolationist policy, and tight control of religious activities contribute to the radicalization in the country (Umarov, 2019). The state strictly controls all inflows and outflows of people and uses broad "blacklists" of people who are banned from leaving Turkmenistan, which leads to social discontent. Moreover, the government does not support mullahs travelling abroad to train in foreign religious education centres. Despite trying to prevent religious radicalization, these measures lead to inadequate religious education and social discontent, increasing the opportunities for radicals to exploit the situation. There are estimations that 360-500 citizens were fighting in Iraq and Syria as part of different terrorist organizations. However, it must be noted that there is not an open source to collect information about the Turkmen fighters as well as the returnees.

<sup>9</sup> Since 2018, there were five attacks on Tajik's soil carried out by ISIL, the Taliban, and IRPT (START, 2021).

### 2.1.5. Uzbekistan

The country has a long history of religious radicalism. The main combat-ready terrorist group was the IMU which also contributed to the emergence of other groups such as Jamaat Ansar Allah, Jund al-Khilafa, and Islamic Jamaat of Uzbekistan. Moreover, after IMU sided with ISIS, in 2015, many of its members went to Syria and created militant groups such as Imam Bukhari's Battalions, and Katibaat Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.

There is no reliable data about the number of Uzbek fighters and returnees. Following the ICSR report (2018: 17), approximately, 1500-2500 Uzbek citizens travelled to fight together with ISIS and 156 returned (US Department of State, 2019)<sup>10</sup>. Many Uzbek citizens view Islamic values as a good alternative to chaos, corruption, and violence that surrounds them. Along this line, it is important to highlight that the country presents similar problems as Turkmenistan: resource-rich state but corrupted, with a little portion of arable lands and an important impact of climate change as well as poor human rights (Cronin, 2019:5).

### 2.1.6. Afghanistan

Afghanistan's commercial exchange with Central Asian countries is comparatively low in comparison to trade with neighboring Pakistan and Iran, with whom it shares larger historical and cultural ties. Despite this, Central Asia is an important supplier of electricity, transport communications, and food security in Afghanistan (Esentaeve, 2019:1116). Thus, they are closely interlinked.

Afghanistan is the state which has the most deaths due to terrorism. The main terrorist group is the Taliban. The Taliban are linked to several active terrorist groups in Central Asia (it cooperated with Al-Qaeda, IMU, and Haqqani Network, for instance). However, there is also the Islamic Jihad Union<sup>11</sup>, comprised of Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Kazakh radicals who are linked to IMU, focused on the attacks against international forces based in Afghanistan. Before 2010, the Islamic Jihad Union had a training camp in Kazakhstan and operated in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (Cronin, 2019:5). The peace negotiations were carried only with the Taliban and the main question is what will happen to the terrorist groups which did not take part in the negotiations but are based in Afghan territory<sup>12</sup>.

## *2.2. Security implications*

In addition to the drug trafficking and smuggling, the spread of radical Islam and the extremist groups entering Central Asia from Afghanistan, especially to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan ("Russia's soft underbelly"), can have a negative impact for the regions of Chechnya and Dagestan. In this regard, it needs to be said that despite the Taliban will not host the terrorist organizations in the Afghan territory, the support that they gave to Chechens during the war and the recognition of them as an independent state as well as the possibility that those groups can relocate to the post-USSR republics in the region undermines Kremlin's trust.

10 It is also important to pinpoint that ISIS tried to recruit especially high-skills workers (STAN RADAR, 2015).

11 Formed in 2002, is a splinter group of IMU. The Islamic Jihad Union has been affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Although the organization remains committed to overthrowing the Government of Uzbekistan, it also has a global agenda, demonstrated by its attacks on international forces in Afghanistan (US Department of State, 2019: 264).

12 The attack of 6th March 2020 was the first major one since a U.S.- Afghanistan deal was signed. Even the agreement aims to bring peace, the IS was not included in negotiations (BBC News, 2020).

Also, it can provoke a flow of Muslim migrants from Central Asia which can trigger the Russian extreme-right movement<sup>13</sup> and, consequently, socially isolated migrants may be prone to get involved in extremist activities.

Due to the development of digital media and communication, the cases of radicalization and recruitment of Central Asian immigrants living in Russia became more frequent. While it is difficult to establish concrete causes for radicalization, the main discourse line affirms that many immigrants from this region coming to Russia as a labour force and becoming vulnerable to extremist indoctrination due to their socio-economic condition<sup>14</sup> which often leads to a sense of injustice (Elshimi et al., 2018). Following the Pew Research Centre (2018) data, in 2017, an estimated number of more than 2.6 million Kazakhs, 1.1 million Uzbeks, 590 thousand Kyrgyz, 470 thousand Tajiks, and 190 thousand Turkmens were living in Russia.

In the ICSR report (2018:16) the estimated number of Russian (including Chechens and Dagestanis) affiliated with ISIS accounted for 4000-5000 people, from which 380 returned from the conflict zone. According to the opposition, the second largest foreign group which was fighting Al-Assad was Chechen (it probably encompasses other ethnic groups from North Caucasus, such as Dagestanis); this is due to the weakening of the Caucasus Emirate between 2013-2015 and the replacement of commanders, who swore allegiance to ISIS (CSIS, 2017:12). Studies suggest that Russia is a significant base for recruitment: 80-90% of foreign fighters in the Middle East who carried Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz nationalities were radicalized and recruited during their stay in Russia as labour force (Soliev, 2019:69; CSIS, 2017:6). Many of those, before traveling to Russian Federation, were described as non-religious and non-radical.

In more broad terms, it is estimated that 5000-7000 Russians and Central Asians went to fight with ISIS. Thus, in Syria and Iraq, there is an important number of ethnic groups from Central Asia. These ethnic groups compose the terrorist cells of Jamaat Imam Bukhari, Jayshal al Muhajirin, Jamaat Sayfulla Shishani, and Tawhid Val Jihad, which were quite involved in hostilities. Furthermore, while there is a prioritization of ISIS foreign fighter's data, it should not be forgotten that there are also Central Asian brigades affiliated with Al-Qaeda; currently, these are an option for the Central Asians who seek to join Salafi-jihad movement (CSIS, 2017: 13-14).

### **3. Russia's counterterrorism regime: legal and institutional framework**

#### *3.1. National framework*

The Russian Federation was one of the first states to face the threat of terrorism on its territory due to economic, social, and political problems. After the collapse of the USSR, the borders were open for the migration movements from neighbouring countries to Russia, allowing the flow of ideas and ideologies. Furthermore, the collapse emphasized the diversity of cultures and moral principles between different nationalities, disintegrating the unity factor that prevailed during the Soviet Union's existence. The events in the Caucasus, especially in Chechnya, made it clear to Russia that it was necessary to meet and fight the threat of international

13 Russians believe that immigrants increase the risk of terrorism in the country (Gonzalez-Barrera and Connor, 2019). This fact must be understood considering the historical close link between Russian institutions and the Orthodox Church. Thus, it is not due to islamophobia itself but to the idea of "superiority of their culture" and the proudness of their national identity, closely interlinked with religion (Pew Research Centre, 2017). The Russian population is around 145.93 million, of which 6.5% are Muslims (World Population Review, 2020).

14 For instance, problems to speak fluently Russian, monetary incentives, low levels of education, the strictness of the migration laws in Russia which press to legalize the status after migrant arrival and failure to do so can lead to extremist ideas, etc.

terrorism even at distant approaches before it spreads into Russian territory. As Omelicheva (2019) pointed out, the key lesson that the Kremlin learned after the past failed counterterrorist operation (the Dubrovka Theatre and Beslan school) was that they must have sufficient force to secure the perimeter of the operations and be able to constrain different types of freedom (of movement, mass media, etc.).

The counterterrorism regulatory framework of the Russian Federation is mainly composed of the Constitution of the Russian Federation; Criminal Code of the Russian Federation; Federal Law of the Russian Federation of March 6, 2006, N° 35-F3 “On Countering Terrorism”; and Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of February 15, 2006, N° 116 “On measures to counter terrorism”. In the Constitution of the Russian Federation (Kremlin, 1993) we can distinguish articles 13, 21, and 45, which deal with the prohibition of the creation of public associations whose purpose is to violate the integrity of Russia, inciting hatred through violence; about the dignity of the person; and the protection of citizens. Moreover, the Federal Law of the Russian Federation dated March 6, 2006 (Kremlin, 2006), recognizes terrorism as a multi-layered social phenomenon<sup>15</sup> and establishes a clear structure of counteraction to terrorism, dividing it into three main vectors: the prevention of terrorism, the fight against it, and minimization and liquidation of its consequences.

In the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation (Kremlin, 2019), it can be seen the creation of structures whose purpose is the fight against terrorism. Thus, the National Counterterrorism Committee, whose chairman is the director of FSB (Federal Security Service), was established and, as part of it, the Federal Operation Headquarters was formed to organize the planning of the use of forces and means of federal executive bodies and their territorial bodies in the fight against terrorism. In 2010, with the initiative of the FSB, an International Counter-terrorism Data Bank was created, in which many counter-terrorism organizations from diverse countries participate. This helps to form a unified interstate information system for supporting anti-terrorist activities, as well as to work on identifying conspiratorial schemes and financing channels for international terrorist structures. Additionally, a section has been created, inside the organization's structure, that is responsible for countering the terrorist ideology (RIA, 2010).

Along with the regimes of martial law and emergencies, the counterterrorism regimes allow Kremlin to impose temporal restrictions on some rights and liberties (property inspections, freedom of movement, etc.). The Russian armed forces can be used for combating terrorism and the chief of a counterterrorist operation can order the creation of a combined group of forces, that can include military forces, for participation in operations against terrorism. Also, the legislation allows the destruction of national or foreign aircraft or vessel that suppose imminent threat to vital targets or places where there is a high concentration of people. Moreover, the President has the authority to use FSB security forces against the terrorists and their bases abroad.

It is interesting the fact that in separate articles (art. 205, 206, and 208) of the Criminal Code (Kremlin, 1996), related to the terms of detention for persons involved in terrorism, hostage-taking, organization, and participation in an illegal armed group, there is a note that stipulates that if a person participated in the preparation of a terrorist act, but warned the authorities about it, then he is exempted from criminal liability. Also, in 2006 law, a monetary reward was introduced, for the first time in the legislation, to persons assisting the law enforcement

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<sup>15</sup> It defines terrorism as an ideology of violence and the practice of influencing decision-making by state and local agencies or international organizations by means of frightening the population or other forms of unlawful violent action. Also, it draws the line between terrorist activity and act.

bodies of the Russian Federation in the fight against terrorism.

Since 2018, 23 terrorist attacks took place on Russian soil. Therefore, even this regulatory and legislative framework seems to be insufficient, there are still some problems in the fight against terrorism. For instance, this is a case of the penal system of the Russian state. The Federal Law of July 25, 2002, N°. 114-F3 “On Countering Extremist Activities” creates conditions that impede the penetration of destructive religious organizations into penal institutions; however, some studies, such as Selantyev and Hohrin works (cited in Hruleva and Maslov, 2019:358), point out that 8% of 100 processed biographies of neo-converted Islamic extremists, who were declared wanted for extremist crimes by law-enforcement agencies, accepted the extremist beliefs in prison. Furthermore, more often, those who have studied the canons of Islam abroad take an active part in organizing the activities of extremist organizations in the penitentiary system. Along the same line, it needs to be mentioned the existence of a significant number of jamaats, where the recruitment is easier. These are formed mainly by Central Asian immigrants who present problems getting integrated into Russian society.

In a broad sense, even the legislation recognizes terrorism as a complex socio-economic phenomenon, it does not include clear preventive measures to counterterrorism and scarce attention is given to the analysis of causes and conditions which give the rise of terrorism (Omelicheva, 2019). Furthermore, the protective measures aimed to reduce the vulnerability of people and infrastructures to terrorist attacks and liability for failed counterterrorism operations and violation of human rights are omitted. Russia approaches counterterrorism from the scope of counterintelligence; there is an emphasis on the detection and suppression of terrorist acts as well as mitigation of the destructive consequences, with the increasing importance of punitive measures and the use of force by the armed forces in combating terrorism. Another problem supposes the inefficiency on the inter-departmental exchange of information and the collision of the counterterrorism regime legislation with other legislations (for instance, the Federal Law “On State Border of the Russian Federation”, 1993).

### 3.2. Regional framework

Regarding the counterterrorism operations, and always taking into consideration the principles and goals of the United Nations (UN), the Russian Federation works in the post-Soviet countries within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Despite the fact that the CSTO is increasingly assigned the role of the military-political link in ensuring security, and the SCO is more considered as the mechanism of regional cooperation in various areas, including energy, the economy, and the humanitarian sphere, both Organizations highlight terrorism, and especially the spread of ISIS extremism, as one of the main threats for Central Asian countries.

The CSTO has developed its tools to deal with the threat of terrorism as well as instability in Afghanistan, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and increased crime. The mutual interest of the UN and the CSTO in the development of practical cooperation in peacekeeping, the fight against crime and terrorism is noted. In the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation of 2015 (Article 90), Russia advocates “*the qualitative development of the CSTO, its transformation into a universal international organization capable of withstanding regional challenges and threats of a military-political and military-strategic nature, as well as threats in the information sphere*” (Kremlin, 2015).



The issues of countering terrorism and extremism are resolved within the framework of the CSTO special operations: against drug trafficking - "Channel"; ensuring the security of information networks and the fight against cybercrime - "PROXY". In addition to these special operations, others are carried out to solve fundamental problems such as the fight against the sale and transfer to persons of arms, ammunition, and explosives and the monitoring of information networks from possible recruitment activities for terrorist and extremist organizations. Also, on the territory of Central Asian states, tactical exercises "South Antiterror" are held to increase the preparedness of security agencies and special services of states for a quick response to terrorist threats. In 2011, a protocol on counterterrorism was signed between the SCO and the CSTO related to regulation and coordination of counterterrorism operations.

The CSTO considers as a threat the possibility of the return of citizens of member states who were trained in camps of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, and Iraq and fought on the side of ISIS as well as the possibility of the future destabilization of the situation in Afghanistan. In 2018, negotiations were held to launch "Mercenary operations", the purpose of which is to identify citizens returning from combat zones after participating in the activities of terrorist organizations (Military Review, 2018). It is also important to underline that in 2016, more than 20 armed attacks occurred on the Tajik-Afghan border; in the border territories with the CSTO member states in the Central Asian region, training camps are being created and recruitment activities are ongoing; and there is radio propaganda, as well as recruitment through social networks. In this regard, the decision of the CSTO "On Assisting the Republic of Tajikistan to Strengthen the Tajik-Afghan Border" is of fundamental importance together with a working group on Afghanistan under the CSTO Council of Foreign Ministers, which constantly monitors the situation in Afghanistan.

In general terms, the work of the CSTO in the field of security is carried out through the following aspects: operational planning, combat training, military-technical cooperation, personnel training, and the creation of common armed forces. Today, there are several joint military forces in the CSTO: Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, Collective Rapid Deployment Forces, and Peacekeeping Forces. Also, to achieve a higher level of security in the region, there are Russian military bases in Kazakhstan<sup>16</sup>, Kyrgyzstan<sup>17</sup>, and Tajikistan<sup>18</sup>. However, the threat of terrorism and extremism comes not only from Afghanistan but also from the internal problems of the CSTO member states.

Art. 79 of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, 2016) emphasize that:

*"Russia considers it important to further strengthen the SCO's position in regional and global affairs and expand its composition, advocates building up the SCO's political and economic potential, and implementing practical measures within its framework to strengthen mutual trust and partnership in Central Asia, as well as for developing cooperation with the SCO member states, observers to the SCO and the SCO dialogue partners".*

16 Russian military facilities on Kazakh soil are Baykonur, Kostanae, and Sare-Sharhane.

17 In 2017, an agreement was signed between Russia and Kyrgyzstan on the presence of a Russian military base on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic. Under this agreement, all military bases of Russia were merged. The combined Russian military base in the Kyrgyz Republic includes four facilities: Kant, Karakol, Kara-Balta, and Dzhahalal-Abad.

18 An agreement was concluded between Russia and Tajikistan, according to which the Russian military base will be based on the territory of Tajikistan until 2042. Russian military base is located in two cities of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, and Kurgan-Tyube.

It advocates building the organization's potential, developing the power structures within the UN, and an anti-drug strategy. The SCO member states are also implementing a program of cooperation in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism and, within the framework of a draft SCO Convention on the Suppression of Extremism, anti-terrorism exercises "Peace Mission" are being held. According to the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, 2016), the activities of the SCO have an impact on the formation of a global collective leadership system; it should become an integral element in the network of partner organizations for regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region; and, together with the CIS, UN, and CSTO, should play a decisive role in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. The strategic importance of the Organization lies in the fact that it supposes an additional security belt to CSTO, along the Russian borders (Bailes et al., 2007:33).

Despite both organizations include Afghanistan as a permanent or observer member state, the non-belonging of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan portrays an important gap to the CSTO and of Turkmenistan to SCO. Moreover, the willingness to cooperate in counterterrorism activities can be undermined by mistrust and conflicts between member states<sup>19</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusions

Terrorism and extremism are not the only factors that contribute to instability in Central Asia; as we mentioned, these countries share some common characteristics such as significant levels of poverty, restrictive governments, the negative impact of climate change, violations of human rights, etc. which push many of their citizens into extremist ideologies; this has been seen by the important number of foreign fighters that travelled to Syria and Iraq from Central Asia and the Russian Federation. Moreover, the uncertainty about the future of Afghanistan and the terrorist organizations that are based in its territory is an issue to be considered.

In the face of all these elements, the radicalization, inside Russian borders, and its neighbouring Central Asia, supposes an imminent threat for Kremlin. Therefore, measures should be taken to improve Russia's counterterrorism regime, within national and regional frameworks. The issues that must be better addressed and developed by the Russian government are the following:

- (a) Higher attention should be given to preventive measures in order to combat terrorism. Thus, the continuous analysis of causes and conditions that give rise to terrorism should be carried out. Especially, the socio-economic roots might be studied giving significant attention to the Central Asian population in their countries and within Russian territory to address their needs.
- (b) The human rights restrictions as well as the violations of these, within the scope of the counterterrorism regime, should be also addressed to ensure better protection for the population and their interests. The liability of failed operations and human rights violations should be ascribed to responsible authorities.

<sup>19</sup> Within OSC it can be mentioned, for instance, the need to establish a balance between China and Russia, the conflictive relation between India and Pakistan as well as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz-Uzbek dispute regarding the construction of a dam over Naryn River, and changes in perception and definition of "terrorism" and "terrorist group" becoming more blurry and sensitive. Within the CSTO, the main problem lies in the overwhelming preponderance of Russia in front of the rest of the member states (Wang and Kong, 2019: 75).

(c) A more comprehensive policy to counterterrorism should be developed, including different dimensions (legal, political, punitive, etc.) and a better system for the inter-departmental exchange of information should be constructed. It should be developed not only inside Russian Federation but also in the regional organizations.

(d) Tighter cooperation should be developed between CSTO and OSC to fight radicalization in the Central Asian region. It is important to not only rely on the use of armed forces to fight extremism and terrorism but also include policies for socio-economic development to prevent it. The use of armed force as the main element of counterterrorism will only stop the rise of terrorism within Russian borders but not eradicate it in its “soft underbelly”. Therefore, a more comprehensive approach should be developed. The CSTO and OSC can become a useful tool for eradication of terrorism causes; establishing a joint coordination and cooperation framework, both organizations can be considered as complementary.

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