

Mónica Román González, Paula M. Núñez-Guerra y Manuel Torres Lajo

The Crocus City Hall Attack Two Years On: Geopolitical Framing in Russian Discourse

Abstract

For decades, Jihadist terrorism has struck Russia, largely stemming from military interventions in the North Caucasus, Afghanistan, and Syria. The 22 March 2024 ISIS-K attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall, the deadliest since Beslan's siege, resulted in almost 150 fatalities. Marking the tragedy's second anniversary, this article analyses the "geopoliticisation" of the official Russian narrative. Despite the ISIS-K claim of responsibility, the Kremlin instrumentalised the event to implicate Ukraine and its Western allies. Through qualitative content analysis, the research identifies the construction of these confrontational frameworks. The findings show that the Kremlin redefines domestic crises to integrate them into pre-existing international conflicts, consolidating an external existential threat to legitimise its current geopolitical stance.

Keywords: Terrorism, geopolitics, Russia, ISIS-K, narrative

Mónica Román González, Bachelor in International Relations and Master in International Politics. PhD candidate at Complutense University of Madrid.

Paula M. Núñez-Guerra, Bachelor in Journalism and Master in International Relations and Communication. PhD candidate at Complutense University of Madrid.

Manuel Torres Lajo, Bachelor in Economics and Master in Science. PhD candidate at Complutense University of Madrid.

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1. Introduction

On 22 March 2024, Russia suffered its worst terrorist attack since the 2004 Beslan school siege. Armed attackers linked to the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) stormed Moscow's Crocus City Hall, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians. Now, two years after the massacre, the legal process has concluded. On 17 February 2026, the Russian General Prosecutor's Office requested life imprisonment for 15 of the 19 defendants, including the four primary suspects of Tajik nationality¹. The trial, held largely behind closed doors since August 2025, concluded in March 2026 with the conviction of all 19 defendants, including life imprisonment for the four primary perpetrators and eleven of their accomplices.

However, this attack was not an isolated security failure. While the Russian Federation has long been a target for Islamist groups, their activities have resurfaced as they exploit vulnerabilities resulting from the conflict in Ukraine. A clear example of this resurgent threat is the FSB operation in Karabulak, Ingushetia, just days before the Moscow attack (National Antiterrorism Committee, 2024). Despite ISIS-K claiming responsibility and the evidence of this jihadist resurgence, the Russian Investigative Committee officially concluded the assault was planned "in the interests of the Ukrainian leadership".

Rather than recognising these internal security failures, the Kremlin instrumentalised the tragedy to demonise Kyiv and reinforce its narrative of an existential threat from "unfriendly" foreign powers. This strategy aligns with the Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation (2016), which states that "the information sphere has a crucial role to play in implementing strategic national priorities". Consequently, since the early 2000s, Russian strategic documents like National Security Strategies and Military Doctrines have treated information as a weapon linked to national interests. For instance, the Russian Military Doctrine (2014) connects the "information space" directly to military threats and political purposes.

As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss (2014:12) explain, Moscow's weaponisation of information stems from a military establishment that believes "Russia is itself under mass information and influence attack from the West". This explains the Kremlin's efforts to strengthen state media and social media tools, viewed as "gamechangers" in informational warfare (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014:17). This *modus operandi* has been consistent across the Chechen Wars (1994-2009), the invasion of Georgia (2008), and the war in Ukraine since 2014.

Currently, the full-scale war against Ukraine has made this weaponisation essential, as Moscow frames the conflict as an existential struggle. Despite a 40-year history of Islamic terrorism in the country, the Crocus City Hall attack serves as a new vehicle for these narratives. By suggesting

1 The four main suspects were identified as Dalerdzhon Mirzoyev, Saidakrami Rachabalizoda, Shamsidin Fariduni, and Mukhammadsobir Fayzov, aged between 19 and 32. According to investigative reports, they were recruited via a Telegram and had been working in Russia in low-skilled jobs (Baker & Greenall, 2024)

Western complicity, the Kremlin constructs a message for both local and foreign audiences to shift public opinion. This aligns with Brzezinski's (1994:80) warning that "with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire". This article analyses the official Russian narrative regarding the Crocus attack through the lens of these defining geopolitical factors.

2. Methodology

The research question asks how geopolitical notions appeared in the Russian official narrative regarding the ISIS-K terrorist attack at Moscow's Crocus City Hall in March 2024. The central hypothesis of the research is that geopolitics played a leading role in the elaboration and development of the mentioned narrative on such terrorist crime.

Accordingly, the main goal of this research is to expose the narrative disseminated by the Government of the Russian Federation about the terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall and analyse it in geopolitical terms. Simultaneously, the following secondary objectives are framed: (1) establish a contextual framework about the Crocus City Hall attack to explain the role of jihadist terrorism in Russia; (2) describe the evolution of the Russian official narrative about the terrorist attack; (3) analyse the geopolitical aspect of the Russian official narrative about the attack.

To address the research question, this study employed qualitative methods using archival and internet-based data. The analysis focused on primary and secondary sources, including official government documents, local media, and social media. Governmental data comprised policy statements and speech transcripts from official websites, such as those of the President, the Government, and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation. Additionally, media information was gathered from major national agencies like TASS, alongside social media content from relevant platforms like Telegram and X.

To analyse the gathered data, the study employed qualitative content analysis, defined as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2004:18). Guided by the research aim, this method was applied to the Russian official narrative and media coverage of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow on 22 March 2024. The analysis identified the Shatterbelt theory and subsequent geopolitical narratives as the most prominent elements in the Russian discourse, which will be explored in the following sections.

3. The Crocus City Hall Attack (I): Jihadist Terrorism and ISIS-K in Russia

The jihadist threat in Russia and ISIS-K's role dates back to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. As David Charles Rapoport (2004:61-65) explains, this period launched the "fourth wave" of "religious terrorism". The global mobilisation of Muslim fighters against the USSR contributed to the 1989 Soviet defeat, after which radicalisation evolved into terrorism (Rapoport, 2004). Consequently, jihad became a worldview for followers, transforming Afghanistan into a training ground and sanctuary for Al Qaeda prior to the 9/11 attacks (Laborie, 2014:137).

Afghanistan's current complexity stems from foreign terrorist groups like Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan and ISIS-K. The latter, responsible for the Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow in 2024, is a regional branch of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) that is primarily active in South-Central Asia. It targets schools, mosques, markets, and hospitals unpredictably (Requena, 2023:24-28). The terrorist group has been operating in Afghanistan since its foundation in 2015 with the main objective of defeating the Taliban. Rivalry intensified following the 2020 Doha Agreements, as ISIS-K accused the Taliban of abandoning global jihad (Calvillo, 2023:16-17).

This friction explains the surge in attacks since 15 August 2021, when the Taliban took power following the collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces. While 2022 saw the highest volume of incidents, the group has sustained its campaign through 2025 with lower-cost but high-impact tactics (United Nations Security Council, 2025:15-17). To sustain these operations, ISIS-K comprises not only Afghan militants disaffected with the Taliban, but also members from Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, and various Central Asian countries (Calvillo, 2023:17).

While Afghanistan remains its primary target, the group operates within the historical "Greater Khorasan", illustrated in Figure 1. Furthermore, ISIS-K maintains access to the black market, enabling the acquisition of small arms, light weapons, and advanced equipment, such as night vision goggles and fertilisers for explosive devices (Requena, 2023:29).

Figure 1. Map of Greater Khorasan Region

Source: RightQuark (2024)

Russia is a persistent target for ISIS-K due to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, historical repression of Muslim communities particularly in the North Caucasus, and Putin's support for Bashar Al-Assad and the Taliban. Ideologically, ISIS-K's roots of hostility date back to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's fight against the USSR in the 1980s, now particularly rooted in the Khorasan branch (Smith et al., 2024).

Since Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria, ISIS has labelled Moscow the leader of the "Crusader East", while framing Russian and Taliban interests as intertwined since 2021. These factors, alongside Kremlin measures against domestic Muslim communities, prompt ISIS and ISIS-K to urge attacks against Russia. Consequently, Daesh propaganda portrays Putin as a primary oppressor of Muslims. As Smith, Webber, and Clarke (2024) note, ISIS-K "has rolled out Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek media wings to extend its reach and influence throughout the region and within Central Asian diaspora communities".

The predominance of Tajik nationals among the Crocus City Hall attackers reflects a recurring operational pattern in which ISIS-K leverages Central Asian networks to project violence beyond the Khorasan theatre. This approach is based on the systematic targeting of Central Asian populations, particularly Tajik and Uzbek nationals, to build transnational militant networks and expand the organisation's strategic horizon². Crucially, this model operates across multiple layers,

² Analysts have also identified the Crocus City Hall attack as a warning for Western Europe, suggesting a new phase in ISIS-K's external operations (Iguallada, 2024).

including regional populations, returnees from Syria and Iraq, and migrant diasporas, especially in Russia (Lemon et al., 2018:22-26). It is further sustained through multilingual propaganda and digital outreach (Wahlang, 2023:7).

4. The Crocus City Hall Attack (II): Chronology of Russian narrative

Since adopting its first Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation (2000), Russia has weaponised information for political ends. The Islamist attack on Crocus City Hall not only undermined security guarantees but contradicted the Kremlin's narrative, which portrays Ukraine as a "terrorist state" while framing the conflict as an existential war for Russia against "the collective West". Moscow used the attack to launch a disinformation campaign, baselessly blaming Kyiv and Western nations to further its strategic interests.

Days before the attack, US intelligence and several Western embassies warned Russian authorities and their citizens of an imminent terrorist threat (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Russia, 2024; Khimiak, 2024). When no immediate strike followed, Vladimir Putin (2024a) dismissed these warnings as provocations designed to destabilise Russia before the presidential election:

At one time, the West actively used all sorts of cross-border radical terrorist groups to its advantage, including encouraging their aggression against Russia [...] I would also like to recall the recent provocative statements by a number of official Western structures regarding potential terrorist attacks in Russia. All these actions resemble outright blackmail and the intention to intimidate and destabilise our society. You are well aware of them, so I will not go into details at this point.

On 22 March, post-attack uncertainty triggered the spread of pro-Russian disinformation. Journalist Enzo Panizio (2024) noted these unfounded accusations primarily targeted Ukraine. Viral examples included: (1) a Belarusian truck misidentified as Ukrainian; (2) a photoshopped Ukrainian ID purportedly belonging to a perpetrator; and (3) a deepfake of the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov, claiming responsibility. This video circulated on social media and Kremlin-controlled channels like NTV (Robinson et al., 2024).

Despite being debunked, Moscow persisted in blaming Kyiv. After four suspects were arrested in Bryansk, Vladimir Putin (2024b) said in his address to the nation the day after the attack that the terrorists "attempted to escape and were heading towards Ukraine, where, according to preliminary information, a window was prepared for them on the Ukrainian side to cross the state border". However, the Russian narrative suffered a further setback when ISIS-K claimed responsibility, releasing bodycam footage via the ISIS-linked Amaq News Agency (Robinson et al., 2024).

Although the first reaction of foremost Russian propagandists such as Margarita Simonyan (2024) was to doubt the veracity of its content on popular social media platforms like X, Vladimir Putin (2024c) publicly recognised the group as the perpetrators on 25 March. This initiated a new phase in Moscow's strategy: accusing Ukraine of masterminding the attack:

We know that the crime was perpetrated by radical Islamists. The Islamic World itself has been fighting this ideology for centuries. But we are also seeing how the United States is using different channels to try and convince its satellites and other countries of the world that, according to its intelligence, there is supposedly no sign of Kyiv's involvement in the Moscow terrorist attack, that the deadly terrorist attack was perpetrated by followers of Islam, members of ISIS, an organisation banned in Russia. We know whose hands were used to commit this atrocity against Russia and its people. We want to know who ordered it.

Russian authorities have since maintained this narrative. FSB Director, Alexander Bortnikov, exemplified this, claiming radical Islamists prepared the attack with Western facilitation and a "Ukrainian trace" (Zarubin Reporter, 2024). However, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (2024) partially contradicted this, telling BELTA that the terrorists first failed to flee across the Belarusian border.

Even though the statements of Putin's counterpart contradicted Russian claims of the existence of an escape window ready on the Ukrainian side to help the terrorists, Moscow remained firm in its position. At the 19th Meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Security Council Secretaries, Nikolai Patrushev pointed out that "the perpetrators of this mass shooting and also their accomplices were arrested upon their attempt to cross the Russian state border where the Ukrainian side prepared a window for their escape". Patrushev further held Ukraine and the West responsible for the attack:

They are trying to impose it on us that the terrorist act was committed not by the Kyiv regime but by supporters of the radical Islamic ideology, possibly, by members of the Afghan branch of ISIL [...] However, it is far more important to promptly establish who is the mastermind and the sponsor of this horrific crime. Its traces lead to Ukrainian intelligence services. However, everyone is well aware that the Kyiv regime is not independent and is fully controlled by the United States. It has to be borne in mind that ISIL and Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups were created by Washington (TASS, 2024)

Subsequently, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation carried out an investigation focused on the funding of terrorist activities by the US and NATO. According to the final investigation report, a criminal case was opened against these countries for terrorist financing offences in accordance with Article 205.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Also, the investigators put the spotlight on Burisma Holdings, a Ukrainian oil and gas company which is well

known for being closely linked to Hunter Biden and the allegations of corruption levelled against Joe Biden's son (Sledstvennyy Komitet RF, 2024).

In 2025, the Russian Investigative Committee finalised its criminal proceedings against 19 individuals implicated in the attack. According to investigators, although the perpetrators were identified as members or affiliates of the proscribed "Vilayat Khorasan" organisation, the killing was orchestrated "to serve the interests of the Ukrainian leadership with the intent of destabilising Russia's internal political situation". The investigation also established that preparations for the assault began months in advance, involving suspects who "received training abroad", with weapons being transported from Dagestan to the Moscow region immediately prior to the attack. Following the massacre, the perpetrators were apprehended in the Bryansk region whilst attempting to allegedly flee towards the Ukrainian border (Sledstvennyy Komitet RF, 2025).

This prosecutorial narrative was subsequently judicially reinforced. In March 2026, the Second Western District Military Court convicted all 19 defendants in the case, imposing sentences ranging from 19 years and 11 months to life imprisonment. The four direct perpetrators received life sentences and financial penalties, while eleven accomplices were likewise sentenced to life imprisonment. Crucially for the broader political framing, both the Investigative Committee and the Prosecutor General's Office reiterated after the verdict that the attack had been planned and carried out "in the interests of the current Ukrainian leadership" and with the aim of destabilising Russia, while simultaneously linking the perpetrators to ISIS-K (TASS, 2026).

Following the conclusion of the trial, the Russian narrative continued to follow two main tracks: (1) Ukraine was behind the attack with Western cover, and (2) ISIS-K acted in partnership with Kyiv using Western funding. Despite this evolving rhetoric, actions on the ground suggested the Islamist connection was taken seriously. As the suspects were Tajik citizens, Moscow paired its anti-Western strategy with a large-scale anti-migrant crackdown. Vladimir Putin (2024d) stated that illegal migration fosters extremism and that "internal and external threats are often interconnected today [...] aimed at containing Russia and undermining its sovereignty". Consequently, while using the attack to suggest an international conspiracy, authorities launched an extensive campaign against Central Asian labour migrants to bolster the security apparatus's image of effectiveness (Rogov et al., 2024:5-8).

5. Geopolitical Element in the Russian narrative

Following the official Russian narrative on the Crocus City Hall attack, two geopolitical elements emerge: the shatterbelt theory and geopolitical narratives from the aftermath.

5.1. *Ukraine and Central Asia as a shatterbelt*

Samuel Cohen defined a “shatterbelt” as a “geographic area subject to internal divisions and major power competition” (Cohen, 1973; Khan & Begum, 2022:296). Recent iterations of the term now include non-state actors. Phil Kelly (1986:164) identified a two-tiered structure in these territories: a local layer “characterised by political turmoil, social and economic depression and fragmentation, and strategic minerals and passageways”, and an international one where great powers compete for the territory.

Several parts of the world have been considered as shatterbelts, including the Middle East (Simons, 2023b:282), Central and Eastern Europe (Cohen, 2005:1-22), and Southeast Asia. These are all territories in which several religious and ethnic nationalities live, and where natural resources such as oil, gas, or fertile grounds could be found. When these characteristics coincide in an area, there are grounds for conflict to happen. The Middle East, for example, is a territory where the United States, Russia, China and even Iran have interests (Simons, 2023b:282), arguably making it the prime example of a present shatterbelt, at least until the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

5.1.1. A brief geopolitical view of the Russia-Ukraine war

The Russian narrative blames Ukraine and the West for the Crocus City Hall attack as part of its full-scale war. Starting in 2014 after the Euromaidan and the ouster of President Viktor Yanukovich (Kutcher, 2024), Moscow viewed these events as a pro-Western shift contrary to its interests (Simons, 2023b:263). The Russian invasion’s rationale lies in historical roots, as Moscow considers Ukraine an inseparable part of its history, dating to the Kyivan Rus (Sánchez Herráez, 2015:17-19; Kutcher, 2024; Plokhly, 2021). Francisco Ruiz González (2012:8) notes the Tsarist saying, “Petersburg is the head, Moscow the heart, and Kyiv the soul of Russia”, highlighting Ukraine’s importance in the Russian collective imagination.

Consequently, Ukraine’s rapprochement with the West and a potential NATO membership concerns the Russian regime (Manboah-Rockson et al., 2024:23). Thus, Ukraine fits the shatterbelt definition: despite its sovereignty, Russia and Western powers compete “for footholds” in a resource-rich territory (Kelly, 1986:164; Simons, 2023b:281). Following Mackinder’s (1919) Heartland thesis, controlling Ukraine is essential for Putin’s expansionist aims to increase manpower and resources (Beal, 2023:9). Annexing Crimea provided a base to the Donbas, and controlling Ukraine’s Black Sea shore would threaten NATO’s southern flank (Kutcher, 2024).

This reticence about any Ukrainian rapprochement with NATO is also analogous to how the USSR envisioned the country during World War II: a territory that Germany could not control or defend because it should be controlled by them, the USSR (Plokhly, 2021:261; Ortiz Delgado, 2024:322). In

that line, it is possible to argue that the territory of today's Ukraine has played a crucial geopolitical role for centuries. Serhii Plokhy (2021) describes Ukraine as a "wall" protecting Europe from Eastern invasions, explaining EU support (Ortiz Delgado, 2024:319). European nations, especially Poland and the Baltic states, fear a domino effect where a fallen Ukraine leads to Russian attacks on them (Rainsford & Kirby, 2024).

5.1.2. A brief geopolitical view of Russia on the former Central Asian Soviet Republics and Afghanistan

The territories of the five former Central Asian Soviet Republics (namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) could also be considered a shatterbelt, following the definition provided in the previous section. These five countries share similar cultures and a whole range of issues, particularly of economic and security nature. Furthermore, given their past as part of the USSR, the Russian Federation considers them as part of its area of influence (Sánchez Herráez, 2015:66) and consequently Moscow is usually recognised as a "hard security guarantees" provider in the region (Khan & Begum, 2022:297). Historically, Russia remains a major destination for these citizens. As such, it is estimated that around 1 million Tajiks currently live in Russia (Putz, 2024).

Located south to those five former USSR territories, Afghanistan is another country that shares several cultural aspects with them, including Islam as their religion. Given its strategic position that links Central and South Asia, the Middle East and Western China, it has long been considered a key territory for global powers (Khan & Begum, 2022:295). Hence, it can also be considered a shatterbelt. For instance, in 1979 during the Cold War, the USSR invaded Afghanistan, arguably in line with the Brezhnev doctrine which stated that no socialist country will be allowed by Moscow to move to capitalism (Sánchez Herráez, 2015:53; Tripathi, 1992:10-11).

The goal was to avoid having an Afghan government contrary to their interests. The war was a disaster and, ten years after, they had to withdraw. Among the consequences of the Soviet invasion was the exacerbation of the cultural problem, both in Afghanistan and in the Central Asian Soviet territories (Reuveny & Prakash, 1999:700-704). Furthermore, the United States supported the *Mujahidin*, who were fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan to contain the USSR advancements (Brown, 2013:70-71). According to Julie Lowenstein (2016:13), this help paved the way for global jihad groups, such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and, later, the Islamic State.

5.2. *Geopolitical Narratives in the aftermath of the attack*

A geopolitical narrative attempts to put across a message through clear arguments that could easily, almost visually, resonate with an intended target population in such a way that it can mobilise them (Postel-Vinay, 2005). While originally focused on nations, these narratives now include non-state actors, such as ISIS-K, whose interests often diverge from traditional states (Simons, 2023a:349). For example, ISIS-K pursues objectives distinct from the countries it attacks.

No geopolitical narrative is unitary: it has different levels and sublevels that highlight a different attribute that is consistent with the geopolitical interests aimed at a particular group (Cap, 2023:134). What and how something will be said plays a crucial role in the effort of controlling the narrative (Simons, 2023a:247-249), as stated by Freedman, Hoogensen and Tahinjanahary (2021) when describing hybrid threats such as the ones being used in the Ukrainian conflict (Celso, 2018:99-101). For instance, Russia utilises Telegram, Russia Today, and allied governments to disseminate its message. Key terms include “special military operation” to avoid the word “war”, “denazification” and “demilitarisation” to portray the Ukrainian government as a Nazi regime, and “Russophobia” (Kutcher, 2024; Montero Moncada et al., 2023:209; Simons, 2023a:269).

Piotr Cap (2023: 135-137) identifies two frameworks: Global Conflict Reality (GCR) and Local Conflict Reality (LCR). Arguably the first kind of narrative, GCR, is used mostly by Ukraine given their interest in framing the war as a “black-or-white” conflict, full of “alternative futures”, in which creating the idea of proximity of the conflict to the target audience (i.e. NATO, other Western countries) is key. This narrative warns that failing to support Ukraine would have dire consequences for the democratic world.

Contrariwise, LCR, is the most relevant for the analysis of this article, given that it is the one used by the Russian Federation. An LCR narrative allows to explain and analyse the different approaches that country takes depending on who is the intended target population of its narrative, while keeping the main conductor line, which is the Russia-Ukraine war. Unlike GCR, the Kremlin frames the conflict as local, denying NATO a ground to intervene. Messaging varies by audience: domestic communications focus on the context of war, while international messages differ. For the West, Russia aims to erode support for Ukraine by mentioning potential terrorist attacks, while for the Global South, it portrays the West as returning to imperialism (Cap, 2023:140-142).

These layers can be seen in the Russian responses in the aftermath of the attack. The Kremlin’s LCR narrative focused on three points: blaming Ukraine and the West, dismissing opposition as Russophobia, and highlighting ethnic minorities. Each point targeted a specific audience through various adapted versions.

5.2.1. Ukraine and the West

Previous sections have highlighted the way Russian authorities have repeatedly put the blame on Ukraine and Western countries in the aftermath of the 2024 terrorist attack, a strategy persistent since the invasion's start through Kremlin-backed fake news. This aims to cast doubt on events in Ukraine and Russia, eroding Western support (Cap, 2023:141) while bolstering domestic backing for Putin's imperialist regime (Manboah-Rockson et al., 2024:19).

Despite dismissing Western warnings before the Crocus City Hall attack, the Kremlin later accused Western intelligence of withholding information and blackmailing Russia (Bacon, 2024; Khimiak, 2024). This reinforces the perceived existential threat to local and international audiences. Putin directly accused Ukraine of facilitating the terrorists' escape (Putin, 2024b). Aligned with the LCR framework, other actors amplify this narrative (Cap, 2023:141), in Russia's case through viral fake news on Telegram (Sussex, 2024).

Although ISIS-K claimed responsibility with compelling evidence, Russia continued blaming Ukraine and the West (Ahmadzai, 2024; Sussex, 2024). Patrushev, Bortnikov, and Lukashenko all accused Ukraine of financing or aiding the terrorists. While these discourses targeted the Russian public, the Kremlin linked the attack to American support for the Mujahidin in Afghanistan to influence Western audiences. Putin (2024c) insinuated U.S. involvement in destabilising Russia, while Patrushev accused the Americans of creating ISIS (TASS, 2024). This narrative resonates in the Global South (Cap, 2023:141), fostering support for a Russian-backed resolution to the war. Involving the Biden family via Burisma Holdings exemplifies an LCR narrative targeting the 2024 U.S. election (Stoll, 2024).

Locally, the Russian Investigative Committee probed NATO officials for "terrorism financing" to solidify domestic backing for the "special military operation". Sociologist Elena Koneva (2024a; 2024b) concludes, based on independent surveys, that these efforts were successful in the attack's aftermath.

5.2.2. Russophobia

Closely linked to the previous point is the concept of Russophobia. Although the origins of this concept date back to the 19th century, "the Russophobia card" has been increasingly used by the Kremlin since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Simultaneously, Konstantin Pakhalyuk (2024) adds that "after February 24th, 2022, the definition of Russophobia blossomed to include everyone who speaks out against Russian aggression in any way" and, simultaneously, "it created the narrative that Russians are criticised for who they are, not what they do". In the Strategy for Countering Extremism in the Russian Federation (2024), the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs defined Russophobia as:

An unfriendly, biased, hostile attitude towards Russian citizens, towards the Russian language and culture, expressed, among other things, in aggressive sentiments and actions on the part of individual representatives and political forces, as well as discriminatory actions on the part of the authorities of states unfriendly to Russia.

This manifests through various Western policies, which the Kremlin frames as an “official Western ideology” (Kutcher, 2024). Moscow labels all dissenting opinions, especially concerns over Russian expansion, as “Russophobia”. On 27 March 2024, Maria Zakharova blamed the West for not cooperating in anti-terrorist efforts on this perceived prejudice:

The collective West –guided by its own selfish considerations, driven into a dead end by its unrestrained Russophobia and too busy trying to preserve its slipping geopolitical dominance– has in fact distanced itself from any real and constructive international antiterrorist cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024)

Through the LCR narrative, Russia presents itself to international audiences as a victim of Western destabilisation. Scholars have labelled this recurring strategy “imperial innocence” (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022). However, this stance could undermine counterterrorism intelligence coordination, creating opportunities for ISIS and its affiliates to expand and attack (Ahmadzai, 2024; Bacon, 2024; Taneja, 2024). This is related to the third key point: the ethnic minorities.

5.2.3. Ethnic minorities

Muslims, primarily of Caucasian or Central Asian origin, are Russia’s fastest-growing minority following post-Soviet migration (Simons et al., 2023:4-5; Berman, 2023). Despite their growth, they are often treated as second-class citizens, continuing a USSR legacy (Kutcher, 2024). Notably, they are disproportionately conscripted for the Ukraine war, frequently serving as “cannon fodder” (Berman, 2023).

This historical context explains why Caucasian and Central Asian minorities were quickly blamed for the Crocus City Hall attack. Fake news alleged they were trying to destroy Russia through “Islamisation” (Khimiak, 2024). The aftermath saw a surge in anti-immigrant sentiment, increased police controls, and public harassment, particularly towards Tajiks (Stuart & Tesfaye, 2024). By identifying four Tajiks as main suspects, the government fuelled further violence, creating a local narrative that poses significant internal security risks (Sussex, 2024).

6. Conclusions

The 2024 Crocus City Hall attack underscores ISIS-K's growth and Russia's vulnerability to Islamist fundamentalism. While this has been a threat since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine has increased Russia's permeability to such risks. To maintain its "special military operation" narrative, the Kremlin incriminated Ukraine and the West despite proven ISIS-K responsibility. Geopolitical narratives played a key role in how Russia constructed and maintained its official account of the attacks. By framing its response as LCR, it is feasible to understand the different layers of this narrative.

For the Russian government, blaming external actors mattered more than admitting it ignored warnings, as doing so would damage its internal perception. By blaming Ukraine and the West, the regime pursued two related goals. The first targeted the domestic audience to increase support for actions in Ukrainian territory. Vladimir Putin's dismissal of early Western warnings as "destabilisation" is central to this framing; it reassures the public that Russia faces an existential threat from foreign agents, be it Ukraine, NATO, or the West. Thus, information from these sources was dismissed as having ulterior motives.

Post-attack, the LCR narrative merged ISIS-K with the Western threat. Putin and Patrushev highlighted ISIS-K's outlaw status to imply the attack served their usual enemies. By labelling Western criticism as "Russophobia", the regime deflected blame for its negligence and prompted local audiences to link terrorists with Western interests. To reinforce this, they opened a criminal case against NATO for "terrorist financing", signalling opposition to losing its sphere of influence.

In conclusion, the Kremlin's narrative was partially successful in gaining domestic support. The idea of Western responsibility penetrated Russian society, avoiding self-criticism while targeting ethnic minorities like Tajiks. Internationally, the narrative's success is harder to determine, though posing as a victim of Western encirclement resonated in some Global South countries.

However, the future internal security threat remains significant. Targeting ethnic minorities from Central Asia to prime public opinion risks exacerbating nationality conflicts present since Soviet times. These migrants may leave Russia, causing economic fallout and intensifying long-standing tensions within the former Soviet territories.

This research paves the way for future lines of inquiry into ISIS-K as a significant threat to international security, particularly through an analysis of its recruitment mechanisms and the processes underpinning its geographical expansion. Furthermore, it contributes to future research on Russian disinformation beyond the Ukrainian context.

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