**Islamic State recruiters are coming for Russia’s best and brightest**

KYIV, Ukraine — When a female Moscow university student disappeared in May and turned up a week later on the Turkish-Syrian border, with the apparent goal of joining the Islamic State, Russian officials realized they had a new problem.

International coalition forces continue their year-old military strikes against IS, and Russia has assured the world of its commitment to the fight. But it’s also grappling with how to handle the threat increasingly close to home.

Estimates vary, but the Foreign Ministry [says](http://tass.ru/en/russia/806666) as many as 2,200 Russian nationals are already fighting alongside IS and other insurgents in Syria and Iraq. Many of them are from Russia’s troubled and predominantly Muslim North Caucasus region.

If true, that's one big, alarming figure: It's at least half the number of those who've [fled European Union](http://www.globalpost.com/article/6585935/2015/06/17/eu-anti-terror-chief-very-young-europeans-joining) countries for the same purpose, and way more than the [200 Americans](http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/247256-more-than-200-americans-tried-to-fight-for-isis-fbi-says) who've done so.

IS recruiting efforts aren’t just directed at the North Caucasus, an area long plagued by extremist violence, officials say. The group is also taking aim at educated young people, especially women, in other Russian regions.

Russia's hoping to tackle the problem with new measures. Next month, the Civic Chamber, a government oversight body, will [launch a hotline](http://www.newsru.com/russia/22jul2015/hotline.html) for families who fear their loved ones might be caught up with IS recruiters.

Those fears grow as Russian media takes greater interest.

The Moscow State University student who [made national headlines](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/moscow-student-who-hoped-to-join-isis-returning-to-russia-thursday/523434.html) after her capture was reportedly busted with around a dozen other Russian citizens, several of them young women, making the same journey.

Then, over the next month, came news of at least two other teenage female students from Moscow who had run away from home with alleged plans to join IS.

After her initial disappearance, some media reports focused on how the quiet and studious Varvara Karaulova, who was learning Arabic and studying Islam, could have fallen prey to recruiters.

Officials are hoping to deal with that, too: They’re planning to introduce psychology courses in schools and universities aimed at desensitizing young Russians to the power of Islamist extremist propaganda, according to the Moskovsky Komsomolets newspaper.

“We all know how to fight the flu, so why do we still not have knowledge about mental hygiene?” Yuri Zinchenko, the dean of Moscow State University’s psychology department, told the paper this week.

The Investigative Committee on Thursday said it would [not open a criminal case](http://www.rferl.org/content/islamic-state-russia-karaulova/27149176.html) against Karaulova. In [other cases](https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/07/24/jihadi-brides-isil-charities-and-online-propaganda), officials have pressed charges against some women who’ve stayed in IS territory. Earlier this year, Russia’s Supreme Court said [dozens of investigations](http://www.rferl.org/content/russian-fighting-with-islamic-state-investigated/26822218.html) were underway against Russians fighting for the group.

Despite these steps, the Islamic State — known for its sleek and effective information campaigns — already appears several steps ahead. Observers say it’s increasing its efforts at disseminating Russian-language propaganda through an unofficial media wing.

Last month, the group announced the establishment of a province (or “wilayat”) in the North Caucasus, where authorities for years have struggled to suppress their own Islamist insurgency.

Some local rebels have already reportedly sworn allegiance to IS, though [analysts believe](http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/10/isis-comes-to-russia.html) that won’t necessarily change the fundamental dynamic of the movement there, which has long been loosely structured, and focused mostly on attacks within the region.

Still, the North Caucasus’ economic depression, rampant corruption and heavy-handed security forces have helped galvanize local discontent and contributed to low quality of life, according to a new report by the International Crisis Group. That’s fueled radicalism and created fertile ground for recruitment.

Some officials, like Ramzan Kadyrov, the [iron-fisted ruler of Chechnya](http://www.globalpost.com/article/6565019/2015/05/29/kadyrov-russia-chechen), have taken a tough stance against potential IS recruits. On Wednesday, [he proposed](http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=12197) that Russia strip the citizenship of anyone found to have left for Syria or Iraq.

But some experts say those kinds of solutions are missing a key point: that Karaulova’s case is a sign recruiters are looking beyond the troubled North Caucasus, seeking educated Russians in cities like Moscow.

“On the internet you can find message boards where IS attracts qualified cadres,” Marianna Kochubei, a Russian anti-terrorism expert, [said](http://ria.ru/world/20150721/1140098016.html) at a Moscow news conference Tuesday. “They need linguists, translators.”

“Everyone remembers the story of Varvara Karaulova,” she added. “She knows five languages, [and] to say she was being prepared as a wife for a militant is absurd.”