



Kremlin's 'War on Terrorism' in the Northeastern Caucasus: How Chechnya Still 'Saves' Russia

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Abstract: This article discusses Russia's struggle to combat disintegration in the Northeastern Caucasus—one of the country's most turbulent regions in terms of religious extremism, criminal violence, and radically different social processes—in light of its politics in Chechnya. With the beginning of the Second Chechen War (August 1999) and a series of dubious terrorist attacks in Russia in September 1999, Vladimir Putin rose to power, displaying an uncompromising stance against terrorism and post-Soviet fragmentation. The so-called counterterrorism operation in Chechnya officially ended in the spring of 2009. However, the power structures responsible for the crackdown on terrorists have not been disbanded to this day. Ramzan Kadyrov's effort to strengthen security measures in Chechnya starting in 2022 might be linked to the war in Ukraine. This article aims to examine the Chechens' involvement in the war against Ukraine and to reassess the Moscow-Grozny relationship in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. It highlights Chechnya's increasing alienation from Russia while the political dialogue at the official level attempts to prove the opposite.

Keywords: North Caucasus, terrorism, extremism, Russo-Ukraine war, Chechnya.

Tyranny is better than anarchy.

Dmitry Furman¹

¹ Dmitry Furman, "International Terrorism and Moscow Politics," Wilson Center, March 27, 2003, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/international-terrorism-and-moscow-politics>.

Introduction

Along with Dagestan and Ingushetia, Chechnya is part of the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation. These three autonomous republics together form an entity that scholars call Russia's "Inner Abroad"² – a socio-political environment atypical of mainstream Russia. Despite its political status as a federal subject within the Russian Federation, the presence of religious extremism, criminal violence, and terrorism justifies scholars' tendency to perceive Chechnya as an additional post-Soviet frozen conflict in the Caucasus.³ Sociological studies on post-Soviet Russia show that most Russians do not regard the North Caucasus's inclusion in the Russian Federation as valuable.⁴ However, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the successful Olympic Games in Russia, the number of Russians who viewed the situation in the North Caucasus as "prosperous and calm" increased from 18 to 41 percent between January and March 2014. Moreover, an increasing number of respondents have expressed a positive outlook on future developments in the region.⁵

With the escalating conflict in Eastern Ukraine, by the end of June 2014, nearly half of the Russian population was convinced that the situation in the North Caucasus was peaceful.⁶ Understanding the complexity behind these perceptions requires examining the political dynamics that Vladimir Putin has developed with the leadership of Chechnya. Since rising to power, Putin has struggled

² Anna Matveeva, "The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia," in *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, ed. Robert Bruce Ware (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 253-282, 253, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501300752>; Ekaterina Sokirianskaia and Varvara Pakhomenko, "Chechnya: The Inner Abroad," International Crisis Group, Report No. 236, June 30, 2015, www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/russianorth-caucasus/chechnya-inner-abroad; Alexey Malashenko, "The North Caucasus: Russia's Internal Abroad?" *Carnegie Moscow Center Briefing* 13, no. 3 (November 2011), https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/MalashenkoBriefing_November2011_ENG_web.pdf.

³ Valeria Chelaru, "Dawns in Abkhazia Are Still Quiet: The Forgotten Roots of a Post-Soviet Frozen Conflict," *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai Historia* 67, no. 1 (2022): 81-99, <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbhist.2022.1.04>.

⁴ Sergey Markedonov, "Stop Feeding Whom? North Caucasus: From a Regional Problem to an All-Russian Plot," *Global Affairs RU*, no. 6 (November/December 2013), December 16, 2013, accessed March 29, 2023, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/hvatit-kormitkogo/>. – in Russian

⁵ "The Situation in the North Caucasus in the Perceptions of Russians," *Levada Tsentra*, April 14, 2014, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/2014/04/14/obstanovka-na-severnom-kavkaze-v-predstavleniyah-rossiyan-3/>. – in Russian

⁶ "Ukraine Convinced Russians of Peace in the Caucasus," *Levada Tsentra*, June 23, 2014, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://www.levada.ru/2014/06/23/ukraina-ubedila-rossiyan-v-spokojstvii-na-kavkaze/>. – in Russian

to combat fragmentation in the Caucasus while attempting to avoid becoming overly dependent on a client regime.⁷

Chechnya's case underlines one of the most alarming aspects of regions plagued by post-Soviet conflicts – their susceptibility to exploitation and instrumentalization by Moscow. As Lev Gudkov, head of the Levada Center, remarked, the positive reevaluation of the situation in the North Caucasus did not indicate its stabilization but reflected the “effect of shifting attention” due to a massive propaganda campaign against Ukraine. The Russian state's sustained propaganda has managed to obscure the “constant shootings, clashes, and terrorist attacks” in the North Caucasus.⁸

With the Kremlin's attempts to rein in the post-Soviet Chechen conflicts, Russian politics have become increasingly influenced by the situation in the North Caucasus. Scholars have noted that Chechnya's situation, along with other Caucasian conflicts, has transformed the Russian Federation “in ways that are both deeply fundamental and multifaceted.”⁹ From this perspective, Richard Sakwa explained Ramzan Kadyrov's brazen assertion that “Chechnya saved Russia.”¹⁰ When placed in the context of post-Soviet wars in the Caucasus—South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Chechnya, and Georgia—such a claim underscores the relationship between instability in the Caucasus and the remarkably “Caucasianized” way in which the Russian Federation has responded.¹¹ These interplays in Russia's current war in Ukraine bring to the fore a series of issues that this article attempts to clarify.

The history of the Caucasus is intrinsically linked to Russia's competitive eagerness to gain influence and expand its territory. Due to its exotic lands and people, Russian colonial rulers enjoyed affluence and saw an opportunity to introduce the natives to the civilization. It was a promising and flattering prospect

⁷ Richard Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics,” in *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, 175-202, 176, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501300752.ch-006>.

⁸ Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics.”

⁹ Robert Bruce Ware, “Conclusion: How Has the Caucasus Shaped Russia?” in *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, 283-326, 305, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781501300752.ch-010>.

¹⁰ In an interview with the Regnum News Agency in 2009, Ramzan Kadyrov declared that when Putin showed his trust in the Chechens, “Chechnya saved Russia.” The Chechen leader's assessment was made against the drawback of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 in which the Chechens fought against Tbilisi. Kadyrov also stressed his loyalty to Putin and Russia while pointing out that Georgia was “under the wing” of the United States. Mikheil Saakashvili's presence in Georgia as president of the country was seen as a threat to the Russian Federation's security. See: Hassan Abbas, “Kadyrov Calls Budanov a ‘Schizophrenic’ and ‘Murderer,’” *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 6, 2009, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://jamestown.org/program/kadyrov-calls-budanov-a-schizophrenic-and-murderer/>.

¹¹ Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics,” 175-201.

from which the subject peoples could benefit while simultaneously elevating the Russian empire to the level of its Western counterparts.¹²

History and geography worked hand in hand in shaping the multifaceted cultural landscape of the North Caucasus. It was the region's geographical position, coupled with Russia's ambition to expand its territory at the expense of rival empires, that gave the mountainous Caucasus its current traits. While geography determined the region's overwhelming multiethnicity, history contributed to the underdevelopment of the sociocultural and socioeconomic structures on which statehood relied.¹³ In areas with multiethnic societies, as scholars have shown,¹⁴ the role of political geography intermingles with ethnicity and can easily obscure the history of institutionalization and politicization.

Bordered by the Caspian Sea in the east and the Terek River in the west, Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia have been the core of mountain dwellers' resistance to Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and, more recently, the Russian Federation.¹⁵ Uprooted, disenfranchised, persecuted, and heavily traumatized during the Soviet period, the region's inhabitants grew increasingly alienated in the wake of the Soviet collapse. The Kremlin's tight grip on the region, in an attempt to prevent a domino effect across the disintegrating post-Soviet country, brought about flagrant side effects under the Putin administration.

This article reevaluates the Moscow-Grozny dynamics in the wake of Putin's campaign against fragmentation. It shows how the term "anti-terrorism" in Chechnya has become thoroughly abused, empowering Ramzan Kadyrov to despotically rule Chechnya for nearly 25 years. Moreover, it points out that, with the war against Ukraine, Chechnya's leadership has exploited the "terrorist threat" even more conspicuously. Eager to please the Russian president, Kadyrov supports Russia's war against Ukraine, and his regime has been involved in crimes against humanity alongside Russian military units. At home, the Chechen leader heavily relies on the anti-terrorism narrative to maintain his grip on power.

This article analyzes the intricate center-periphery relationship between Russia and Chechnya in the context of the war against Ukraine. Its main objective is to demonstrate Russia's deadlock in the Northeastern Caucasus and Putin's unwillingness to confront the issue. The article comprises three parts. The first examines the dramatic alterations that the populations of the Caucasus had to adapt to within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. It also highlights the

¹² Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 46.

¹³ Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁴ John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Jean Radvanyi, "The Caucasus in a Time of Conflict, Demographic Transition, and Economic Change," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 48, no. 2 (2007): 135-156, 135, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.48.2.135>.

¹⁵ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, 12.

region's socio-political void following the Soviet collapse, along with the radicalization of Islamic groups as a reaction to it. The second part explores how Vladimir Putin's counterterrorism strategies have led to political interdependence between Moscow and Chechnya. Finally, the third part addresses the evolution of the Kadyrov-Putin reciprocal dependence in the context of the war against Ukraine.

From Empire(s) to the Post-Soviet Chechen Conundrum: Wars, Traumas, and Identities

Until the Russian incursions in the early 1800s, the Caucasus was dominated by two Muslim powers: the Persian and Ottoman Empires. Islam became a mobilizing force in the context of the Russian invasion. Despite the Caucasians' eagerness to combat the Russian army and the difficulties of mountain warfare, the empire's new roads built into the valleys of Chechnya and Ingushetia sealed the fate of the mountain people.

When the Russian Empire disintegrated in 1917, the issue of the numerous ethnic groups had to be addressed in line with the country's new socio-political realities. The threat of national revendications among the newly emerging nations made Lenin realize the necessity of concessions. To reconcile the Bolshevik stance with national demands, administrative units were created along ethnic lines. Since complete decentralization would have destabilized the system, Lenin sought to build federal structures that were "national in form, yet socialist in content."¹⁶

In the context of the Russian Civil War (1917–1923), Chechnya joined the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) (1921), a short-lived political entity in the Northern Caucasus within the Russian SFSR, which included a cauldron of motley ethnic groups: Balkars, Kabardians, Karachays, Ingush, Ossetians, and Terek Cossacks. Soon, the Mountain ASSR began to disintegrate, leading to the formation of the Chechen Autonomous Oblast (AO), North Ossetian AO, and Ingush AO. In 1934, the Chechens and Ingush were united into the Checheno-Ingush AO, which was later elevated in status with the establishment of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR in December 1936.

State engineering in the Soviet Union was also linked to the participation, or non-participation, of ethnic groupings in the anti-Russian struggle.¹⁷ While the first discord between the Chechens and Ingush emerged during the Tsarist conquest, the mass deportations at the behest of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1944

¹⁶ Ian Bremmer, "Reassessing Soviet National Theory," in *Nation and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, ed. Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9–10.

¹⁷ Pavel Polyakov, *Not of Their Own Will ... History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (Moscow: O.G.I. Memorial, 2001). – in Russian; Vicken Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia's Troubled Frontier* (London: Hurst & Company, 2008).

provoked the deepest trauma in contemporary Chechen memory. Its role in the Caucasus's post-Soviet conflicts remains paramount.

Although neither Chechnya nor Georgia was occupied by the Germans during World War Two, the Chechens and Georgia's Meskhetian Turks were accused of collaborating with the Nazi army. Four ethnic groups in the North Caucasus—the Ingush, the Karachays, the Balkars, and the Chechens—were deported to Siberia or Central Asia to join their counterparts, such as the Volga Germans, Crimea Tatars, and the Kalmyks.¹⁸ Stalin's selective deportations, which officially assigned people to national groups, laid the foundation for national identities in the North Caucasus.¹⁹

When the Checheno-Ingush ASSR was restored, Prigorodny Rayon—a suburb of Vladikavkaz—was not included. The struggle to regain this territory erupted into mass violence in 1992 and escalated into an interethnic conflict between the Ingush and North Ossetians.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many former Muslim communities that had been organized into Soviet federal republics found themselves outside Russia's new borders. The North Caucasian Muslims displayed national sentiments in opposition to allegiance to the new Russian state. Most importantly, the emergence of radical Islamic movements posed a serious threat to stability, as these groups challenged Russia's authority in the region along religious rather than ethnic lines.²⁰ Chechnya turned into a nest of radical Wahhabis who promoted military *jihad* against local authorities and sought to establish an Islamic state in the North Caucasus. When the Chechens continued demanding independence, and the war with Moscow erupted in December 1994, a drastic domino effect threatened Russia's other territories.

A turning point in the relationship between the Soviet authorities and the Islamic faith occurred during Mikhail Gorbachev's administration. In the late 1980s, religious effervescence characterized all Muslim republics in the North Caucasus. Across the region, a series of private organizations began teaching Arabic, and foreign Islamic missionaries were allowed to preach and distribute Islamic literature. During the last two years of Soviet rule, under Chechen Communist Party leader Doku Zavgayev, two hundred mosques were built in Checheno-Ingushetia. By 1999, approximately four hundred mosques existed in Chechnya alone.

When the Soviet borders opened, the *hajj*—religious pilgrimages to the holy places of Mecca and Medina—enabled young Muslims of the North Caucasus to interact with the outside world and connect with the broader Islamic community (*umma*). Many North Caucasian youths went to study Islam at universities in the

¹⁸ Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia's Troubled Frontier*, 79.

¹⁹ Cheterian, *War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia's Troubled Frontier*.

²⁰ Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov, "Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization," in *The Fire Below: How the Caucasus Shaped Russia*, 51-94, 52, <https://doi.org/0.5040/9781501300752.ch-003>.

Middle East. These experiences proved to be a watershed moment, as they introduced the Caucasus's young Muslims to nontraditional forms of Islam, such as Salafism – an Islamic movement that advocates a return to the practices of the first generations of Muslims while rejecting external influences and doctrinal innovations. Over time, Islam and Salafism became increasingly intertwined.

Compared to other Caucasian societies, the Chechens proved particularly resistant to Sovietization. They managed to preserve traditional forms of local organization in key areas such as justice and law, loyalty and solidarity, and religion and identity, and they also resisted Soviet atheist campaigns. Islam was the main source of customary law (*adat*). Despite the official banishment of religion in the USSR, attachment to Islam remained intrinsically linked with Chechen cultural identity.²¹ Nevertheless, the Islamic theological principles and knowledge of its main tenets were often superficial, even among religious figures. This was largely due to Soviet atheist policies and the region's isolation from Muslim communities abroad.

Traditional Islam in the North Caucasus remained a blend of Islamic principles, local customs, and Sufi practices, having evolved together since Islam first arrived in the region. It closely resembled the form of Islam that predominated in the Caucasus prior to the tsarist and Soviet efforts to suppress Islamic culture.²² In 1995, Akhmet Kadyrov took office. A member of the *Qadiriyya tariqa*, he was a staunch opponent of Salafi and Wahhabi Islam in Chechnya.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the failure of Western liberal democracy led to an ideological crisis in the North Caucasus, particularly affecting younger generations. Islamic ideas offered them a "more powerful" alternative, integrating various elements and providing a sense of a cause they deemed worth dying for.²³ For most young people—but not only them—Salafism seemed to fill the social and moral void that engulfed the post-Soviet region. Salafism attracted followers not only due to its strict moral codes, concern for social justice, and egalitarian spirit but also because it provided an alternative to the "anachronistic" and "traditional" forms of Islam preached by an ill-prepared old clergy.

Chechnya's strong sense of self-reliance, loyalty to the clan, and resistance to Soviet institutionalization and culture contributed to the parallel existence of two normative systems.²⁴ The coexistence of strikingly different—and often mu-

²¹ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, 73-74.

²² Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, "Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization," 56.

²³ Matveeva, "The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia," 261.

²⁴ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, 74; Emil A. Souleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahhabism, and the Invasion of Dagestan," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no. 4 (December 2005): 48-71, http://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/meria/meria_dec05/Souleimanov.pdf.

tually exclusive—systems of norms and procedures was typical of all Soviet societies but particularly pronounced in Chechnya. In addition to the region's strong sense of sectarian solidarity, the Chechens were marginalized during the Soviet period in terms of opportunities, further embedding their self-reliance.

Since political resources were intrinsically linked to the political hierarchy imposed by the Soviet state, it was highly unlikely that the Chechens would enjoy promotions. As a result, the Chechen-Soviet elite formed slowly, while family solidarity and communities built around revenge and protection outweighed the state's strongly institutionalized networks. When the Soviet Union collapsed, it exposed the peculiarities of Chechnya: on the one hand, its characteristics enabled the Chechens to mount their strong resistance against Russia; on the other hand, their capacity for self-organization became a hindrance to building state structures. It is no surprise that, within the Soviet Union, Chechens also gained a reputation as the most successful group in organized crime.²⁵

Putin's "War on Terrorism"

When analyzing the two Russian-Chechen wars (1994–1996 and 1999–2009, respectively), Vladislav Dmitrievsky²⁶ pointed out the soaring level of brutality on both sides during the second conflict. Putin's ability to transform Russian anti-war public opinion into a pro-war sentiment played a crucial role.²⁷ His uncompromising stance following the Russian apartment bombings in September 1999²⁸ facilitated his political rise and gave social impetus to the war effort. Having understood the impact of information during the first Chechen war—when the conflict became visible to both Russian and international audiences—Putin imposed a blockade on information while skillfully using state propaganda

²⁵ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, 75.

²⁶ Stanislav Dmitrievsky is a human rights advocate and the former head of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, banned in Russia and later established in Finland. He is the author of the two volumes monograph *The International Tribunal for Chechnya*. In 2006, the court of Nizhny Novgorod accused Dmitrievsky of inciting racial, national, and social hatred for having published the call of Aslan Maskhadov and Akhmed Zakaev to peacefully resolve the Chechen conflict. He was sentenced to two years of suspended imprisonment. Actively engaged in both Russian wars in Chechnya, in 2006 Dmitrievsky was awarded the Amnesty International Prize for having practiced journalism in highly dangerous circumstances.

²⁷ Mayrbek Vachagaev, "Did the War Against Ukraine Start in Chechnya?" *Kavkaz Realii*, December 9, 2022, accessed on November 3, 2023, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/voy-na-protiv-ukrainy-nachalasj-v-chechne-/32167243.html>. – in Russian

²⁸ In September 1999, due to a series of apartment bombings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk, more than 300 people were killed in Russia. With more than 1000 people injured, an atmosphere of anxiety spread across the country. The explosions and the invasion of Dagestan gave way to the Second Chechen War.

against terrorism. Moreover, despite claiming to be fighting international terrorism, Russia was reluctant to internationalize the conflict.²⁹ Since the bombings in Russia played a major propaganda role,³⁰ Chechnya's social problems and the increasing number of kidnappings became easy targets for exploitation.

If the first war in Chechnya had been carried out with "white gloves," with any recorded or filmed material broadcasted on Russian television, similar attempts during the second war were condemned as the work of "enemies of the people" or "friends of the most inveterate Chechen thugs." The propaganda campaign launched at the end of 1999 shaped public perception of the war in line with Vladimir Putin's objectives. The shift in the country's narrative—"Russia, which was attacked," "Get up, huge country," and "Chechen terrorists"—demonstrated that Putin had successfully reframed the conflict to serve his political goals.³¹

The violation of the Russian border in August 1999, when Islamist fighters from Chechnya entered Dagestan, sparked the second Chechen military conflict. After Chechnya's independence from the Soviet Union,³² particularly in the period between the two Chechen wars, the country was ravaged by rampant criminality and social instability. The radicalization of Islam in the region began in 1995. During the first Chechen war, a sense of solidarity developed among the Muslims in the Caucasus. As Chechnya became increasingly Islamicized and the ideological radicalization of the Salafi *jamaats* intensified, the idea of violent *ji-had* spread among many Islamic groups throughout the North Caucasus. These developments were closely linked to the arrival of Wahhabi religious figures in Chechnya, such as Sheikh Ali Fathi al-Shishani, and Arab fighters like Ibn al-Khat-tab.³³

In December 1997, the prominent Dagestani Salafi scholar Bagautdin Kebedov fled to Chechnya. While he preached a very strict form of Salafi Islam and advocated the overthrow of the government in Dagestan through violent *ji-had*, Arab Mujahideen fighters, such as al-Khattab, provided financial and military

²⁹ Sakwa, "Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics," 181.

³⁰ The version according to which the apartment bombings in Moscow had been staged to help Putin's political rise to power was soon supported by members of the FSB (the Russian Security Service). See, for example, Alexander Litvinenko, "Lubyanka Criminal Group," accessed September 13, 2023, https://royallib.com/read/litvinenko_aleksandr/lubyanskaya_prestupnaya_gruppirovka.html; Alexander Litvinenko and Yuri Felshtinsky, *Blowing Up Russia: Terror from Within* (New York: Liberty Publishing House, 2004). – in Russian

³¹ Vachagaev, "Did the War Against Ukraine Start in Chechnya?"

³² After the Soviet disintegration, the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic split in two in June 1992 amidst the Ingush armed conflict against another Russian republic, North Ossetia. The newly created Republic of Ingushetia then joined the Russian Federation while Chechnya declared full independence from Moscow in 1993 as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

³³ Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, "Caucasian Crescent: Russia's Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization," 59.

support for the Chechen war effort. Most importantly, Chechnya became the epicenter of radical Wahhabism, endorsing the idea of establishing an Islamic state in the North Caucasus through *jihād*.³⁴

Putin viewed the terrorist attacks in Russia as attempts to paralyze the leadership in Moscow. He claimed that the Khasavyurt Accord³⁵ had been signed despite the genocide of the Russian people in Chechnya and that it had been nothing more than a “moral obligation of two sides” – the federal center on the one hand and the Chechen Republic on the other.³⁶ In October 1999, Putin declared the authority of President Aslan Maskhadov and his parliament illegitimate, despite Maskhadov’s stance against Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab. Maskhadov’s peace plan to crack down on the Chechen warlords was rejected by Putin, who, in the meantime, had become Russia’s President.

It has been argued that, for Putin, Chechnya was the epitome of segmented regionalism.³⁷ The dynamics of the Second Chechen War reflected Putin’s determination to introduce a new strategy to combat it. The reconfiguration of the center-periphery relationship would stem from radical, asymmetrical “federalism.”³⁸

In June 2000, the Russian President appointed the former Chief Mufti Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov as head of the federal administration in Chechnya. On October 5, 2003, he became the first President of the Chechen Republic. Kadyrov had fought against the Russians in the First Chechen War, yet he remained loyal to the Sufi traditions of Chechnya and rejected Wahhabi fundamentalism. Most importantly, the new Chechen leader was strongly connected with the traditional *virḍs* – religious communities that form the Sufi brotherhoods *Naqshbandi* and *Qadiriya*.

Putin’s strategy to counteract segmented regionalism in the Northeastern Caucasus was partly inspired by a similar approach applied to Tatarstan, another Islamic region seen as a “model” for how federal interethnic relations should

³⁴ Sagramoso and Yarlykapov, “Caucasian Crescent: Russia’s Islamic Policies and Its Responses to Radicalization,” 60.

³⁵ The Khasavyurt Agreement refers to the document which ended the First Chechen War. It was signed in Dagestan by the Russian Security Council’s secretary, Alexander Lebed, and the chief of staff of the Chechen resistance forces Aslan Maskhadov. Although it tackled the bilateral relations between Russia and Chechnya (the *de facto* Chechen Republic of Ichkeria), the accord did not address with any finality the issue of Chechen independence. Experts believe that the agreement led to the region’s political instability after the withdrawal of the Russian troops and paved the way for the next war in 1999. See Liz Fuller, “Chechnya: Khasavyurt Accords Failed to Preclude a Second War,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, August 30, 2006, www.rferl.org/a/1070939.html.

³⁶ “Vladimir Putin: ‘The Organizers of the Terrorist Attacks Will Certainly Be Destroyed,’” *Lenta.Ru*, November 20, 1999, accessed November 12, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/1999/09/20/putin/>.

³⁷ Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics,” 181.

³⁸ Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics.”

manifest.³⁹ The process introduced in Chechnya by Akhmed Kadyrov was termed *Chechenization*. While repudiating radical Islam, it offered an alternative in which traditional Islam intertwined with allegiance to both Russia and Chechnya.

Regarding insurgencies, Putin relied on delegating the task to the local regime while gradually integrating the region's bureaucratic structures into those of the federal center. In its new approach to regional conflicts, Moscow became heavily reliant on federal incentives and the devolution of power to the leader of Chechnya. However, the strategy of *Chechenization* ultimately resulted in a flagrant breach of the Russian constitution.

Following Kadyrov's assassination in May 2004, his youngest son benefited from further support from Putin. After becoming President of Chechnya in 2007, Ramzan managed to persuade the Kremlin that only he could control the region. His loyalty to Putin has been sustained by his readiness to fight for him at any time. Kadyrov has repeatedly declared that Putin should become a lifelong president. The Chechen leader has received full support and impunity from the federal center in response to his unbridled enthusiasm.⁴⁰ As Richard Sakwa stressed, the Chechen issue was resolved through "the classic combination of autonomy in exchange for loyalty."⁴¹

Unsurprisingly, Chechnya is the Kremlin's "success story." Significant propaganda efforts rely on nationalism and traditionalism to create the illusion that the republic grants its citizens a high degree of self-determination. Chechen nationalism, Sufi Islam, allegiance to Putin, and Russian patriotism have been amalgamated to form the official ideology.⁴² Considering its physical recovery after the devastating wars, Chechnya indeed stands out. It has emerged from the post-war rubble due to Russia's lavish generosity, translated into billions of dollars. The Putin Avenue in Grozny—renamed "for Putin's outstanding services in the fight against terrorism, the restoration of the economy, and the social sphere of the Chechen Republic"⁴³—may offer a façade of prosperity compared to the rampant poverty and insecurity in neighboring Ingushetia and Dagestan. However, the Kremlin's princely financial support for Chechnya has been accompanied by severe fatal constitutional and social flaws.

Although banned in Russia, polygamy is still practiced in Chechnya. Unofficial militia forces women to wear head coverings. Women are often subjected to domestic violence, yet any public declaration regarding this is prohibited. According to Tanya Lokshina from Human Rights Watch, "those who file complaints with official authorities or speak out about abuse are routinely forced to take

³⁹ Harry L. Humphries, Browyn K. Conrad, Lessian Salakhadinova, and Irina Kouznetsova-Morenko, "New Ethnic Identity: The Islamitization Process in the Russian Federation," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2005): 207-231, 209.

⁴⁰ Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, "Chechnya: The Inner Abroad."

⁴¹ Sakwa, "Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics," 183.

⁴² Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, "Chechnya: The Inner Abroad."

⁴³ "An Avenue Named after Putin Appeared in Grozny," *Lenta.Ru*, October 5, 2008, accessed November 17, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/2008/10/05/street>. – in Russian

their allegations back and apologize on camera. This is one of the tactics used by Chechen authorities to suppress dissent.”⁴⁴ Additionally, functionaries must adhere to a strict dress code, and the sale of alcohol is permitted for only two hours a day. Once again, the process through which the Chechen authorities appear to be engaging in the country’s de-secularization involves policies and practices that contradict the Russian Constitution.⁴⁵

On the one hand, Sufi Islam is part of the official ideology, leading to a forced radical interpretation of the religion and the erosion of the secular state’s principles. On the other hand, intolerance toward any form of religious dissent has intensified, with authorities openly encouraging the killing of Wahhabis and violently suppressing any display of Salafi symbols.⁴⁶ Since Ramzan Kadyrov came to power in 2007, forced confessions and retractions have been used not only to intimidate people but also to promote a utopian image of Chechnya as a region free from human rights violations.⁴⁷

Due to its high stakes for Moscow—and consequently, its sheer ubiquity in political narratives—the fight against terrorism grants legitimacy to Chechnya’s various crimes and arbitrary actions. A socio-political scandal erupted in Russia in January 2022 over the so-called “Yangulbaev case,” when Chechen human rights activist and lawyer for the Committee against Torture, Abubakar Yangulbaev, announced the disappearance of his relatives. Abubakar’s harsh criticism of the Chechen leadership led to the persecution of his family. Suspected of running the opposition Telegram channel 1ADAT, he was accused of “organizing extremist activities,” a charge coupled with “public calls for terrorism on the Internet.” In August 2023, Yangulbaev was added to Rosfinmonitoring, Russia’s registry of “extremists and terrorists.”⁴⁸

The persecution of the Yangulbaev family included, among other acts, the kidnapping and imprisonment of Abubakar’s mother, Zarema Musayeva,⁴⁹ as

⁴⁴ Sarah Johnson, “How Public ‘Apologies’ Are Used Against Domestic Abuse Victims in Chechnya,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/Global-Development/2021/Jul/15/How-Public-Apologies-Are-Used-Against-Domestic-Abuse-Victims-In-Chechnya>.

⁴⁵ Sakwa, “Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics,” 180.

⁴⁶ Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, “Chechnya: The Inner Abroad.”

⁴⁷ Johnson, “How Public ‘Apologies’ Are Used Against Domestic Abuse Victims in Chechnya.”

⁴⁸ Elena Dolzhenko, “‘Chechnya Is a Laboratory of Dictatorship.’ Abubakar Yangulbaev on the New Criminal Case and the Fight Against Kadyrov,” *Kavkaz Realii*, August 29, 2023, www.kavkazr.com/a/chechnya-eto-laboratoriya-diktatury-abubakar-yangulbaev-o-novom-ugolovnom-dele-i-borjbe-s-kadyrovym/32569114.html. – in Russian

⁴⁹ After Musayeva’s kidnapping from Nizhnyi Novgorod in Russia, Kadyrov has staged a trial against her. Flying from Moscow to the trial on 4 July 2023, the journalist of *Novaya Gazeta* Elena Milashina and the lawyer Alexander Nemov were attacked in Grozny by masked people. The perpetrators “reminded Milashina and Nemov of all the courts and cases” they had been involved in, which indicates that the attack aimed to “punish” their activities. The journalist and lawyer were savagely beaten with batons. A medical examination revealed that Milashina had a closed head injury and

well as the arrest and physical assault of his father (a former judge of Chechnya's Supreme Court) and brother. In his campaign against the outspoken Yangulbaev family—who had previously been kidnapped and tortured in 2015 at the Chechen president's residence—Kadyrov declared that they must be detained and, in case of resistance, “destroyed.”⁵⁰ His torrent of abuse against the family was followed by public threats from Adam Delimkhanov—a State Duma deputy from Chechnya, member of the United Russia faction, and Kadyrov's acolyte—who vowed to decapitate the Yangulbaevs.⁵¹

Moscow's approach to the issue speaks volumes. According to Dmitry Peskov, the press secretary for the Russian President, Chechnya is a special region within the Russian Federation due to its successful fight against terrorism. Regarding Kadyrov's stance against the Yangulbaev family, Peskov vaguely remarked that “it is his right and the right of these people to defend their honor and dignity.”⁵²

It is important to bear in mind that Kadyrov is not only the head of the region but also the General of Chechnya's Ministry of Internal Affairs. His public statements cannot be separated from the institution he represents. However,

fractured fingers. Nemov received injuries, including a knife wound. Before the attack, Milasheva had been threatened by the Chechen leadership in connection with the case of Zarema Musayeva. At the beginning of 2022, Ramzan Kadyrov named Milasheva and the human rights activist Igor Kalyapin “terrorists” and “supporters of the terrorists” and called on law enforcement agencies to detain them. See: “Novaya Gazeta Journalist Elena Milashina and Lawyer Alexander Nemov Attacked in Chechnya,” *Meduza*, July 4, 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/07/04/v-chechne-napali-na-zhurnalistku-novoy-gazety-elenu-milashinu-i-advokata-aleksandra-nemova>. – in Russian

⁵⁰ “Ramzan Kadyrov Has Declared the Family of Judge Yangulbaev ‘Accomplices of Terrorists.’ The Head of Chechnya Has Demanded That They All Be Detained or ‘Destroyed’ If They Resist,” *Meduza*, January 22, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/01/22/ramzan-kadyrov-ob-yavil-semyu-sudi-yangulbaeva-posobnikami-terroristov-glava-chechni-potreboval-zaderzhat-ih-vseh-ili-unichtozhit-pri-okazanii-soprotivleniya>. – in Russian

⁵¹ On his Instagram account, on 1st February 2022, Delimkhanov made the following statement in the Chechen language: “Knowing no peace, day or night, our bodies, souls, property, offspring are chasing you. Tearing off your heads, working on you, killing you. We are at war with you, [we declare] blood revenge. This is also available for those who would try to translate [the declaration] into Russian. We are at war with you on all fronts. We are at war with you, against you, [we declare] blood revenge. And so will be our descendants [with you]. See: “‘Tearing off Your Heads.’ Chechen Leadership Threatens Yangulbaev Family Again,” *BBC News* (Russian Service), February 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-60226189>. – in Russian

⁵² “The Kremlin Believes that Kadyrov Has the Right to Call Journalists and Human Rights Activists ‘Terrorists,’” *Meduza*, January 24, 2022, <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/01/24/v-kremle-schitayut-cto-kadyrov-imeet-pravo-nazyvat-terroristami-zhurnalistov-i-pravozaschitnikov>. – in Russian

Kadyrov does not seem to favor Putin's policies regarding accountability. Unsurprisingly, his outrageous actions, conducted along with his *siloviki*,⁵³ raise questions about the reciprocity that defines the Kremlin-Chechnya relationship.

Scholars have observed that Ramzan Kadyrov's "state within the state" has also produced a parallel society that significantly impacts developments across the Russian Federation.⁵⁴ Sergey Markedonov emphasized that Kadyrov managed to create a quasi-state, which is not only almost independent of the Kremlin but can even dictate terms to it.⁵⁵

Chechnya and the War against Ukraine

The Russian President appears to have his own paradigm regarding the situation in Chechnya. At a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in February 2015, Vladimir Putin declared that Kyiv should handle Ukraine's issue with the pro-Russian rebels in the same way he addressed it in Chechnya – by buying it off "with autonomy and money."⁵⁶

In 2009, the so-called counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya ended, but the Chechen authorities have remained reluctant to disband the anti-terrorist structures. These structures have remained in place despite Kadyrov's 2021 announcement of the "complete destruction of the underground." Chechnya ranks fourth in Russia as a recipient of federal subsidies,⁵⁷ which is why the Chechen leader consistently produces anti-terrorist reports and uses the allegedly counter-terrorist security forces to justify their continued necessity to Moscow. In Chechnya, the economy is virtually nonexistent, and employment in the security forces serves as a key source of income. Therefore, the security departments are

⁵³ "The Kremlin Believes that Kadyrov Has the Right to Call Journalists and Human Rights Activists 'Terrorists.'"

⁵⁴ Sakwa, "Blowback? Chechnya and the Challenges of Russian Politics," 180.

⁵⁵ Sergey Markedonov, "'Chechenization' of Russian Power," *Le Monde diplomatique*, no. 5 (February 2007), <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/chechenizatsiya-rossiyskoy-vlasti/viewer>. – in Russian

⁵⁶ Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, "Chechnya: The Inner Abroad," 1.

⁵⁷ Between January and July 2022, Chechnya received 50.2 billion rubles from the Russian budget, and Kadyrov estimated the annual amount of the "federal support" at 375 billion rubles. The North Caucasus ranks only fifth out of eight in terms of the total revenues from the Russian budget; however, half of the federal transfers are received by Dagestan and Chechnya: more than 108 billion rubles out of 217 distributed over six months. Comparable with them remains only Stavropol *kray* (with 35.5 billion rubles over six months). See Andrey Besedin, "Moscow Will Pay: Federal Subsidies Do Not Help Chechnya and Dagestan," *Kavkaz.Realii*, September 21, 2022, www.kavkazr.com/a/moskva-zaplatit-federaljnye-dotatsii-ne-pomogayut-chechne-i-dagestanu/32044051.html. – in Russian

under pressure to provide the “right” numbers; otherwise, they risk staff and budget cuts.⁵⁸

Between 2000 and 2010, 800 billion rubles (USD 25 billion) were allocated to the region, according to Vladimir Putin. Federal funding accounted for 87-92 percent of Chechnya's budget.⁵⁹ In 2022, Ramzan Kadyrov estimated Russia's annual remittance to Chechnya to be 300 billion rubles, while Russia officially reported a sum of 33.5 billion rubles. Economist Natalya Zubarevich estimated that, between January and November 2021, 84 percent of Chechnya's budget came from federal funds. While transfers to other Russian regions were reduced by 6 percent, Chechnya's allocation was increased by 13 percent.⁶⁰ According to official sources, the federal Ministry of Finance sent no less than 718 billion rubles to the regions in 2021.⁶¹

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ramzan Kadyrov repeatedly emphasized the need to strengthen security measures in Chechnya. Addressing the leadership of the Russian Guard, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Defense Ministry servicemen in Chechnya, he later announced additional measures to ensure law and order with FSB's help. Kadyrov's concerns may stem from the growing assertiveness of supporters of the unrecognized Ichkeria, who declared *jihad* against the Chechen leader.⁶² Many members of the Chechen opposition and separatists abroad became particularly vocal in the context of the war in Ukraine. They united from across Europe to join a volunteer battalion—OBON, or the Separate Special-Purpose Battalion of the Ministry of Defense of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria—warning that if Ukraine is not defended, the “Russian bear” will not stop there.⁶³ The volunteer unit operates as part of the Foreign Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine, and most of its members previously fought against Russia in the first and second Chechen wars.

In October 2022, the Ukrainian parliament recognized Chechnya as a territory temporarily occupied by Russia and condemned the “genocide of the Chechen

⁵⁸ Natalia Kildiyarova, “Fight for Kremlin Money: Terrorism in the Interior Ministry's Report on Chechnya,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, April 26, 2023, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/borjba-za-denjgi-kremlya-terrorizm-v-otchete-mvd-po-chechne/32379895.html>. — in Russian

⁵⁹ Matveeva, “The Northeastern Caucasus: Drifting Away from Russia,” 255.

⁶⁰ “Kadyrov Spoke about 300 Billion Rubles for the Maintenance of Chechnya. Was He Wrong by an Order of Magnitude?” *BBC News* (Russian Service), January 24, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60117012>. — in Russian

⁶¹ “Deputies Proposed to the Finance Ministry to Index Subsidies to Regions,” *RBC Ru*, October 21, 2021, <https://www.rbc.ru/economics/21/10/2021/616ec6299a794768b336ce08>. — in Russian

⁶² “Supporters of Ichkeria Announced Preparation of Underground Resistance in Chechnya,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/storonniki-nepriznannoy-ichkerii-zayavili-o-podgotovke-podpoljnogo-soprotivleniya-v-chechne/31954994.html>. — in Russian

⁶³ Lidia Mikhailchenko, “Chechen Separatist Fighters Defend Ukraine Against ‘Common Enemy’ Russia,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-chechens-common-enemy-russia/32136592.html>.

people.” The Russian-Ukrainian war has made the fight against a common enemy meaningful to most Chechen combatants. “What is happening to Ukraine, happened to us,” stressed Anzor Maskhadov, the son of the former president of the unrecognized state of Ichkeria. Leaders such as Anzor Maskhadov and Dzhambulat Suleymanov, head of the Chechen diaspora organization Bart Marsho, point out that the war against Ukraine is covertly, yet heavily, condemned in Chechnya.⁶⁴

Kadyrov’s security measures in 2022 are also regarded as attempts to avoid the mobilization of Chechen troops. By artificially creating a terrorist threat in the region, the Chechen leader may have hoped to find a way to keep his fighters away from Ukraine. Kadyrov has portrayed himself as a “supplier of manpower” for military operations, and a direct evasion would contradict that image.⁶⁵

Needless to say, when it comes to terrorism in the Caucasus, the Chechen leader understands what is at stake for Moscow. Kadyrov is not only a guarantor of Chechnya’s prosperity but also a guarantor of stability in the entire Caucasus. Beyond the fight against terrorism, federal funding allows the Chechen authorities to justify human rights violations, such as illegal imprisonment or torture. As Ekaterina Vanslova, head of the North Caucasus branch of the Team Against Torture, noted, anti-terrorist reports “demonstrate” that militants are attempting to destabilize the region while local authorities are successfully resisting them.⁶⁶

A recent propaganda project by Ramzan Kadyrov, “Sons of Chechnya Guarding the Russian State,” aims to promote the idea that it was Russia’s conquest that brought “prosperity” to Chechnya and ended the “many years of blood feud.” The cream of the crop of the so-called “Akhmat Kadyrov’s team” have all been involved in flagrant breaches of human rights.⁶⁷ Their names among the Chechen elite on Russia’s side against Ukraine speak for themselves.

Prior to officially declaring the mobilization of its troops in 2022, the Kremlin heavily relied on Russia’s ethnic minorities in its war against Ukraine. In that context, Chechnya announced the formation of the North Akhmat Regiment and three registered battalions: East Akhmat, West Akhmat, and South Akhmat. According to Kadyrov, they were prepared to join the troops of Russia’s Ministry of Defense. Military units with the same purpose were also created in other regions of Russia. When the Chechen leader refused to send troops beyond Chechnya’s borders, experts attributed it to Kadyrov’s concern over the growing reluctance

⁶⁴ Mikhailchenko, “Chechen Separatist Fighters Defend Ukraine Against ‘Common Enemy’ Russia.”

⁶⁵ Kildiyarova, “Fight for Kremlin Money: Terrorism in the Interior Ministry’s Report on Chechnya.”

⁶⁶ Kildiyarova, “Fight for Kremlin Money: Terrorism in the Interior Ministry’s Report on Chechnya.”

⁶⁷ Beka Atsaev, “12 Heroes of Kadyrov. Residents of Chechnya Will Be Told about Their Fellow Countrymen Who Fought for Russia,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, April 14, 2023, www.kavkazr.com/a/geroev-kadyrova-zhitelyam-chechni-rasskazhut-o-voevavshih-za-rossiyu-zemlyakah/32360247.html. – in Russian

of residents to join the war. Additionally, the head of Chechnya may have been motivated by his interest in maintaining control over security forces at home.⁶⁸

In August 2022, Chechnya sent its so-called “volunteers” to Ukraine, who, along with their counterparts from other Russian regions, had been trained at the “Russian Special Forces University” in Gudermes. The aggressive recruitment campaign was based on the large-scale abduction of Chechen youth, who were forced under duress to join the war.⁶⁹ Moreover, the authorities framed any reluctance to fight against Ukraine as a lack of masculinity and religiosity. The poor, children of former participants in the Chechen resistance and women were identified as the next groups to be conscripted.⁷⁰

Moscow's exploitation of minority groups continued even after the official mobilization, sparking protests against conscription in many national republics. In response to a protest by Chechen women in September 2022, Kadyrov threatened to send dissenters to the front. He also declared that Chechnya had exceeded its conscription plan and that no further mobilization would take place in the republic.

Researchers at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) point out that Moscow relies on the Chechen *siloviki* to establish administrative regimes in Ukraine's occupied territories. After appointing Kadyrov's representatives in the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions, propaganda banners featuring Putin, Kadyrov, and Denis Pushilin, the head of the Donetsk separatists, were observed at the Mariupol Metallurgical Plant. Currently, Chechen military forces in Ukraine are tasked with maintaining order in the rear of Russian troops and conducting localized battles in the Bilohorivka area of Luhansk.⁷¹

According to Magomed Daudov, the chairman of the Chechen parliament, 21,000 Chechen fighters have been dispatched to Ukraine since the war began. On his Telegram account, Kadyrov claimed that there are currently 9,000 Chechen combatants in Ukraine. However, he refrained from disclosing the number of *siloviki* and “volunteers.” Experts emphasize that Kadyrov's supporters tend to be assigned duties in rear positions rather than fight on the front lines.⁷²

⁶⁸ Andrey Besedin, “Fear of Putin and the Threat to Kadyrov's Regime: How the War Is Affecting the Situation in Chechnya,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, April 13, 2023, www.kavkazr.com/a/strah-pered-putinyim-i-ugroza-rezhimu-kadyrova-kak-voyna-vliyaet-na-obstanovku-v-chechne/32362361.html. – in Russian

⁶⁹ “Men Are Being Kidnapped in Chechnya to Be Sent to War in Ukraine,” *Radio Svoboda*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/v-chechne-pohischayut-muzhchin-dlya-otpravki-na-voynu-v-ukrainu/31869609.html>. – in Russian

⁷⁰ Besedin, “Fear of Putin and the Threat to Kadyrov's Regime: How the War Is Affecting the Situation in Chechnya.”

⁷¹ Besedin, “Fear of Putin and the Threat to Kadyrov's Regime: How the War Is Affecting the Situation in Chechnya.”

⁷² “Chechen Authorities Named the Number of Residents of the Republic Sent to War,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, January 11, 2023, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/vlasti-chechni-nazyvali-chislo-otpravlennyyh-na-voynu-zhiteley-respubliki/32218534.html>. – in Russian

The Chechen special detachment “Akhmat,” led by Iznaur Musayev, is highly suspected of having participated in the Bucha massacres in the Kyiv region.⁷³ Ukraine’s Security Service has also accused the secretary of the Chechen Security Council and commander of the Akhmat special forces unit, Apti Alaudinov.⁷⁴ Between March and April 2022, Alaudinov led military actions in Rubizhne, Kreminna, and Siverskodonetsk, employing a scorched-earth tactic that resulted in the destruction of infrastructure, the deaths and injuries of thousands of civilians, and the displacement of tens of thousands.⁷⁵

Similarly, there is evidence suggesting Ramzan Kadyrov’s involvement in the kidnapping of Ukrainian children from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.⁷⁶ These children were taken to Chechnya for so-called “preventive work” and “military-patriotic education.” Experts believe that Kadyrov shares responsibility for the forced deportation of children with the commanders of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions.

Putin’s perceived formula for success appears to stem from both his uncompromising stance against terrorism in the Caucasus and his nostalgia for Soviet-era power.⁷⁷ Prominent voices have argued that in the war against Ukraine, Putin

⁷³ “SBU Announces Suspicion of Mass Murder to Commander of Special Unit ‘Akhmat,’” *Kavkaz.Realii*, August 29, 2022, www.kavkazr.com/a/sbu-obyavila-komandiru-spetsotryada-ahmat-podozrenie-v-massovyh-ubiystvah/32009167.html. – in Russian

⁷⁴ According to Ukraine’s Security Service (SBU), Apti Aronovich Alaudinov “took a direct part in the armed aggression of the Russian Federation and in the seizure of the territories of Ukraine”. Consequently, the Kremlin awarded Alaudinov the star of the Hero of Russia, while Kadyrov entrusted him with one of the most positions – secretary of the Security Council of the Chechen Republic. SBU investigators have declared Alaudinov a suspect under Part 2 of Art. 110 of Ukraine’s Criminal Code (“committing deliberate actions aimed at changing the boundaries of the territory and and the state border of Ukraine in violation of the procedure established by the Constitution of Ukraine, by a group of people in a prior conspiracy”). “The SBU Reported the Suspicion to the Secretary for the Security of the Chechen Republic, Who Commanded the “Kadirovtsy” at the Hour of the Burial of the Lugansk Region,” Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), August 25, 2022, accessed on June 4, 2024, <https://ssu.gov.ua/novyny/sbu-povidomya-pro-pidozru-sekretariu-rady-bezpeky-chechenskoi-respubliky-yakyi-komanduvav-kadyrovtsiamy-pid-chas-zakhoplenia-luhanshchyny>. – in Ukrainian

⁷⁵ “SBU Announces Suspicion of Crimes against Chechen Security Council Secretary Apti Alaudinov,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, August 25, 2022, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/sbu-obyavila-sekretaryu-sovbeza-chechni-apti-alaudinovu-podozrenie-v-prestupleniyah/32004592.html>. – in Russian; “The International Criminal Court in The Hague Has Issued an Arrest Warrant for Vladimir Putin,” *Kavkaz.Realii*, March 17, 2023, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://www.kavkazr.com/a/mezhdunarodnyy-ugolovnyy-sud-v-gaage-vydal-order-na-arest-putina/32323300.html>. – in Russian

⁷⁶ Besedin, “Fear of Putin and the Threat to Kadyrov’s Regime: How the War Is Affecting the Situation in Chechnya.”

⁷⁷ Putin’s famous declaration about the fall of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century” received a new backup in December 2021, just a few months before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Putin pointed out in a

heavily relies on the country's "lessons from the past" – namely, a culture of impunity as a *modus operandi* and the terrorization of civilians, a pattern widely observed during the Second Chechen War.⁷⁸

Conclusions

It has been remarked that the *near abroad*—a term used by the Russian leadership to refer to the former Soviet republics—is not only a strategic resource for Moscow but also a burden "under unfavorable circumstances."⁷⁹ Regarding the *inner abroad*, the situation is even more intricate due to its complete dependence on Moscow's subsidies. Chechnya ranks fourth among the most subsidized federal subjects after Dagestan, Yakutia (Republic of Sakha), and Kamchatka. Unlike Russia's other regions, it benefits from a special budgetary scheme based on the republican budget's expenditures. As Finance Minister Anton Siluanov explained in 2017:

We look at how objective and reliable these figures are, then we check the revenue base of the region's budget and allocate additional funds for the difference that remains. We agreed that we would annually reduce this part of the assistance.⁸⁰

When remarks about the Chechen "burden" are even remotely voiced in Russia, authorities in Moscow and Grozny react fiercely. Such was the case with film director Aleksandr Sokurov, who, in December 2021, suggested "letting go of everyone who no longer wants to live with us in the same state." He was heavily criticized by the Russian president, while Ramzan Kadyrov demanded the prosecution of the "nihilist Sokurov."⁸¹ According to Magomed Daudov, speaker of the Chechen Parliament,

Sokurov's speech, thoroughly permeated with xenophobia and offensive to the peoples of Russia, the allied states of the Russian Federation, and friendly countries, can be called an attempt to explode from within the stability and

documentary ("Russia. Recent History") running on 12 December (the Day of the Russian Constitution) on state television that the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 "was the disintegration of historical Russia under the name of Soviet Union"; See: "Putin Laments Soviet Breakup as Demise of 'Historical Russia,' amid Ukraine Fears," Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, December 13, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-historical-russia-soviet-breakup-ukraine/31606186.html>.

⁷⁸ Vachagaev, "Did the War Against Ukraine Start in Chechnya?"

⁷⁹ Zhao Huasheng, "Russia and Its Near Abroad: Challenges and Prospects," Valdai Discussion Club, March 9, 2021, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-its-near-abroad-challenges-and-prospect/>.

⁸⁰ "Kadyrov Spoke about 300 Billion Rubles for the Maintenance of Chechnya."

⁸¹ "Kadyrov Spoke about 300 Billion Rubles for the Maintenance of Chechnya."

the social harmony, international peace and unity that our multinational, multi-religious country values.⁸²

Kadyrov reinforced this stance, declaring, “The Chechen Republic has been and will be an integral part of the Russian Federation!”⁸³

Ramzan Kadyrov received 97.94 percent of the votes when he was elected head of Chechnya in 2016. He also set a record among Russian governors, having been supported by 99.7 percent of voters, according to the Central Election Commission. At the end of 2020, Kadyrov became the richest governor in Russia, with an income of 381.19 million rubles.⁸⁴ Despite his achievements, Kadyrov and his acolytes have constantly sought greater legitimacy. This is closely related to the Chechen leadership’s evasion of free and fair elections, the strong—if quiet—dissent among Chechens both at home and abroad, and the unhealed wounds left by the two Chechen wars.⁸⁵ The ideology of the republic is a *mélange* of Chechen nationalism, Sufi Islam, Putinism, and Russian patriotism. This ideological mix is actively exploited to reassure Moscow of Kadyrov’s loyalty and his unique capacity to keep Chechnya under control.⁸⁶

To prove his effectiveness in combating terrorism in the region, the Chechen leader frequently references past cases. In the Northeastern Caucasus, the figures for killed, identified, and arrested “terrorists” have remained unchanged for many years, roughly estimated at one thousand people per year. Chechnya consistently accounts for nearly the same percentage of this number. Alexander Cherkasov notes that such cases are processed routinely, with charges often based on the testimony of the same previously convicted secret witnesses, and sentences are passed regularly, adding figures to security forces’ reports.⁸⁷

An additional way of maintaining the “required” level of terrorism is the targeting of unofficial Islamic communities. Simply wearing a “wrong” beard could be enough for someone to be placed on the list of extremists.⁸⁸ The “financing of terrorists” has become a highly exploited issue and the easiest way to “pray on militants.” Any person involved in money transfers could fall under this charge, provided that security forces are in need of “suspects.”

Lawyers have repeatedly warned that toughening penalties for financing and recruiting terrorists, as well as introducing terms such as “terrorist propaganda”

⁸² Timur Batyrov, “Chechnya to Ask Investigative Committee Head to Check Sokurov’s Words over Proposal to ‘Let Go’ of Caucasus,” *Forbes Russia*, December 11, 2021, <https://www.forbes.ru/society/449427-cecna-poposit-glavu-sk-proverit-slova-sokurova-iz-za-predlozenia-otpustit-kavkaz>. – in Russian

⁸³ “Kadyrov Spoke about 300 Billion Rubles for the Maintenance of Chechnya.”

⁸⁴ “Kadyrov Spoke about 300 Billion Rubles for the Maintenance of Chechnya.”

⁸⁵ Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, “Chechnya: The Inner Abroad,” 15.

⁸⁶ Sokirianskaia and Pakhomenko, “Chechnya: The Inner Abroad.”

⁸⁷ Kildiyarova, “Fight for Kremlin Money: Terrorism in the Interior Ministry’s Report on Chechnya.”

⁸⁸ Kildiyarova, “Fight for Kremlin Money: Terrorism in the Interior Ministry’s Report on Chechnya.”

into the Criminal Code, could facilitate the fabrication of cases. Since the eradication of terrorism remains Putin's top priority in the region, and Ramzan Kadyrov is able to provide stability, no price is too high for Moscow.

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, Kadyrov has been vacillating between towing the Kremlin's line and consolidating his power in Chechnya. Unlike Wagner mercenary group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, with whom Kadyrov used to rub shoulders during the war, the Chechen leader appears to have no interest in strengthening his position within the Kremlin elite. Kadyrov's goal is to remain independent from that elite and to retain at least a degree of exclusivity in his relationship with Putin.⁸⁹ Following Prigozhin's suspicious death, it is widely believed that Kadyrov may follow suit.⁹⁰ His assertiveness and impulsiveness, his unbridled independence at home, and his former anti-Kremlin stance have put many in Russia's power apparatus on high alert.

On the occasion of Russian President Vladimir Putin's birthday (October 7), Ramzan Kadyrov offered him Chechnya's highest award and called for the cancellation of Russia's presidential elections. According to Kadyrov, the elections should be replaced by Putin automatically resuming his duties as President of Russia – a necessary measure, in his view, given the ongoing war in Ukraine (referred to in Russia as the “special military operation,” or SVO):

During the period of the SVO, there should be no talk of any presidential elections in Russia. It is quite obvious that many unfriendly countries, including the collective West, will take advantage of such large-scale events and will use them for provocations. Our enemies will try to destabilize the state.⁹¹

The dynamics between Putin and Kadyrov remain unpredictable, but they undoubtedly foreshadow a distressing future. Since the fight against terrorism and destabilization has defined Putin's political ascendancy, the stakes in the battle against terrorism remain high for Moscow. Meanwhile, Kadyrov heavily exploits the anti-terrorist mantra to consolidate his regime at home. On the one hand, Russia appears to rely on Kadyrov's loyalty; on the other, his impulsiveness and authoritarian rule in Chechnya defy the fundamental principles of the Russian Constitution. However, neither party is willing to acknowledge the skeletons in their closet.

⁸⁹ Vadim Dubnov, “Is a Power Transition in the Cards in Chechnya?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 4, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89447>.

⁹⁰ Nataliya Medvedeva, “After Prigozhin, the Kremlin will kill Kadyrov – Bild,” *Liga.net*, August 29, 2023, <https://news.liga.net/politics/news/posle-prigojina-kreml-ubet-kadyrova-bild>. – in Russian

⁹¹ “Kadyrov Calls for Canceling Elections – or Nominating Putin Alone,” *Radio Svoboda*, October 7, 2023, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/kadyrov-prizval-otmenitj-vybory---ili-vidvinutj-odnogo-putina/32627511.html>. – in Russian

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