

Chechnya's status within the Russian Federation: Ramzan Kadyrov's private state and Vladimir Putin's federal "Power Vertical"

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SWP Research Paper

Uwe Halbach

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Ramzan Kadyrov's Private State and Vladimir Putin's Federal "Power Vertical"



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In the run-up to the Russian presidential elections on 18 March 2018, the Kremlin further tightened the federal “vertical of power” that Vladimir Putin has developed since 2000. In the North Caucasus, this above all concerns the republic of Dagestan. Moscow intervened with a powerful purge, replacing the entire political leadership. The situation in Chechnya, which has been ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov since 2007, is conspicuously different. From the early 2000s onwards, President Putin conducted a policy of “Chechenisation” there, delegating the fight against the armed revolt to local security forces. Under Putin’s protection, the republic gained a leadership which is now publicly referred to by Russians as the “Chechen Khanate”, among other similar expressions. Kadyrov’s breadth of power encompasses an independent foreign policy, which is primarily orientated towards the Middle East.

Kadyrov emphatically professes that his republic is part of Russia and presents himself as “Putin’s foot soldier”. Yet he has also transformed the federal subject of Chechnya into a private state. The ambiguous relationship between this republic and the central power fundamentally rests on the loyalty pact between Putin and Kadyrov. However, criticism of this arrangement can now occasionally be heard even in the Russian president’s inner circles. With regard to Putin’s fourth term, the question arises just how long the pact will last. The price that Moscow was willing to accept for Chechnya’s “pacification” by Kadyrov and his supporters include serious human-rights violations. Since 2017 these have increasingly moved back into the focus of international politics and reporting.

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**Chechnya's Status within the Russian Federation.
Ramzan Kadyrov's Private State and Vladimir Putin's Federal "Power Vertical"**

The current head of the Chechen republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, has ruled for over a decade, during which period Chechnya's relationship with the Russian Federation has become ambiguous. Kadyrov makes strenuous efforts to proclaim that the republic is part of Russia, to link Chechen nationalism with Russian patriotism, to portray Russia's president in the Chechen capital Grozny as a state icon, and to present himself as "Putin's foot soldier". Yet he has turned the federal subject of Chechnya into a private state to such an extent that the Russian President's entourage is asking itself to what degree the federal "vertical of power" developed by Vladimir Putin extends to Chechnya. Among Russians, expressions such as the "Chechen Khanate" or "Kadyrov's caliphate" have gained currency. From a historical perspective, Chechnya's position within the Russian Federation has been compared to the Central-Asian Emirate of Bukhara, which enjoyed a maximum of autonomy within the power structure of the Tsarist Empire in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Kadyrov's self-arrogated powers also encompass a foreign policy that is primarily orientated towards the Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole. No other regional leader has claimed a comparable role for himself, extending beyond his own administrative area and beyond Russia's borders. Here too the above-mentioned ambiguity is in evidence. On the one hand, the Kremlin welcomes the division of diplomatic labour vis-à-vis the Islamic world between Moscow and Grozny. On the other hand, this situation creates contradictions, as was shown for instance in Moscow's and Grozny's divergent statements regarding the persecution of the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar.

In the 1990s, Chechnya became the epitome of separatism in post-Soviet Russia. Within the renegade republic, a national movement invoked a historical continuity of anti-colonial resistance to Russian dominion. In 1991 Dzhokhar Dudayev, the then-leader of the Chechen secessionist movement, demanded a peace treaty to put an end to "the 300-year war

between the Russian Empire and the Chechen people". Moscow's response to these efforts consisted of massive military operations. According to the official interpretation, in the first war (1994–1996) Russian forces in Chechnya combated ethno-territorial separatism; in the second war, which began in 1999 and officially ended in 2009, they fought international Islamist terrorism. The two wars are the most violent events in the post-Soviet space. In terms of casualties and the extent of town and settlement destruction, their consequences easily eclipse the secession wars in the Southern Caucasus (1991–1994), the civil war in Central-Asian Tajikistan (1992–1997) and the battles in East Ukraine from 2014 onwards. Nowadays, the Kadyrov republic portrays itself as an advocate for Russian multiethnic unity, but in fact it has long been Russia's "internal abroad". The clearest expression of this development is its particular legal situation, which combines Islamic and traditional common-law rules with the whims of the head of the republic, and contradicts Russian legislation.

By delegating the fight against the insurrection to Chechen security forces as of 2002, President Putin attempted to end the period of large-scale acts of war in the Caucasian republic. Critics of this "Chechenisation" claim that Akhmat Kadyrov and his son Ramzan were using it to bring about de facto secession, all the while proclaiming untiringly that Chechnya was a constituent of the Russian Federation. In so doing, critics say, the Kadyrovs were more successful than the armed separatist resistance to which they had both previously belonged. The Chechnya policy during Putin's first term in office is the more remarkable because it was contemporaneous with his development of the so-called federal power vertical: events in and around Chechnya caused the Kremlin to recentralise political structures within the Russian Federation. Even some Russian experts now critically refer to this as "hyper-centralisation". President Putin derived legitimacy for the recentralisation from the conflict with the Caucasian republic of Chechnya. A major step in this direction was the (temporary) abolition of regional gubernatorial elections following the hostage crisis in the North-Caucasian town of Beslan in September 2004. More than 300 people were killed when Russian security forces stormed a school occupied by terrorists.

Scholarly literature is divided on the merits of the "Chechenisation" policy. Some observers point to the transition from the period of large-scale armed violence to a more selective, more targeted and ulti-

mately more successful fight against the armed underground by local security forces. For them, this transition succeeded in removing Chechnya from the top position in the North-Caucasus violence statistics. Others consider that the local political price of this security-policy victory was too high. The "stabilisation costs" that President Putin was willing to accept in this context include widespread human-rights violations in the Kadyrov republic, which Russian authorities have done nothing to check. The persecution and murder of homosexuals in Chechnya in 2017 and the arrest of the national representative of the human-rights organisation Memorial in early 2018 have brought these violations to the forefront of international politics and reporting as rarely before.

The loyalty relationship between Kadyrov and his "feudal lord" Putin plays a decisive role in Chechnya's position within the Russian Federation vis-à-vis the central-government level, which has been strengthened since the early 2000s. With regard to Putin's fourth term in office, the question arises whether the Putin-Kadyrov pact will continue to hold.

The Development of the “Vertical of Power”

On 31 March 1992, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a federation treaty set out the division of power in post-Soviet Russia between the centre and the regions or federal subjects. During his visit to the Tatar capital Kazan in the summer of 1990, Boris Yeltsin, the president of the then-Soviet Russian Federation (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, RSFSR), had proclaimed: “Take as much sovereignty as you can digest.” In the period that followed, republics that had been Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) declared themselves sovereign political entities. They demanded autonomy and resolute federalisation. The 1992 federation treaty sealed this process. A year later, Russia’s post-Soviet constitution was adopted; even then, it contained no explicit mention of the treaty. Moreover, two autonomous republics, Chechnya and Tatarstan, had not signed the treaty. Hardly anyone in Russia remembers that document today.¹

At the dawn of the post-Soviet era, the Russian Federation consisted of 89 regional entities. In the years that followed, mergers of several regions reduced that number to 83. Today, the multinational federal state consists of 85 federal subjects (including the Crimea, annexed in 2014 in violation of international law, and the city of Sevastopol). They are represented at the central government level by delegates on the federal council. The regions, including the autonomous republics, differ widely in socio-economic development, size of economy and population, ethnic composition, financial dependence on the federal budget, and other criteria.² The majority

of regions is currently reliant on annual financial support. Only 14 regions count as net contributors. Among the net beneficiary regions (*dotacionnyye regiony*), the largest autonomous republic in the North Caucasus, Dagestan, is first and Chechnya fifth.³

Among the federal subjects, 22 republics have non-Russian titular nationalities. In some cases, these populations are smaller in number than the ethnic-Russian populations. However, hardly any Russians still live in Chechnya or Dagestan. The areas of the Russian Federation that have attracted the attention of Russia specialists in the West are the North Caucasus with its seven autonomous republics, from Adygea near the Black Sea to Dagestan on the Caspian Sea; the Volga region including the autonomous republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan; and the Far East.

President Vladimir Putin has initiated a process of recentralisation and expanded a “power vertical” limiting the federal subjects’ leeway for independent policy-making. An example of this interlocking with the central government is the dominant position of the governing party United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*) in the regional parliaments. Putin’s power vertical contrasts with his predecessor’s time in office. The early Yeltsin years in particular were characterised by a sometimes chaotic process of decentralisation and a “sovereignty parade” of autonomous republics and autonomous regional entities.

Recentralisation began in 2000, when the government created seven federal districts, which were

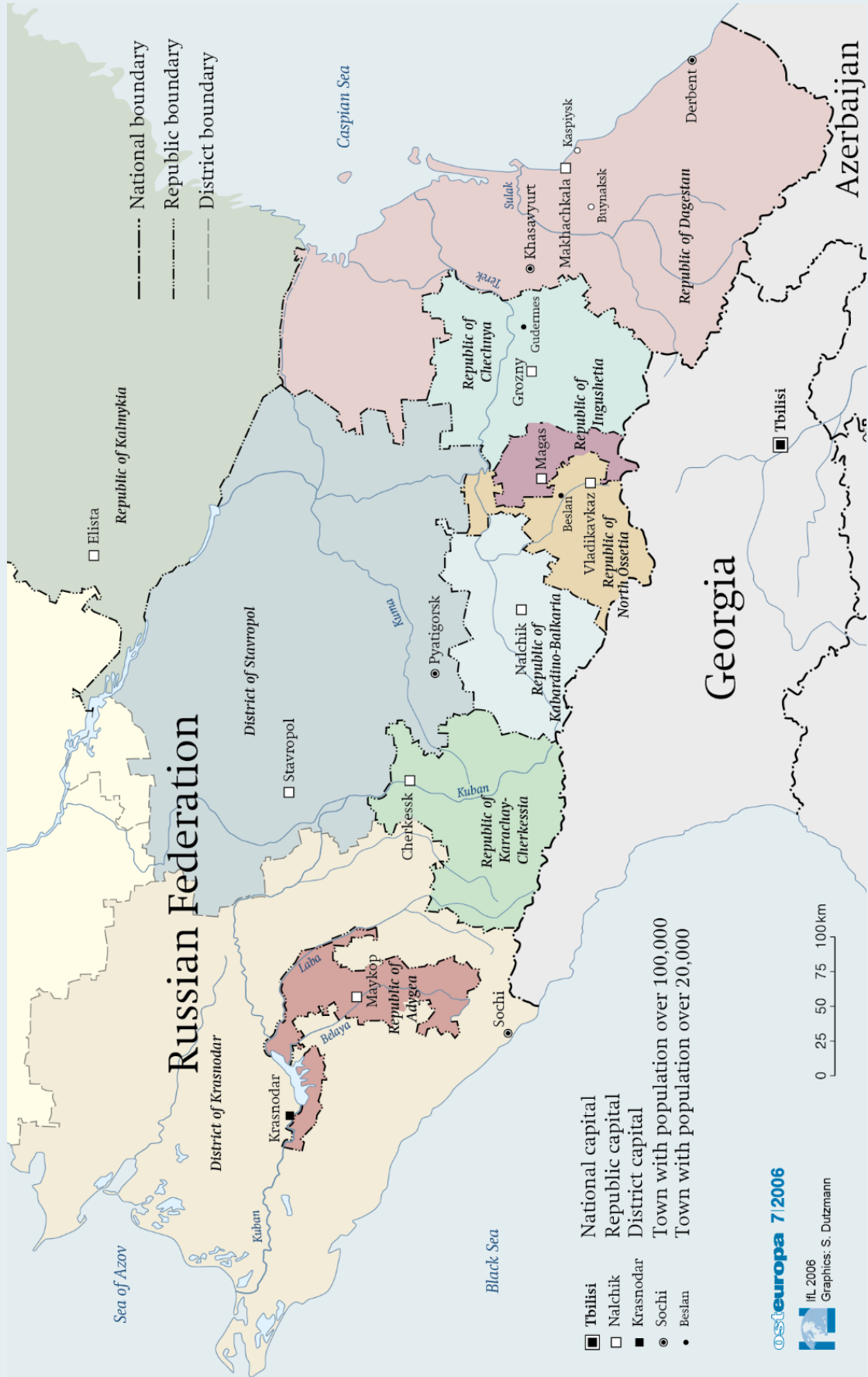
¹ Vadim Shtepa, *The Devolution of Russian Federalism* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 4 April 2017), <https://jamestown.org/devolution-russian-federalism/>.

² Alexander Libman, *Russische Regionen. Sichere Basis oder Quelle der Instabilität für den Kreml?*, SWP-Studie 19/2016 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 2016); Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, *Regionale Diskrepanzen in Russ-*

land: Politisch verursacht (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 14 April 2014), <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/russland/182692/analyse-regionale-diskrepanzen-in-russland-politisch-verursacht>.

³ “Dagestan i Chechnja popali v pjaterku vysokodotacionnyh regionov” [Dagestan and Chechnya came in the top five of the highly subsidised regions], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 12 October 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/310951>.

Map: Northern Caucasus



compared to the General Governorates of the Tsarist Empire. Two others have now joined: in January 2010 the Northern Caucasus, which previously belonged to the larger Southern Federal District, was promoted to its own federal district; in 2014 annexed Crimea was also added to this category. The federal districts are run by special representatives of the Russian president. Their main tasks include ensuring the concordance of federal and regional legislation and controlling the federal authorities that are active regionally, such as tax authorities, the police or the domestic secret service, the FSB.⁴ The fact that Chechnya largely eludes such control makes it a true exception.

Nineteen governors were forced to resign in 2017, in the largest wave of dismissals of the past five years.

After the Beslan hostage crisis of 2004, direct elections of governors and heads of republic were abolished. Since then, they have been appointed by the Russian president. After mass protests against alleged fraud during the December 2011 elections to the Duma, the principle of direct regional elections was reintroduced, albeit with serious restrictions. Becoming a candidate for gubernatorial elections is now complicated by a “municipal filter”: prospective candidates first have to submit a set number of signatures of delegates from local and district councils and mayors in their favour. Moreover, the elected governor or head of republic can still be deposed by the Kremlin. Before regional elections in 2017, there were demands that the municipal filter – which had ensured the dominance of the governing party at the regional level – be made more democratic. Nevertheless, in September 2017 the filter once again served as an administrative tool to prevent independents from registering as candidates for gubernatorial elections in 16 regions.⁵

⁴ Martin Russell, *Russia's Constitutional Structure. Federal in Form, Unitary in Function*, (Strasbourg and Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS], Members' Service Research, October 2015), 4.

⁵ “In 8 out of 16 regions, non-systemic candidates failed to overcome the ‘municipal filter’ because of obstruction by local and regional authorities.” European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), *Analytical Report on the Administrative Control over the Procedure of Collecting Signatures of Deputies and Heads of Municipal Entities in Support of Candidates (“Municipal Filter”)*, Newsletter (Berlin, 10 August 2017), 1, http://newsletter.epde.org/tl_files/EPDE/RESSOURCES/2017%20

Within several months to go before the presidential elections in March 2018, Moscow further tightened its grip on governors and regional finances as part of a staff policy focusing on a generational change among the regional elites by replacing older “territorial princes” with younger, easier-to-control technocrats from central institutions. Moscow has also tied the loans that it grants to the many indebted regions to conditions that restrict the latter’s leeway to decide their own financial policy.⁶ Nineteen governors were forced to resign in 2017, in the largest wave of dismissals of the past five years.⁷ Simultaneously, Moscow has increasingly recruited non-local cadres to lead regions and republics. A striking example was in Chechnya’s neighbouring republic Dagestan. In October 2017, Ramazan Abdulatipov, the 71-year-old head of the republic, who had been in office since 2013, was replaced by Vladimir Vasilyev, a former high-ranking police officer from Moscow and deputy speaker in the Duma. For the first time since 1948, this placed a non-native at the helm of the largest republic in the North Caucasus.⁸ This move was rationalised not least by arguing that the new head of republic had no obligations to any one ethnic group or clan in Dagestan and would therefore be better able to lead the fight against corruption and clanish nepotism, which are particularly present there. However, some commentators see in this cadre policy the idea favoured by Russia’s patriotic circles of returning to the Tsarist practice of appointing governors.⁹

[Golos%20Reports/Report_Russian_Election_Municipal_Final.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/dress-rehearsal-for-russias-presidential-election/).

⁶ Fabian Burkhardt and Janis Kluge, *Dress Rehearsal for Russia's Presidential Election. Moscow Tightens Grip on Regional Governors and Budgets*, SWP Comment 37/2017, (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, October 2017), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/dress-rehearsal-for-russias-presidential-election/>

⁷ Maria Domańska, *The Kremlin's Regional Policy – a Year of Dismissing Governors*, OSW Warsaw Commentary no. 257 (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, OSW], 15 December 2017).

⁸ Denis Sokolov, “Pervyj prokurator Dagestana” [Dagestan’s first procurator], *Vedomosti*, 4 October 2017, <http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/10/04/736464-prokurator-dagestana>.

⁹ “Russian Pundit Puts New Dagestan Appointment in Context”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newline – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 11 October 2017.

The Kremlin has declared the defence against separatism one of the greatest challenges for its national security policy. It is risky in today’s Russia to advocate real federalism and the right to regional self-determination: the authorities could interpret it as an appeal for separatism. In 2014 a law entered into force that encouraged this equation by prohibiting “calls to harm the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. It has already led to criminal proceedings.¹⁰

During the Second Chechen War, the fight against terrorism and Islamist extremism served to justify a renewed, large-scale military operation. At the regional level, the threat of ethno-nationalistic separatism had declined by then. Siberian regionalism, Finno-Ugric national movements in Karelia, and demands for autonomy in Tatarstan never turned into serious secession movements. The Russia expert Marlène Laruelle doubts that the nationalisms of non-Russian ethnic groups are still a “force for change” in today’s Russia, for the following reasons: in the North Caucasus, the region with the highest initial potential for secession, ethno-territorial separatism was overtaken by Islamist dynamics within the armed underground. In her assessment, the “sovereignty parade”, which had emerged at the dawn of the post-Soviet era through various national movements and popular fronts, is now largely a part of Russia’s past; today’s regional faultlines tend to be characterised by socio-economic rather than ethnic differences.¹¹

At the military level, the National Guard (Ross-gardiya) created by President Putin in 2016 is seen as the most recent and striking institution of the power vertical. It reports directly to the president and groups existing structures of the security agencies, including the troops of the interior ministry and special units such as OMON and others. This kind of Pretorian guard had already been considered in the Yeltsin era, but was not established until recently.¹² It now has a staff of about 400,000 men under the command of Putin’s close confidante, Viktor Zolotov, who was also appointed head of counterterrorism for the North

Caucasus in August 2017. In this context, there has been some discussion over whether the National Guard with its posts in Chechnya limits the (conspicuous) independence of the Chechen security bodies — and if so, to what extent.¹³ Some observers have interpreted this measure as a move against Kadyrov’s inclination to act on his own authority. Others see no limitations on his power since Chechen soldiers serving in the National Guard continue to be loyal to their territorial sovereign and are not deployed without his approval. They are led by Sharip Delimkhanov, a younger brother of Adam Delimkhanov, who is considered Kadyrov’s right-hand man in the federal Duma in Moscow. The Delimkhanovs are Ramzan Kadyrov’s cousins.

In 2017 the question of whether federalism can develop in Russia, and to what extent, gained in importance in domestic political discourse.

In 2017 the question of whether federalism can develop in Russia, and to what extent, once more gained in importance in domestic political discourse. One trigger was the confrontation over extending the accord that gave the autonomous republic of Tatarstan a special relationship with the central government. In the early 1990s, the Russian leadership had been challenged not only by the Chechen independence movement pushing for separation from Russia. Moscow was also confronted with emphatic demands for autonomy from the Tatar nationalist movement in the Volga region. The Tatars are the largest non-Russian ethnic group in the Russian Federation. Like Chechnya, Tatarstan had not signed the 1992 federation treaty. However, unlike Chechnya, the autonomous republic — located not on the periphery but in the centre of Russia — focused on separate power-sharing negotiations with the central government, rather than on secession. In 1994 an accord was signed to that end. It was extended for ten years in 2007 and expired in July 2017. This special accord guaranteed Tatarstan a certain measure of political and economic autonomy, which has since been restricted by Putin’s power vertical, but not eliminated

10 “Putin Signs a Law Criminalizing Calls to Separatism”, *The Moscow News*, 30 December 2013.

11 Marlène Laruelle, “Is Nationalism a Force for Change in Russia?”, *Daedalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 89–100 (90).

12 Margarete Klein, “Russlands neue Nationalgarde. Stärkung der Machtvertikale des Putin-Regimes”, *Osteuropa* 66, no. 5 (2016): 19–32; Pavel Luzin, “The Ominous Rise of Russian National Guard”, *Intersection (Security)*, 21 July 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/security/ominous-rise-russian-national-guard>.

13 Dmitry Shlapentokh, “The Kremlin’s Last Resort: Kadyrovtsi in Russia’s National Guard”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 3 March 2017, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13430-the-kremlin-last-resort-kadyrovtsi-in-russias-national-guard.html>.

completely. Tatarstan has remained the only federal subject to have a president; all other autonomous republics have had that title replaced by the designation “head of republic”. Ironically, it was the autocratic head of the Chechen republic, Kadyrov, who inspired this terminological change in 2010 by pointing out that there could only be one president in Russia, namely Vladimir Putin.¹⁴ Like Chechnya (but unlike other regions), Tatarstan also demanded the right to have its own foreign policy and foreign economic relations. In the dispute between Russia and Turkey (2015-16), it was thus able to take a stance against the economic sanctions that Moscow had imposed on Ankara and insist on having its own relationship with Turkey.

Before the power-sharing agreement expired in July 2017, demands were made for a renewed extension and a strengthening of federalism. There was talk of a new form of power-sharing and a “budgetary federalism” that would allow Tatarstan, which is economically powerful compared to the North Caucasus, to keep the majority of its revenues. Against this background, there were also calls for compulsory teaching of the Tatar language at schools in Tatarstan and a Tatar-language TV channel to be broadcast nationwide since many Tatars live in other parts of Russia. These language-policy demands resonated to some extent with non-Russian titular nationalities in other regions.¹⁵ At the Tatar World Congress in early August 2017, which was attended by a thousand delegates from 40 countries, the first elected President of Tatarstan (1991 – 2010), Mintimer Shaimiev, gave a speech. He reminded his audience of the power-sharing agreement, which he believed influenced

“the entire fate of Russia” and of Russian federalism. Its extension was a “historical necessity”; the parties needed to sit at the negotiating table to resolve legal issues and harmonise the regional and federal constitutions.

To date, the Kremlin has only granted one of these demands. It has allowed Rustam Minnikhanov, the head of the republic since 2010, to use the title of President until 2020, but rejected any extension to the special agreement with Tatarstan. Even the Tatar government only accepted some of the above-mentioned concerns, and that cautiously. Russian organisations in the autonomous republic, 40 percent of whose population of 3.8 million (according to the 2010 census) are ethnic Russians, indignantly rejected the cultural and linguistic demands.¹⁶ These demands certainly contradict the strengthening of the Russian language that President Putin has called for at all levels of the Federation.¹⁷ In late November 2017, Tatarstan ceded to Moscow’s pressure: being taught the Tatar language at school was not made compulsory.¹⁸

The wave of resignations and new appointments of governors moved regional affairs into the spotlight.

There were also disturbances below the national-territorial level with its autonomous republics. The wave of resignations and new appointments of governors moved regional affairs into the spotlight.¹⁹

14 “Chef ohne Präsidententitel: Kadyrov legt Treuebekenntnis zu Moskau ab – ‘Iswestija’”, *Sputnik Deutschland*, 13 August 2010, <https://de.sputniknews.com/politik/20100813257098749/>.

15 Paul Goble, “Tatarstan’s Pursuit of Power-Sharing Accord with Moscow Energizes National Movements across Russia”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 13 April 2017; Ramazan Alpaut, “Stanet li tatarskij vtorym gosudarstvennym jazykom Rossii?” [Will Tatar become Russia’s second official language?], *Kavkaz.Realii*, 8 April 2017, http://www.kavkazr.com/a/stanet-li-tatarskiy-vtorem-obshenatsionalnym/28416275.html?mc_cid=344420573e&mc_eid=9eaa49374d; Ruslan Gorevoj, “Iskushenie separatizmom” [Temptation through separatism], *Versiya*, 12 February 2017, https://versiya.ru/tatarstan-mozhet-sprovocirovat-rossijskie-regiony-na-novyj-parad-suve-renitetov?mc_cid=344420573e&mc_eid=9eaa49374d.

16 A Society for Russian Culture in Tatarstan complained to the minister of education and science in Moscow about the call for compulsory lessons in the Tatar language for all of the republic’s inhabitants. At least 50 percent of the region’s children, it said, would have to suffer through a useless subject – the Tatar language – at the expense of the Russian language and culture. “Russia: Tatarstan Media Highlights 28 August – 3 September 2017”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 10 September 2017.

17 “He has encouraged both ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking members of other nations to come out in open opposition to non-Russian republican policies of language” Paul Goble, “Language Fight in Tatarstan Set to Ignite Political Explosion Across Russia”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 19 September 2017.

18 “Squeeze on Tatarstan Underlines Putin’s Bid to Centralise Control of Republics”, *Financial Times*, 26 January 2018.

19 Andrey Pertsev, *Russia’s New Old Wave of Technocratic Governors* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 3 March 2017), <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=68169>.

Regional elites, for example, complained about their loss of influence and decision-making powers. According to a study by the Centre for Applied Strategic Research, whose director is the former Russian finance minister Alexei Kudrin, these are exclusively administrative elites behind the “political elites” able to influence political decisions and the “veto elites” able to correct such decisions. The importance of regional economic elites has also decreased.²⁰ Following the latest regional and gubernatorial elections in autumn 2017, Russian historians, economists and political scientists warned against “hyper-centralisation”, a division of Russia into “Moscow and Not-Moscow” carried out in the name of safeguarding territorial integrity.²¹

There was resistance to the draft bill “On the State’s National Policy”, initiated by President Putin in 2016, and the binding definition of the “Russian nation” (*rossiyskaya naciya*). A definition had been needed since the start of Russia’s post-Soviet history. Policy had oscillated between three interpretations of national statehood: civic nationalism; ethno-nationalism (here referring to Russianness); and neo-imperialism.²² While Moscow pays lip service to civic nationalism, it has been more attached to the third variant during the Putin years. The definition was therefore supposed to be settled by legislation. Despite President Putin’s support and encouragement, however, the draft bill was shelved until further notice after five months of discussions. Its (provisional) failure was due to the resistance of Russian nationalists, who wanted the law to set out the dominant status of ethnic Russians, and of non-Russian elites, who sensed an attempt to rob them of their privileges.

Ideological and cultural tensions between the centre and the regions also exist concerning the representation of history.

Ideological and cultural tensions between the centre and the regions also exist concerning the

20 “Regional’nye elity priznali svoju otstranennost’ ot politiki” [Regional elites have noticed their alienation from politics], *Vedomosti*, 16 March 2017.

21 Cf. Paul Goble, “Hyper-Centralization of Russia Threatens Its Development and Survival”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 19 October 2017.

22 Igor Torbakov, “What Is To Be Done about the ‘Russian Question?’”, *EurasiaNet*, 27 October 2017.

representation of history. In a return to the past, that representation is increasingly steered by state authorities, who are directing it towards a unitary narrative that exalts Russia as a great power. At a meeting in March 2015 with regional North Caucasus politicians, Moscow’s special envoy for the federal district accused local universities of falsifying history and questioned historical terms such as “anti-colonial resistance”. He also disapproved of exhibits in local museums dedicated to native life before the region became part of Russia, supposedly glorifying that period.²³ In recent years, there have been “monument conflicts” between the centre and periphery, in which ethnic Russians pay homage to Tsarist generals such as Aleksey Yermolov while North Caucasians commemorate their resistance fighters, including Imam Shamil.²⁴ During Putin’s mandate, the policy on history has tended to challenge the notion of Russian colonialism, effectively saying: We were never a colonial power like the Western powers, which attacked overseas territories and exploited them. In October 2016, Russia’s security council called for a Centre to be established to protect against falsifications of Russian history, which it claimed were circulating in the West and former Soviet republics, for example “speculations on the colonial issue”.²⁵

Chechnya, which only two decades ago forged its place in the anti-colonial resistance to Russian domination, now corroborates the historical narrative supported by the Kremlin. Since 2011, for example, the Kadyrov regime no longer supports the commemoration of the deportation of entire ethnic groups from the North Caucasus ordered by Stalin in 1943–1944, such as the Chechens and Ingush.²⁶

23 Valery Dzutsati, “History Widens the Divide between the North Caucasus and the Rest of Russia”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 30 March 2015.

24 Paul Goble, “Russian Regions Erecting Statues to Those Who Resisted Muscovite Expansion”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14 March 2017.

25 Cf. Alexander Morrison, “Russia’s Colonial Allergy”, *EurasiaNet*, 19 December 2016.

26 Cf. this study’s chapter “Kadyrov’s Cultural Policy: Back to Chechen Tradition?”, below, p. 16.

“Pax Ramzana”: The “Pacification” of Chechnya in Kadyrov’s Private State

At the regional level, another power vertical was developed in Chechnya by the Kadyrov dynasty, particularly Ramzan Kadyrov. It seems limitless and is thus an exception within Russia. The mayor of the republic’s capital Grozny, Muslim Khachiyev, has said: “Everything of any real significance that happens [in Chechnya] happens on Kadyrov’s watch. He is accountable for everything to the people, to God, and to the president [of Russia]”.²⁷

The head of the Chechen republic has repeatedly pointed out that except for President Putin nothing and no-one could limit or control his authority – neither parliament nor the media nor judicial mechanisms, let alone the opposition. “We have no opposition. That’s a system to undermine state sovereignty [vlast]. I don’t allow anyone to play games with the people.”²⁸ No political parties exist in Chechnya other than the governing party, United Russia. Consequently, as the governing party’s candidate in regional elections, Kadyrov receives almost 100 percent of the vote. The same is true of his feudal lord Putin. Chechnya occupies first place among the so-called electoral sultanates, i.e. about 15 regions in which the results obtained by Putin and the governing party in presidential and parliamentary elections are far above the national average.

As a reward for his loyalty to Putin, vassal Kadyrov gets to treat Chechnya as his personal fiefdom. He has threatened to open fire on police units from other parts of Russia if they operate in Chechnya without

his authorisation. He uses collective punishment against his adversaries and persecutes them even outside of Chechnya. He also pursues a cultural and religious policy that, according to his critics, amounts to transforming the republic into an Islamic state.²⁹

Born in 1976, Ramzan Kadyrov fought on the side of the separatists against Russian troops in the first Chechen War (1994–1996). Thereafter, he served as body guard to his father Akhmat, who was the acting mufti of the de-facto independent republic. At the start of the second war in autumn 1999, both father and son defected to the side of the Russian security forces. During the chaotic phase from 1996 to 1999, it had become clear to the Kadyrovs that Chechnya was highly unlikely to win a renewed war against Russia. Once Russian troops had regained control over the renegade autonomous republic, President Putin promoted Akhmat Kadyrov to be its ruler. The young Ramzan headed his father’s security apparatus, which became known as “Kadyrovtsy” and now numbers over 30,000 men. In March 2003 a new Chechen constitution was passed by referendum, and entered into force a month later. It guarantees a measure of autonomy for the republic, but subordinates it to the Russian Federation and central government. During the questionable presidential election in the republic in October 2003, Moscow’s candidate Akhmat Kadyrov was elected with 80 percent of the votes cast. On 9 May 2004 he was assassinated. His successor was interior minister Alu Alkhanov, since Kadyrov’s son was still too young for the presidency. However, as Putin’s protégé, Ramzan climbed rapidly to become the de facto ruler. In March 2006 he was made prime minister and proceeded to fill most government and ad-

²⁷ Quoted in “Chechen Strongman Builds Cult of Personality through Sport”, *Financial Times*, 4 August.

²⁸ Quoted in Il’ja Jashin, *Ugroza nacional’noj bezopasnosti. Nezavisimij ekspertnyj doklad* [Threat to national security. Lecture by an independent expert] (Moscow: Open Russia, February 2016), 12, <https://openrussia.org/post/view/12965/>.

²⁹ Georgy Bovt, “Will Moscow Allow Polygamy in Chechnya?”, *The Moscow Times*, 13 May 2015.

ministrative positions with his acolytes. In 2007 Alkhanov resigned as president, and the office was assumed by Ramzan Kadyrov.

A fundamental reason for the special status of the republic’s ruler is that the Kadyrovs, on Putin’s orders, helped to transform the phase of full-scale war violence in Chechnya into a more selective and more targeted fight against the adversary. The Second Chechen War was, like the First, characterised by devastating violence. After Russian troops took Grozny in March 2000, the armed resistance withdrew to inaccessible mountain regions and launched a partisan war against Russian forces. The Russian troops in turn proceeded with disproportionate force against entire cities and settlement areas, bombarding them with artillery, bombing them from the air, and carrying out massive punitive operations.³⁰ However, their methods were ultimately unsuccessful. A Russian general reported from the battlefield in Chechnya as late as 2004 that the Russian army was primarily occupied with keeping its own troops safe and was unable to counter the guerrillas effectively.³¹

Since 2002 the Kremlin has increasingly relied on pro-Russian local paramilitary units under the ultimate command of the Kadyrovs

Since 2002 the Kremlin has increasingly relied on pro-Russian local paramilitary units under the ultimate command of the Kadyrovs, who have had first-hand experience of guerrilla warfare as former resistance fighters against Russia. These local units, which integrated growing numbers of defectors from the insurgency,³² had more detailed knowledge than the Russian troops of the sociocultural terrain and of their adversaries’ modus operandi. Gradually, the Second Chechen War turned into a local civil war.

30 Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, *How Socio-cultural Codes Shaped Violent Mobilization and Pro-insurgent Support in the Chechen Wars* (Cham: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 38. On Russian warfare, cf. Mark Galeotti, *Russia’s Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009* (Oxford, 2014).

31 Emil Aslan Souleimanov, *The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The United States Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, February 2017), 35.

32 According to the then-ruler of the republic, Alu Alkhanov, in October 2005 half the local security forces already consisted of (about 7,000) former insurgents, who had defected. John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia’s War on Terror* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 88.

The Kadyrovtsy largely replaced the Russian troops as the leading force in fighting terrorists. Their main tool was collective punishment, which was not limited to close relatives of the remaining insurgents and terror suspects. The most common practice was to burn down houses. Ramzan Kadyrov’s punitive and deterrent measures also targeted the Chechen diaspora in Europe.

According to a study from 2010, the targeted counter-insurgency practised by local security forces resulted in a 40 percent decrease in violent activities by the armed guerrillas compared to the Russian army’s methods.³³ In 2009 Moscow officially lifted Chechnya’s special status as a counter-terrorism location. In February 2010 a British delegation visited the Caucasian republic. It was led by Frank Judd, former rapporteur for the Council of Europe on the human-rights situation in Chechnya. The delegation reported that people living in Chechnya were noticeably safer than during the war, but that the human-rights situation continued to be precarious.³⁴

Once the fiercest phase of military confrontation had come to an end, violence levels in Chechnya did decline. However, simultaneously the Islamist revolutionary movement spread to other parts of the North Caucasus. In 2007 the last Chechen underground president, Doku Umarov, proclaimed the so-called Caucasus Emirate. While it never ruled over a compact territory, it did make efforts to coordinate local underground cells (*jama’at*) in various parts of the North Caucasus and motivate them ideologically. Fighting throughout the entire region has only declined since about 2013, with markedly fewer casualties. This was primarily due to many jihadi fighters moving from the Caucasus and other parts of Russia to combat zones in Syria and Iraq.³⁵

Field studies have raised doubts about the loyalty of the Chechen people to the head of their republic – and even of some Kadyrovtsy to their commander. Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov

33 Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, “A Perfect Counterinsurgency? Making Sense of Moscow’s Policy of Chechenisation”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 8 (2016): 1287–1341 (1289); Jason Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War”, *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010): 1–20.

34 Quoted in “British MPs ‘Disturbed’ by Chechnya Visit”, *The Moscow News*, 25 February 2010.

35 Uwe Halbach, *Russland und der Nordkaukasus im Umfeld des globalen Jihadismus*, SWP-Aktuell 23/2017 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2017).

conducted interviews from 2008 to 2013 in which some interlocutors complained, for example, that only towns and localities linked to the Kadyrov clan had profited from the reconstruction programmes in Chechnya.³⁶ At the same time, the two researchers concede that Putin’s Chechenisation policy and his alliance with the Kadyrov family have been remarkably successful. For them, the Russian president has attained three fundamental objectives: first, war casualties among the population declined. Second, transferring the counter-insurgency fight to the Kadyrovtsy helped Moscow to distance itself from the battlefield of Chechnya and the violence committed against local civilians, and thus to avoid accusations of human-rights violations. Third, Kadyrov actually managed to drive back the insurgency – unlike, for example, the leader of the neighbouring republic of Dagestan. Moreover, they believe that Kadyrov, despite taking the law entirely in his own hands in Chechnya, has remained loyal to the Russian president.³⁷

Whether it is possible to thereby derive lasting stability is questionable. Two instruments used by the Kadyrovs in fighting the insurgency make this particularly doubtful, namely collective punishment and vendetta, which have historically played a role in tribal Chechen society.³⁸

Chechen society is still traumatised by the two wars; there were casualties in almost every family.

Russian human-rights activists and regional experts, such as Ekaterina Sokiryanskaya, Svetlana Ganushkina and Aleksei Malashenko, believe that elements of Chechen youth are receptive to Islamic State (IS) propaganda because Chechnya is not at all lastingly

pacified, as the official interpretation suggests.³⁹ Chechen society is still traumatised by the two wars; there were casualties in almost every family. Even though today’s minors did not experience the wars themselves, the trauma is being passed down to them by their parents’ generation. The shiny new facades in the capital Grozny cannot belie the fact that a large part of the population lives at or below the poverty threshold. Kadyrov’s acolytes, on the other hand, can display their wealth and luxury unhindered. “There are those for whom everything is allowed. And there’s the mass of the people who have no rights at all, [...] who have to gather in public to support the government, who have to follow their religion in the way prescribed by the regime.”⁴⁰ The experts emphasise, however, that even under these circumstances there is no large-scale support for IS. They stress that the limited potential followers are recruited not only from underprivileged social strata, and instead have a more complex social and educational profile. According to statements by the Chechen interior minister, in 2017 there were eight IS “sleeper cells” discovered and 18 underground fighters killed.⁴¹

36 “Moscow has managed to maintain control over the Chechen state in general and Chechen elites in particular. [...] Unlike in Afghanistan and Iraq, where sectarian division and the empowerment of local ethnic allies have delivered mixed results for the US Army, Chechenisation represents a model where Moscow has been able to find the right balance between autonomy and control.” Ratelle and Souleimanov, “A Perfect Counterinsurgency?” (see note 33), 1310.

37 Ibid.

38 “Krovnaia mest’ – kak teper’ ubivajut na Kavkaze” [Vendetta: How murders are carried out in the Caucasus today], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 26 December 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/296137/>.

39 “Eksperty nazvali prichiny interesa chechenskoj molodezhi k ideologii IG” [Experts give the reasons for Chechen youths’ interests in IS ideology], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 15 March 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/299244/>.

40 Quotation by Yekaterina Sokiryanskaya, *ibid.*

41 “Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights 15 – 28 January 2018”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newslines – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 1 February 2018.

Kadyrov's Cultural Policy: Back to Chechen Tradition?

Ramzan Kadyrov insists that Chechnya is part and parcel of the Russian Federation and, more than any other regional leader, promotes a cult of President Putin, whom he has asked to remain in power for life. In Grozny, Putin's birthday is celebrated by a mass parade. Ramzan Kadyrov has promoted the Russian President (alongside his father Akhmat and himself) to a state icon. In Chechen society, this tripartite iconology is satirically known as "Father, Son and the Holy Spirit". The father, Akhmat Kadyrov, is at the pinnacle of this personality cult – comparable to Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan, the father of the current president Ilham Aliyev. Azerbaijan and Chechnya are the two political entities in the post-Soviet area in which authoritarian ruling families have established themselves as dynasties. The largest mosque in the whole North Caucasus stands in the Chechen capital Grozny. Not only the mosque has been named after the former mufti and head of the republic, Akhmat Kadyrov, but so have streets and buildings in Grozny and other localities in the republic. In 2017 the father-figure cult was further bolstered: the Chechen football club RFK Terek Grozny, which plays in the top Russian league, was renamed FK Akhmat Grozny. The 66th birthday of its namesake was celebrated in the capital on 22 August 2017 – with the participation of former colleagues and representatives from parliament, public organisations and the muftiate clergy. The guest of honour from Moscow was the Minister for North Caucasus Affairs, Lev Kuznetsov.⁴² During the celebrations, Ramzan Kadyrov addressed the Islamic world: prominent Islam scholars from dozens of countries had acknowledged that his father had sacrificed his life for God and the salvation of the Chechen people. However, international terrorists were preparing to sacrifice the Chechen people to

42 A ministry specifically dedicated to North Caucasus affairs (Minkavkaz) was established in Moscow in March 2014.

bring about the breakup of Russia.⁴³ In the past few years, Kadyrov has repeatedly claimed that Western actors are undermining his republic's stability and Russia's territorial integrity.

Ramzan Kadyrov organises his own personality cult through manliness rituals, martial-arts performances in which his sons occasionally participate, and other bizarre means. In February 2013 he set up his own Instagram page, on which he posted comments on Chechnya, Russia and the rest of the world. His online audience grew to over 4 million visitors. However, as of 23 December 2017, access to Kadyrov's Instagram and Facebook pages was no longer possible. They were blocked three days after the US government had put Kadyrov on its sanctions list under the Magnitsky Act for human-rights abuses.⁴⁴ The measure triggered indignant reactions not only in Chechnya, but all over Russia.⁴⁵

Kadyrov cultivates the image of a helper to those in need not only in his own territory but all across Russia. He has boasted of helping free Russian journalists held in Ukraine, and members of the Russian marine imprisoned in Libya. In 2017 he became involved in the repatriation of Russian women and children stranded in IS territories conquered by Iraqi and Syrian troops. From August to October 2017 alone, Kadyrov's special envoy to the Middle East and North Africa, Ziyad Sabsazi, brought back about 50 of them

43 "Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights 21 – 27 August 2017", *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 3 September 2017.

44 The "Magnitsky Act" was passed by the US Congress in 2012 and signed by President Obama. It placed Russian officials on a sanctions list whom it held responsible for the death of the tax accountant Sergei Magnitsky, who had been arrested in 2009 and died in prison.

45 "Chechen Leader's Social Media Ban Causes Outrage in Russia", *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 25 December 2017.

from the war zones.⁴⁶ Kadyrov's carefully cultivated image is popular in Russia's interior, even though its inhabitants have reservations about Chechens and other North Caucasians. In an opinion poll carried out by the WZIOM Institute among 1,800 citizens of Russia in April 2017, 55 percent of those polled believed that Kadyrov's activities benefited the entire country. The institute's director, Valeri Fedorov, summarised the poll results as follows: "The head of the Chechen republic is viewed by the majority of Russian citizens as a successful and patriotic leader who guarantees the security and development of his republic within the Russian population. Critical objections to Ramzan Kadyrov barely resonate in the mass consciousness."⁴⁷

Within his sphere of control, Kadyrov rigidly steers his course in religious and cultural policy under the motto "Back to Chechen tradition". This "Kadyrovism" builds bridges between different groups, including some that were previously hostile to each other, with different interpretations of "Chechen identity": traditionalists who want to revive the norms of the common law (*adat*) that has been valid for centuries within a tribal society; Islamic purists who only recognise sharia as a legal system; nationalists who insist on Chechnya's sovereignty, basing themselves on the tradition of anti-colonial resistance; and autonomists who prefer a self-determined Chechnya within great-power Russia.⁴⁸ In this context, Ramzan Kadyrov presents himself as the national and religious leader; as the intermediary between Russia and the external Islamic world; as the symbol of Chechen self-determination and simultaneously as the guarantor of the republic's affiliation with Russia; as an active fighter against terrorism and religious extremism who nevertheless employs violent methods himself and dictates strict religious prescriptions to his own society.

Kadyrov emphasises the proximity of Islamic morals and tradition to Russia's Christian-Orthodox traditionalism.

These contradictions are particularly visible in his religious policy. *On the one hand*, Kadyrov emphasises the proximity of Islamic morals and tradition to Russia's Christian-Orthodox traditionalism and vehemently demarcates this link from "Western decadence, ungodliness, and hostility to tradition and the family". Here he resembles his patron Putin, who since 2012 (during his third term as president) has increasingly underpinned Russian patriotism with references to traditional values, and stressed their importance for Russia's security and stability.⁴⁹ Kadyrov supports the concept of "spiritual security", which has been integrated into Russia's national security doctrine, elevating a specific "Russian civilisation" into an object to be defended against external interference.⁵⁰ He maintains contacts with Patriarch Kirill and has opened new Russian-Orthodox churches in Chechnya despite the fact that the ethnic Russian section of its population has shrunk to a tiny minority. Simultaneously Kadyrov supports ultraconservative forces in Moscow, such as the deputy Natalia Poklonskaya and orthodox hardliners that even the Patriarch considers suspect. They include groups that campaigned against the film *Matilda* in 2017, whose theme is the love affair between Tsar Nicolas II and a ballet dancer, for allegedly violating the religious sentiments of "real Russians".

Chechnya's policy towards non-traditional faith communities is just as repressive as Moscow's. Russia passed a law in July 2016 that places the missionary activities of non-Orthodox, non-traditional denominations under suspicion of terrorism. In 2017 Jehovah's Witnesses in particular were criminalised as "religious extremists". In Chechnya, the attribute "non-traditional" is likewise used to demonise undesired religious activities. Ramzan Kadyrov calls for "traditional Islam" in line with his father Akhmat's beliefs, invoking in Marlène Laruelle's words "an often gro-

⁴⁶ "Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights 31 July – 6 August 2017", *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 7 August 2017; *Grozny-Inform*, 21 October 2017. On Kadyrov's activities abroad and his special envoy Sabsazi, cf. this study's chapter on "Chechnya as a Cross-Border Actor", p. 26.

⁴⁷ "Ramzan Kadyrov: Portret Politika", press release no. 3372, VCIOM, 12 May 2017, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=116195>.

⁴⁸ Cf. in particular Marlène Laruelle, *Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?*, *Russie.Nei.Visions* no. 99 (Paris and Brussels: Institut français des relations internationales [Ifri], March 2017), 9.

⁴⁹ Cf. Irina du Quenoy, "Russia: The Stability Implications of State Policies Toward Religion and the Russian Orthodox Church", in *Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Katya Migacheva and Bryan Frederick (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2018), 159 – 80 (171 – 75).

⁵⁰ Cf. Veera Laine and Iiris Saarelainen, *Spirituality as a Political Instrument. The Church, the Kremlin, and the Creation of the "Russian World"*, Working Paper (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs [FIIA], September 2017).

tesque reinterpretation of Sufi tradition".⁵¹ While pilgrimages to the tombs of local saints and Sufi leaders were tolerated in Soviet times as an expression of national-religious folklore, they are now deliberately being revived. At the centre of these efforts is the tomb of Kunta-Haji Kishiev who has been elevated to the shining light of Chechnya's religious history. This 19th-century leader of the Qadiriyya order had opposed Imam Shamil's call to fight the Russian army "to the last man", advocating a return to religious contemplation instead.

Kadyrov has decreed rigid norms of behaviour that could be borrowed straight from the cultural repertoire of his adversaries in the Islamist-Salafist underground.

On the other hand, Kadyrov has decreed rigid norms of behaviour that could be borrowed straight from the cultural repertoire of his adversaries in the Islamist-Salafist underground. At the centre of this policy are prescriptions — for instance regarding dress codes — that especially restrict the personal rights of women. As early as 2006, when he was still prime minister, he launched a morality campaign that contained the obligation to wear a headscarf as well as general dress rules for women, approved Islamic polygamy and justified "honour killings". The consumption of alcohol is strictly controlled; Western music has been banned from local TV channels since 2008; and a liberal approach to sexual minorities (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, LGBT), whose existence in Chechnya is simply denied, is seen as an expression of "Western decadence".⁵²

Ilya Yashin, an ally of the murdered opposition politician Boris Nemtsov made an exaggerated criticism of this "Islamisation from above" within Chechnya in a lecture in February 2016: "Few people have noticed that in the past few years we have had our own local Islamic State take shape on Russian territory. A 'Chechen caliphate' operates according to its own traditions and laws, all the while receiving billions in subsidies out of the federal budget. Chechnya's ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov, indulges in a luxurious lifestyle and steers a policy in which a few sharia

norms have gained the upper hand over Russia's laws, and he is expanding his military might."⁵³

However, a few of Kadyrov's cultural and historical measures intended to embed Chechen nationalism in Russian patriotism have irritated Chechens. In 2011 in accordance with the Kremlin's history policy, he declared 23 February a national holiday. In Russia, this is the Day of the Defender of the Fatherland, when the armed forces are celebrated. However, Chechens link it to a different event. During Stalin's Reign of Terror, 23 February 1944 saw the start of the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Chechens and Ingush to Kazakhstan. Many deportees died on the way. Kadyrov moved the memorial service dedicated to this historical trauma to 10 May, the anniversary of his father Akhmat's death. Moreover, he questioned the significance of commemorating the deportation by making confusing remarks, including the claim that the deportees were in part to blame for their fate.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Laruelle, *Kadyrovism* (see note 48), 20.

⁵² Cf. this study's chapter on "Human-Rights Violations", p. 21.

⁵³ Il'ja Jashin, *Ugroza nacional'noj bezopasnosti. Nezavisimij ekspertnyj doklad* [Threat to national security. Lecture by an independent expert] (Moscow: Open Russia, February 2016), 12, <https://openrussia.org/post/view/12965/>.

⁵⁴ "Zhiteli Chechni ne soglasny vosprinimat' 23 Fevralja kak prazdnik" [The inhabitants of Chechnya do not agree with 23 February as a national holiday], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 23 February 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/298193/>.

Conflicts between Kadyrov and the Russian Security Services

During the past few years, some security personnel (*siloviki*) within Putin's entourage, and especially within the domestic secret service FSB, have criticised Chechnya for its lawlessness and for thwarting investigations by federal authorities.⁵⁵ In 2013 several FSB officers went on hunger strike in protest against the release of three Chechen policemen accused of kidnapping and torturing a man living in Moscow.⁵⁶ In April 2015 the Stavropol police pursued a Chechen national in Grozny whose name was on its wanted list, but did not inform the Chechen authorities of their operation. In response, Kadyrov authorised his security apparatus to shoot anyone who was operating on the republic's territory without prior permission from the local authorities. Chechen representatives in the State Duma and the Federal Council in Moscow supported their republic's leader and accused the Russian interior ministry of provocation. However, the ministry justified deploying the Stavropol police, leaving Kadyrov to backtrack and signal that there was no conflict. "I am a Kremlin man, I am Putin's man, I am a servant of the people."⁵⁷

Commentators who are sceptical about the personal loyalty pact between President Putin and his "foot soldier" in Chechnya have pointed to a series of murders of Kadyrov's critics and opponents that have never been solved by Russian law-enforcement agen-

cies. These include the assassination of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006, human-rights activist Natalya Estemirova in 2009, and Ruslan Yamadayev, shot dead in his car in central Moscow, in 2008. There have also been assassinations abroad, for example Sulim Yamadayev, who was killed in Dubai in 2009. The Yamadayev brothers were some of Kadyrov's fiercest rivals. One of Kadyrov's former body guards, Umar Israilov, who had reported human-rights violations, was killed in Vienna in 2009 after fleeing there with his family. "The FSB hate Ramzan because they are unable to control him", said Aleksei Malashenko from the Carnegie Moscow Center. "He does whatever he wants, including in Moscow. Nobody can arrest members of his team if there is no agreement with Putin." The prominent Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov joined this criticism.

The most spectacular episode is the events surrounding the murder of Nemtsov, who was shot on 27 February 2015 near the Kremlin in Moscow. There was evidence pointing to Chechnya. Shortly after the assassination, five Chechens were arrested and a sixth, who resisted arrest, was shot dead. Kadyrov defended the suspects on Instagram and blamed "enemies of Russia" for masterminding the murder. On his website, he described one of the main suspects as a "true patriot". Ruslan Geremeyev, suspected by Moscow of being involved in the attack, was kept away from investigators in Chechnya. He is allegedly close to Kadyrov's most important ally and relative in Moscow, the Duma deputy Adam Delimkhanov. Given these events, it is interesting that only a few days after the assassination of Nemtsov, Kadyrov was awarded two medals. On 9 March Putin bestowed on him the Order of Honor, Russia's highest state decoration; and on 16 March he received the Medal for Loyalty and Performance of One's Duties from the authorities in Crimea (which had been annexed by Russia the previous year).

55 One of the best-known Russian experts on the Caucasus, Alexei Malaschenko from the Carnegie Moscow Center, comments: "From what I can see, there has always been friction between Kadyrov and the federal forces, because Kadyrov only answers to Putin. This has irked people, especially since Putin awarded him the Order of Honor." Quoted in Ivan Nechepurenko, "Nemtsov Probe Exposes Widening Rift between Kadyrov, FSB", *The Moscow Times*, 11 March 2015.

56 Ibid.

57 Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Why Kadyrov Has Fought with Bastrykin", *North Caucasus Weekly*, 30 April 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/why-kadyrov-has-fought-with-bastrykin/>.

On 14 July 2017 the Moscow Military District Court delivered its verdict in the Nemtsov case. It sentenced the five Chechens to long terms in prison and categorised the attack as a contract killing. However, it shone no light on the motive or on who might have backed or ordered the killing. According to an explanation popular in Chechnya, the man who allegedly fired the fatal shot, Zaur Dadaev, was deeply religious and very upset by the caricatures of the Prophet published in the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and by those defending freedom of opinion after the terror attack on the magazine's editorial office in January 2015. However, it remains unclear which statements by Nemtsov are supposed to have provided the motive for the killing. His fellow activist Ilya Yashin has clarified that Nemtsov "never said a bad word about Islam" and only criticised terrorists.⁵⁸ Furthermore, a number of human-rights activists doubted that the evidence was sufficient to convict the five accused, who were reportedly mistreated in detention and later withdrew their confessions.

58 Friedrich Schmidt, "Ein passendes Geständnis", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 March 2015, 5.

Human-Rights Violations

European institutions and international human-rights organisations view the situation of civil and human rights in Russia as problematic overall. This is true, for instance, of the European Union’s annual report “Human Rights and Democracy 2016” published in October 2017, which Russia’s foreign ministry typically rejected as “not objective” and “Russophobic”.⁵⁹ Reports by international organisations on the human-rights situation in the Russian Federation and specifically in the North Caucasus highlight Chechnya in particular.⁶⁰ Since it has been ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov, the systematic documentation of human-rights violations has been prevented there. Two prominent human-rights activists were murdered in Chechnya in 2009: the internationally known Natalya Estemirova, who worked for the non-governmental organisation Memorial, and Sarema Sadulaeva from the humanitarian organisation Save the Next Generation. Any available information on human-rights abuses and violations committed by the state is consequently unclear. What sparse information there is comes from those affected, who have contacted the Internet portal *Kavkazkii Uzel* (Caucasian Knot) or organisations such as Memorial.⁶¹

The most common human-rights violations include the “disappearing” of alleged members of the armed underground and their relatives, torture in prisons and secret locations, arbitrary violence against Kadyrov’s adversaries and their persecution abroad, as well as large-scale infringements of women’s rights. From 1999 to 2017 approximately 3,000 people disappeared without trace in Chechnya. Between January and October 2017, there were 43 cases of family members

reporting the kidnapping of relatives to the police.⁶² In Dagestan and Ingushetia, there are active human-rights organisations, and the families of kidnap victims go to local law-enforcement agencies for help. In Chechnya, by contrast, people only rarely dare to report the disappearance of relatives to the police. The Russian Federation’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Tatyana Moskalkova, travelled to Chechnya in 2017, but was unable to obtain much reliable information on kidnapping cases.

In March 2017 there were reports of a wave of persecutions against homosexuals in the Kadyrov republic. Hundreds of people were arrested, some murdered. Not one of those arrested had publicly come out as homosexual. Yet in a society that has close family ties within village and clan communities, it is almost impossible for an individual to conceal that his or her sexual orientation diverges from traditional norms. According to the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, this was a “prophylactic cleansing” following a request by representatives of the Russian LGBT community for authorisation to hold demonstrations for the rights of sexual minorities in four locations in the North Caucasus. A Kadyrov spokesman denied the reports, saying it was impossible to arrest people that did not exist in the republic. If such people existed in Chechnya, he continued, their own relatives would send them to places from which they could never return.⁶³ Kadyrov reacted similarly to the case of the Chechen singer Zelimkhan Bakaev, who disappeared without a trace in 2017, for which some sources blame state agencies. At a meeting with local officials in January 2018, Kadyrov said Bakaev was

59 “Moscow Condemns ‘Russophobic’ EU Rights Report”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newsline – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 27 October 2017.

60 See, e.g., Manarsha Isaeva, Sergej Prokopkin and Sarah Reinke, *Die Menschenrechtslage in den nordkaukasischen Republiken Dagestan, Tschetschenien und Inguschetien*, Menschenrechtsreport no. 68 (Göttingen: Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker, November 2012).

61 *Ibid.*, 21.

62 “Pochishcheniya ljudej v Chechne prinjali sistemnyj charakter” [The kidnapping of people in Chechnya has become systemic], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 27 October 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/311657/>.

63 Andrew E. Kramer, “Gay Men in Chechnya Are Killed, Paper Says”, *The New York Times*, 2 April 2017; “‘Hundreds’ Detained for Homosexuality in Chechnya”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newsline – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 1 April 2017.

probably homosexual and therefore killed by his relatives or men from his village.⁶⁴

Chechen security agencies have reportedly established secret prisons in at least two locations for “people of non-traditional sexual orientation”. Russian journalists have filed critical reports about human-rights violations against homosexuals in Chechnya, resulting in threats from those in power there. The republic’s mufti, Salah Meshiev, and a member of the Chechen parliament demanded that the journalists be held to account. The Minister for Nationalities Policy, External Relations, Press and Information, Dshambulat Umarov, described the reporting as an “insult to the Chechen people” and called on the journalists to apologise in writing. As a result, more than 60 writers from Russia – including such world-renowned authors as Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Vladimir Voinovich – sided with the journalists and appealed to the country’s law-enforcement agencies to react to the threats from Chechnya.⁶⁵ Of all the serious human-right violations committed under Kadyrov’s reign of violence, this event created the most waves on the international stage. The foreign ministers of five countries expressed their concerns in a letter to their Russian colleague Sergey Lavrov. The President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, and the OSCE also criticised the human-rights violations against sexual minorities in Russia and particularly in Chechnya.⁶⁶ German Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the abuses during her meeting with President Putin in early May 2017.⁶⁷ In response to the protests, Moscow for the first time examined the accusations against Chechen security forces. However, an investigative committee responsible for the North

Caucasus encountered resistance from the Chechen authorities.⁶⁸ Chechnya’s human-rights ombudsman insisted in his remarks from 23 May 2017 that homosexuality did not exist in the republic. He claimed that the whole dispute over the alleged persecution of homosexuals was the result of a conspiracy by foreign powers intending to undermine Chechen society.⁶⁹ His counterpart in Moscow, Tatyana Moskalova, pointed out that she had not yet received any requests for help from the victims and made clear that the victims’ families would need to be guaranteed maximum protection. This was the precondition, she said, for any serious investigations to be carried out in Chechnya at all.⁷⁰

In early 2018 the precarious human-rights situation in Chechnya once again made the headlines in international politics.

In early 2018 the precarious human-rights situation in Chechnya once again made the headlines in international politics. In January the human-rights activist Oyub Titiev, who had been running the Grozny office of the organisation Memorial since Natalya Estemirova’s murder, was arrested for alleged possession of drugs. This is a favourite regime pretext for silencing its critics. In 2014 a court sentenced the activist Ruslan Kutaev to four years in prison for alleged possession of heroin. He had organised a conference for the 70th anniversary of the deportation of Chechens and Ingush against Kadyrov’s wishes. In 2016 a journalist from the Internet portal *Kavkazkii Uzel* (Caucasian Knot), who had posted reports criticising the Kadyrov regime, was sentenced to three years’ imprisonment for alleged possession of marijuana.

The German government, Council of Europe and EU expressed their concern about this renewed state interference in the reporting on human rights in Chechnya. The State Department in Washington described Titiev’s arrest as “the latest in a string of reports of alarming recent human rights violations

64 “Chechen Leader Defends Detention of Rights Activist”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 18 January 2018.

65 “Pisateli prizvali k rassledovaniju ozvuchennykh v Chechne ugroz zhurnalistam” [Writers call for investigation of the threat against journalists coming from Chechnya], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 17 April 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/301165/>.

66 “Glava Evroparlamenta prizval vlasti Chechni projasnit situaciju s gejami” [The President of the European Parliament calls on Chechnya’s authorities to take a stance on the situation of homosexuals], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 6 April 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/300533/>.

67 “Merkel’ poprosila Putina zashchitit’ prava men’shinstv” [Merkel asked Putin to protect the rights of minorities], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 2 May 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/302040/>.

68 Ann-Dorit Boy, “Tschetscheniens Polizei sabotiert Untersuchung”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26 May 2017.

69 “Chechen Ombudsman Rejects Gay Abuse Allegations”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 23 May 2017.

70 Boy, “Tschetscheniens Polizei sabotiert Untersuchung” (see note 68).

in Chechnya”.⁷¹ Prior to that, in December 2017, the US government had added Kadyrov to the sanctions list under the Magnitsky Act, citing various human-rights violations in his territory. Kadyrov responded to the criticism by vilifying Memorial employees as agitators steered by the US and defaming human-rights activists in general as persons “without family, nation or religion” and as “enemies of the people”.⁷² Concerns grew over the human-rights situation in Chechnya and the North Caucasus more generally when, shortly after Kadyrov’s response, an arson attack was carried out on the Memorial office in Nazran in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia. Human-rights activists in Ingushetia had previously not had the same problems with the authorities as in Chechnya. The Dagestani capital Makhachkala also saw attacks on Memorial. This fed speculation as to whether the Kadyrovtsy’s repression reached beyond the borders of Chechnya.⁷³ Human-rights organisations such as Memorial are currently under increasing pressure in Russia in general.

71 Quoted in Sophia Kishkovsky, “Chechen Arrest Reflects Crackdown, Activists Say”, *The New York Times*, 11 January 2018.

72 Quoted in Benjamin Triebe, “Offensive gegen Bürgerrechtler in Tschetschenien”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 22 January 2018; “Evrosojuz osudil presledovanie PC ‘Memorial’ na Severnom Kavkaze” [The European Union condemned the persecution of the human-rights centre Memorial in the North Caucasus], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 19 January 2018, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/315346/>.

73 Cf. this study’s chapter on “Chechnya as a Cross-Border Actor”, p. 26.

Reconstruction and Economic Boom, or Façade of Stability?

The most visible sign of the changes that Chechnya has undergone in the past decade is the appearance of the capital Grozny. Its magnificent avenues, such as Putin Boulevard, and islands of modernisations, such as Grozny City with its luxury hotels and boutiques, are in sharp contrast to the town reduced to rubble at the end of the intense fighting. However, as in a few other Caucasian metropolises, this boom façade conceals the socioeconomic realities in each country or area. In the case of Chechnya, this also masks the fact that the revival on display here was funded less by its own economic power than by subsidies from the federal budget.

In May 2004 President Putin visited Grozny to attend the funeral of the murdered head of the republic, Akhmat Kadyrov. At the time, he voiced his horror at the devastation in the city. About 154,000 houses and apartments in Chechnya had been wholly or mostly destroyed. In Grozny that comprised 70 percent of all apartments and houses.⁷⁴ A year earlier the United Nations had described Grozny as the most destroyed city in the world. At that time, Chechnya was the weakest economic region in the entire Russian Federation. Fourteen years later, in October 2017, Ramzan Kadyrov gushingly praised the reconstruction during a ceremony for “Grozny Day”. Grozny, he claimed, was a glorious example for the whole North Caucasus, whose beauty was lauded the world over; multitudes of tourists visited it. Chechnya’s second-biggest town, Gudermes, has also witnessed a remarkable reconstruction. There are now plans to demonstrate, through elaborate tourism projects, just how acute the contrast is to the previously war-devastated Chechnya. For example, in one of the mountain regions that saw the heaviest fighting 15 years ago,

the Veduchi ski resort is being built at a cost of potentially up to 500 million US dollars.⁷⁵

When Ramzan Kadyrov came to power, unemployment in Chechnya stood at over 70 percent. By late 2014, this had allegedly been reduced to 21.5 percent, although statistical data from Chechnya are extremely questionable.⁷⁶ In principle, this is true of all socioeconomic data from the North Caucasus, as was most recently emphasised in October 2017 by Natalya Zubarevich, an expert on economic development in Russia’s regions. Her assessment was made when great numbers of governors and representatives of the regional power elites in this part of Russia were dismissed due to their weak economic performance.⁷⁷ Such data are unreliable, Zubarevich points out, if only because of the sprawling underground economy.

On 19 April 2017, President Putin received Kadyrov in the Kremlin and emphasised a series of socioeconomic successes. He stated that decrees passed by him (Putin) in May 2012 for development in Chechnya had been implemented; unemployment had already sunk to 9.2 percent; wages were being paid regularly; and pre-school education was now available for 100 percent of children.⁷⁸

Despite the Kadyrov regime’s insistence on independence, Chechnya’s economy is largely dependent

74 Musa Basnukaev, “Reconstruction in Chechnya: At the Intersection between Politics and the Economy”, in *Chechnya at War and Beyond*, ed. Anne le Huérou et al. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 76.

75 Andrew E. Kramer, “Where Islamists Reigned, a Ski Resort Rises”, *The New York Times*, 1 February 2018.

76 Hannah Salyers Kibler, *Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia’s Vanguard of Security or Long-Term Liability?* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, College of Social Sciences and Public Policy, 2016), 52.

77 “Zubarevich: dlja serii otstavok na Severnom Kavkaze net ekonomicheskich osnovanij” [Subaryevitch: There are no economic reasons for the wave of dismissals in the North Caucasus], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 6 October 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/310642>.

78 “Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights 17–23 April 2017”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 27 April 2017.

on both Russia and the local power elite and local state bodies. The private or market-based sector is largely underdeveloped.⁷⁹ The minister for the economy in Grozny objects that Chechnya has created a favourable climate for investment and that in 2014 private investments totalled 79 percent of all investment in the republic. Independent observers, however, including economists at Chechnya's State University, are sceptical. They point out that there are hardly any jobs in the private sector, but almost exclusively in the state apparatus and administration. And salaries are exceedingly low, except in the higher ranks of the security agencies. One of the few exceptions is the Rodina Complex, in which the Chechen oligarch Abubakar Arsamakov has invested. The complex encompasses large farms and garden centres, for which fallow land in part contaminated by mines was made arable.⁸⁰ The foreign investment which was used to nurse Grozny back to health and give it its magnificent façades partly came from the United Arab Emirates, with which the regime maintains good relations. Additional resources came from a fund created by Ramzan Kadyrov, bearing his father's name, and administered by his mother. The Akhmat Kadyrov Fund is stocked using compulsory levies that are deducted from state employees' pay in a "parallel tax system".⁸¹

Moscow made it clear that Chechnya would increasingly have to grow its economy on its own strength.

In Soviet times, the budget of the autonomous republic (which at the time consisted of both Chechnya and Ingushetia) was already more than 50 percent dependent on subsidies from Moscow. In the post-Soviet era, that share has risen to more than 80 percent. Such high levels of dependence are characteristic for many other federal subjects, not just in the North Caucasus but in other areas as well. Under the

umbrella of a federal programme started in 2002, Moscow took care of the reconstruction of houses, schools, hospitals and roads in the war-ravaged Chechnya with lavish payments. Even after the programme ended in 2012, Moscow continued to grant ample subsidies, but made it clear that Chechnya would increasingly have to grow its economy on its own strength. At the time, it was not yet apparent that Russia would slide into an economic crisis driven by sinking oil prices, sanctions and other factors.⁸²

⁷⁹ Kathrin Hille, "Chechnya's Economic Recovery Tested by Slowdown", *Financial Times*, 28 April 2015, <http://www.ft.com/content/8233d33c-ecd0-11e4-a81a-00144feab7de>.

⁸⁰ Hannah Salyers Kibler, *Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Vanguard of Security or Long-Term Liability?* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, College of Social Sciences and Public Policy, 2016), 64.

⁸¹ Cf. the detailed treatment in "Fond Kadyrova: kak tratjat 'dengi ot Allacha'" [The Kadyrov Fund: How to spend 'Allah's money'], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 6 October 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/310518/>.

⁸² "Against a troubled economic backdrop, the federal authorities are less and less apt to give in to Grozny's extravagant financial demands. The republic's restoration programme drew to a close in 2012, for instance, whereas Kadyrov hoped that it would continue until 2017: instead of \$3 billion, Chechnya has had to make do with \$350 million." Laruelle, *Kadyrovism* (see note 48), 8.

Chechnya as a Cross-Border Actor

Kadyrov's policies do not stop at his republic's borders. They extend primarily to his immediate neighbourhood in the Russian Federation, in the form of border disputes with Dagestan and Ingushetia. He has laid claim to areas in neighbouring regions that were part of Chechnya before the 1944 deportation. A clash between Chechen and Ingush authorities occurred in 2012 when Chechen security forces carried out a special operation in the Ingush village of Galashki. In August 2012 Kadyrov criticised his counterpart in Ingushetia, Yunus Bek Yevkurov, for not combating terrorism in his territory robustly enough: "If Yevkurov can't take care of things, we'll have to do it. He doesn't seem interested at all. Or what else can he mean when he says that he doesn't want to describe terrorists as bandits? As if they're young people who have lost their way. For us, they're bandits, terrorists, satans, enemies of the Chechen and Ingush people, enemies of Russia."⁸³ This criticism referred to Yevkurov's attempt to include Islamist groups in his republic in a dialogue with the official clergy and government officials. Even though these events occurred some time ago, the problem of cross-border discord has not been resolved. In July 2017, for example, there were confrontations in Leninaul district at the border with Dagestan between Chechens and members of other ethnic groups.⁸⁴

When fighting his opponents, Kadyrov reaches far beyond Chechnya. As mentioned above, some of his adversaries and rivals were murdered in exile – both in Russia and abroad – and their relatives in Chechnya threatened with collective punishment. This led

to protests outside of Russia as well, for example in the Chechen diaspora in Vienna, Stockholm and Berlin. In response, Kadyrov threatened activists in Europe that any of their relatives still in Chechnya would be held responsible.⁸⁵

As Putin's "foot soldier", the head of the Chechen republic supplies Moscow with elite fighters for deployment to Syria and Ukraine. However, Chechens can at times fight on both sides of the respective front. In East Ukraine, for example, a few hundred Chechens sided with Ukrainian combatants against pro-Russian separatists. They had been recruited from anti-Russian exile groups hostile to Kadyrov and are organised into two brigades. One is named after Dzhokhar Dudayev, the leader of the Chechen secession movement in the 1990s; the other after Sheikh Mansur, the first leader of the Chechen resistance against Russian invasions into the North Caucasus in the late 18th century. On the opposite side, about 300 Chechens loyal to Kadyrov fought for the separatists in Donbass supported by Moscow.⁸⁶ Russia's incursions into Ukraine are explicitly supported by Grozny. For the third anniversary of the referendum on the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Kadyrov organised a sports festival in March 2017 under the title "Crimea and Russia – We belong together".⁸⁷ Shortly before, on 23 January 2017, Kadyrov had finally admitted that Chechen troops were stationed in Syria. The above-mentioned Adam Delimkhanov was entrusted with forming the Chechen units to be sent to Syria. Inter alia they served for some time with the Russian military police near Aleppo. After a deployment to Syria lasting

83 Quoted in "Kadyrov Ramzan Akhmatovich", *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 22 December 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/85366/>.

84 "Zhiteli Leninaula rasskazali o strel'be na granice Dagestana i Chexhni" [Inhabitants of Leninaul report on shootout at the border between Dagestan and Chechnya], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 8 July 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/305704/>.

85 Emil Souleimanov, "Kadyrov Represses Dissent among European Chechens", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 9 March 2016.

86 Laruelle, *Kadyrovism* (see note 48), 17.

87 "Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights 13–19 March 2017", *BBC Monitoring Global Newslines – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 25 March 2017.

several months, the Chechen military-police troops returned home in February 2018.

Nevertheless Kadyrov presents himself as a leader of Muslims in Russia and internationally in such a way that it challenges Moscow in both its domestic and foreign policy. This became evident in 2017 in connection with the state violence against the Rohingya Muslim ethnic group in Myanmar, a violence with genocidal characteristics. Kadyrov portrayed himself once again as an important voice in the Islamic world. On 4 September 2017 he organised a mass demonstration with an alleged one million participants – according to the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* there were only about 100,000 – who were supposed to express their solidarity with their persecuted Islamic brothers and sisters in Southeast Asia. Members of the Muslim Spiritual Administrations (muftiates) of other North Caucasian autonomous republics also took part in the demonstration. President Putin and the Russian government were urged to take a decisive stance in this foreign affair. Before the demonstration, in a Youtube video, Kadyrov criticised comments by Moscow for suggesting that both the Russian and Chinese leaderships supported the authorities in Myanmar, pointing to the existence of rebel groups among the Rohingya.⁸⁸ It is unlikely that the Kadyrov factor carries much weight in the Sino-Russian relationship.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, because there were also demonstrations in other Muslim regions of the Federation against the persecution of the Rohingya, including in Moscow in front of the Embassy of Myanmar, Kadyrov did cause the Kremlin some difficulties with his statement. Russian political experts such as Fedor Lukyanov see this as the first serious foreign-policy disagreement between Moscow and Grozny.⁹⁰ However, in 2012 Kadyrov had already

called on the Russian government to pay more attention to the repression of the Rohingya.⁹¹

Five years later, Muslims in different parts of Russia proclaimed their solidarity with their persecuted fellow believers in Myanmar.

Five years later, Muslims in different parts of Russia – Moscow, Grozny, the Dagestani capital Makhachkala, the capital of Karachay-Cherkessia, Cherkessk, and elsewhere – proclaimed their solidarity with their persecuted fellow believers in Myanmar. Experts believe this shows the “rise of a political Islam in Russia” headed by Kadyrov.⁹² Anti-Buddhist slogans appeared during the demonstrations and on social networks, and even calls for Muslims to go on jihad to Myanmar and stand by the Rohingya. The Russian security authorities, however, abstained from violent measures against the demonstrators.

Transposing the violence in Myanmar – deplored by the United Nations as a brutal “ethnic cleansing” – onto a religious level and stylising the conflict as a faith dispute between Buddhists and Muslims would first and foremost harm those countries in South and Southeast Asia where the two faith communities live as neighbours. However, the multiethnic state of Russia could also be affected, since Islam and Buddhism along with Orthodox Christianity are officially considered its “traditional religions”. The autonomous republic of Kalmykia has the largest Buddhist-Lamaist ethnic group in European Russia; it is located close to the North Caucasus, where there were the strongest

88 “Chechnya Holds Massive Rally in Support of Myanmar’s Rohingya”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 4 September 2017.

89 “Politologi kritichno ocenili znachimost’ ‘faktora Kadyrova’ v voprosakh otnoshenij Moskvy i Pekina” [Political scientists gauge the importance of the ‘Kadyrov Factor’ for the relationship between Moscow and Beijing], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 7 September 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/309143/>.

90 “Given the growing role and influence of the Muslim community in Russian politics the authorities can hardly ignore such sentiments. Especially when they are expressed by such an influential Muslim politician as Ramzan Kadyrov [...]. It seems the first time Kadyrov and the authorities disagree so much on an issue, which is even more important as it puts Russia in a complicated position in its relations with

China, Myanmar’s main patron.” Fedor Lukyanov, quoted in “Russian Press Views Chechen Leader’s Bid for New Status”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 6 September 2017.

91 On 13 August 2012 he wrote on Chechnya’s official website: “I ask the leadership of our country and the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to use all available diplomatic, political and economic means to end the religious-ethnic cleansing – the genocide – in Myanmar.” Quoted in “Zajavleniya Kadyrova o M’janme priveli k zaderzhaniyam v Rossii” [Kadyrov’s declarations have led to arrests in Russia], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 11 September 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/309410/>.

92 Sergei Markedonov, *Myanmar, Russia’s Muslims, and a New Foreign Policy* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 12 September 2017); Ridvan Bari Urcosta, “Far Away Myanmar Triggering Rise of Political Islam in Russia”, *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 13 September 2017.

reactions to the persecution of the Rohingya. And social networks calling on Muslims to demonstrate have already carried hate speech against Kalmyks.⁹³ However, the overall attitude of Russia's population towards Buddhists has not worsened, as a Levada Centre survey on relationships with faith communities showed in December 2017.⁹⁴

Among the Russian general public, there emerged a number of possible explanations for the outbursts in parts of the Muslim community. Some employed well-established propaganda templates and accused the USA of being behind the wave of protests and agitating Russia's Muslims. Others blamed Turkey and Saudi Arabia for spreading hysteria. Above all, however, people pointed to the political ambitions of the head of the Chechen republic, whom they see as trying to cement his role as "guardian of Islam" during the crisis. This was not necessarily viewed as exclusively negative. With Kadyrov's support, some say, Russia could also foster "spiritual ties" with the Islamic world, and capitalise in terms of both domestic and foreign policy. After all, Kadyrov professes his affiliation not only with Islam but also with Russia and President Putin.⁹⁵

Indeed, the Chechen leadership portrays itself as Moscow's assistant in the latter's Middle-East policy – an area which, at the very least since the military deployment in Syria, has once again played a prominent role in Russia's foreign policy. In the person of Ziyad Sabsazi, Chechnya has its very own ambassador to the Middle East and North Africa. He is currently employed particularly to repatriate nationals of Russia and all CIS countries from the war zones in Syria, Iraq and Libya. Kadyrov's father Akhmat, who began a degree in Islamic law in Jordan in 1990, nurtured relations with statesmen in the Middle East during his term in office as mufti and later as Chechnya's president. Sabsazi, a Chechen born in Aleppo, served as his consultant.⁹⁶

⁹³ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁴ *Otnoshenie k religiyam* [Attitudes to religion] (Moscow: Levada Centre, 23 January 2018), <http://www.levada.ru/2018/01/23/otnoshenie-k-religiyam/>.

⁹⁵ "Groznoe preduprezhdenie" [Warning from Grozny], *Gazeta.ru*, 4 September 2017, http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2017/09/04_e_10873592.shtml?mc_cid=5d6588ce8e&mc_eid=9eaa49374d.

⁹⁶ Pavel Luzin, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat", *Intersection (Security)*, 11 April 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/security/ramzan-kadyrov-russias-top-diplomat>.

Kadyrov presents Chechnya as a significant actor in Syria due to its participation not only in Russia's military deployments, but also in the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. For example, the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation financially supports the restoration of Aleppo's main mosque and further mosques in Homs. Chechen television showed Adam Delimkhanov at Friday prayer in the courtyard of the Umayyad Mosque of Aleppo, which was still strewn with rubble from the many weeks of fighting in the town. Thereafter, Delimkhanov and Chechnya's mufti visited a police bataillon staffed by fellow Chechens patrolling the streets of Aleppo and Delimkhanov gave speeches in the Chechen language.⁹⁷

Kadyrov's Middle-East Policy reaches far beyond Syria and is mostly orientated towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

Admittedly, Kadyrov's Middle-East Policy reaches far beyond Syria and is mostly orientated towards Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, with which Chechnya also has economic relations. Kadyrov had already had links to the Saudi Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman before the latter became the new Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. However, this cooperation with the Wahhabite kingdom clashed with a resolution adopted by an international congress of Islamic theologians in Grozny in 2016. The so-called Grozny Fatwa condemns "religious extremism in all its forms", counting Wahhabism and Salafism as among the "dangerous currents". The fatwa created controversy among Islam scholars and the official muftiate clergy in Russia.⁹⁸ In November 2016 Saudi media reported that Kadyrov had clarified during a meeting with the Crown Prince that the statement against Wahhabism was a misunderstanding.⁹⁹ Relations with Riyadh have not suffered. Kadyrov emphatically categorises Saudi Arabia as an indispensable partner in fighting international terrorism. In late May 2017, the Chechen mufti met the ambassadors of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in Moscow and praised Chechnya as "a reli-

⁹⁷ Albert Aji, "Chechnya a Major Player in Rebuilding Syria", *The Daily Star*, 19 July 2017.

⁹⁸ Liz Fuller, "Grozny Fatwa on 'True Believers' Triggers Major Controversy", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (Caucasus Report)*, 14 September 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-grozny-fatwa-controversy/27987472.html>.

⁹⁹ "Kadyrov Ramzan Akhmatovich", *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 22 December 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/85366/>.

able bridge between the Islamic world and Russia”.¹⁰⁰ In early October 2017, when the Saudi king became the first Saudi ruler to visit Russia since the foundation of the kingdom, Russian media presented his visit as one of the most significant foreign-policy events in recent years. Chechnya once again boasted about acting as a bridge between Russia and the Islamic world.

Kadyrov reinforces this role with fiercely anti-Western rhetoric.

Kadyrov reinforces this role with fiercely anti-Western rhetoric. He likes to issue reminders of what was probably the biggest demonstration ever to be held in Grozny, in connection with the international confrontation over the Islamist terror attacks in January 2015 on the *Charlie Hebdo* editorial office and others in Paris. Using the slogan, “We Are Not Charlie”, Kadyrov ordered a mass demonstration against the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed published in Western media and against the satirical treatment of religion. Demonstrators differentiated themselves from the Western response to the attacks and deplored the violation of religious sentiments by “Western freedom of opinion”. Kadyrov’s right-hand man as regards anti-Western ideology is Dshambulat Umarov, the Chechen Minister for Nationalities Policy, External Relations, the Press and Information, and author of a book entitled *The KRA Factor: Confrontation*, where KRA stands for Kadyrov, Ramzan Akhmatovich. Umarov depicts the Chechen leader as a key figure in the fight against “Western conspiracies against Russia” and underscores his role with religious arguments.¹⁰¹

During the Temple Mount conflict, which was sparked by restrictions on access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in 2017, Chechnya also came into conflict with Israel. In July, the republic’s mufiate published a declaration that was understood by the Chechen people as almost a call to jihad.¹⁰²

Kadyrov then proposed an agreement to guarantee access for Muslims to their holy sites in Jerusalem and the security of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and offered himself as “guardian of Al Aqsa”. Once the mosque was openly accessible again, Kadyrov claimed substantial credit for the Chechen authorities having settled the dispute.

In the same year, Grozny also offered to host international conferences on humanitarian aid. According to the Ministry for Nationalities Policy, External Relations, the Press and Information the reasons for this proposal were Chechnya’s authority across the East, the cordial personal relationships Ramzan Kadyrov maintains with many leaders of the Islamic world and the participation of Chechen authorities in a “policy of people’s diplomacy” and in organising humanitarian aid abroad.¹⁰³ An aid project frequently referenced is the financial support given by the Akhmat Kadyrov Fund to Rohingya refugees from Myanmar.

100 “Russia: Chechnya Media Highlights, 22 May – 4 June 2017”, *BBC Monitoring Global Newswire – Former Soviet Union Political File*, 6 June 2017.

101 Quoted in Denis Grekov, “Kadyrov’s Myanmar Offensive and Its Consequences”, *Intersection (Politics)*, 25 September 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/politics/kadyrovs-myanmar-offensive-and-its-consequences>.

102 “DUM Chechni poyasnilo svoe otnoshenie k dzhichadu protiv Izrailiya” [The Spiritual Administration of Chechnya’s Muslims has taken a stand on the jihad against Israel],

Kavkazkii Uzel, 24 July 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/306587/>.

103 “Gumanitarnuju pomoshch vezut v Groznyj” [Humanitarian aid is given in Grozny], *Kommersant*, 14 June 2017.

Prospects and Conclusion

With its secession movement in the 1990s and its confrontation with Moscow during two wars, Chechnya became the *pars pro toto* for the North Caucasus in European eyes. In the years that followed, armed Islamist underground movements also developed in other parts of Russia's Caucasian periphery, thus broadening the European perspective. Since the end of large-scale hostilities a decade ago, Chechnya has no longer stood out as the epicentre of violence in the region. Yet it has not been lastingly pacified. The same is true of the North Caucasus overall. In the last three to four years, violent incidents and the fighting capacity of insurgents have declined so much that the region hardly registers as a significant problem among Russians. In December 2017 the Russian domestic secret service FSB officially announced that the armed underground in the North Caucasus was now completely eliminated.¹⁰⁴ Experts on the region have their doubts about this assessment, since fights between security forces and insurgents continue. Furthermore, the return of Caucasian jihad migrants from Islamist fight formations abroad could become a security challenge. This is particularly true of the largest republic in the North Caucasus, Dagestan. In 2013 its ruler, Ramazan Abdulatipov, announced that he was crushing the armed underground and combating corruption. However, those goals have not been (wholly) accomplished. As a consequence, he was replaced in October 2017 with a former high-ranking police officer from Moscow, in the most muscular intervention by the Russian central government in regional affairs in the North Caucasus.¹⁰⁵ In January and February 2018, Dagestan's entire government was dismissed, and there followed the most unyielding purge to date in an autonomous republic, using

federal-security and law-enforcement agencies including the attorney general and FSB. In the run-up to the presidential elections in Russia, these operations were meant to signal a further tightening of the "vertical of power" vis-à-vis problem regions such as the North Caucasus.¹⁰⁶ With increasing frequency, high-ranking administrative cadres from other parts of the country are appointed to Russia's republics in the North Caucasus.

In contrast, Ramzan Kadyrov's rule as head of the Chechen republic seems largely protected from such measures. To date, the loyalty pact between the Russian president and his liege in this historically exposed federal subject remains largely intact. President Putin has accepted the stabilisation price for "pacifying" the former war zone. These include serious human-rights abuses in the republic itself; political murders that remain unsolved; sometimes high-handed foreign-policy initiatives; and an "Islamisation from above" creating a legal situation within Chechnya that partly contradicts Russian legislation. The federal power vertical has been tightened throughout the whole Russian Federation, as was demonstrated by the vigorous replacement of personnel within the regional elites before the presidential elections of March 2018. Nevertheless, the leadership of Chechnya undauntedly presents itself as a sort of sultanate that ostensibly will not listen to reason from anyone but President Putin himself. There is speculation as to whether the Putin-Kadyrov pact might shift somewhat during the Russian leader's fourth term in office. The question also arises what would happen should Putin ever exercise his authority after all and demand a personnel change at the top of the Chechen republic. Kadyrov himself has repeatedly stated that he will

104 "Rossiya vyigrala eshche odnu vazhnejshuju bitvu" [Russia has won another decisive battle], *Vzglyad Delovaja Gazeta*, 19 December 2017, https://vz.ru/politics/2017/12/19/900398.html?mc_cid=e7db48683e&mc_eid=9eaa49374d.

105 Cf. Paul Goble, "A Year in Review: For the North Caucasus in 2017, Old Problems Remain while New Ones Arise", *Jamestown Foundation Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9 January 2018.

106 Maria Dománska/Wojciech Górecki, *A Purge in Dagestan ahead of the Russian Election* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [OSW], 14 February 2018), <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2018-02-14/a-purge-dagestan-ahead-russian-election>.

cede his place if President Putin demands it.¹⁰⁷ So far, the Russian general public has not expected or demanded such a measure: according to a Levada Centre opinion poll published in October 2017, Kadyrov ranks seventh among ten politicians in Russia trusted by the public, and is seen as a “strong leader”.¹⁰⁸ The Russian president’s press spokesman, Dmitri Peskov, confirmed on 27 November 2017 that the Kremlin continues to view Kadyrov as the head of the Chechen republic. Kadyrov’s cousin and right-hand man in Moscow, Adam Delimkhanov, affirmed this, saying the future of the republic was unthinkable without Ramzan Kadyrov.¹⁰⁹ Similar statements are made by the Russian power elite about the current president. For instance, Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin has issued the slogan “Putin is Russia – without Putin no Russia”.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, it is not guaranteed that the loyalty pact between Putin and Kadyrov will endure throughout Putin’s fourth term in office. There is currently no fierce resistance in Chechnya to Kadyrov. For the time being, the contrast with the horrific war period continues to hold sway; with his references to “pacification” and “reconstruction”, Kadyrov aims to keep it that way. It is doubtful, however, whether this contrast can lastingly mask the frustration caused by his reign of terror and the socio-economic conditions in the republic.

Regardless of the foreign-policy ambitions of its ruler, Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus are seen as an internal affair for the Russian Federation. In contrast to the South Caucasus with its three independent states and unsolved territorial conflicts, Russia’s Caucasian region is not open to international politics. The exception is Chechnya’s economic and political relationship with Arab Gulf States. Particularly since the Second Chechen War, the influence of Europe and international organisations on the peace settlement has been noticeably limited.¹¹¹ Prior to that, the OSCE in particular was involved as a media-

tor in the conflict between Moscow and Grozny. In 1995, after Russian troops marched into the renegade republic, it founded an assistance group for Chechnya; helped (under its leader Tim Guldemann, a Swiss diplomat) to end the First Chechen War; and kept a presence in the war-ravaged republic until late 1998. Because of the dramatic security situation during the interwar period and the anarchy reigning in Chechnya, which was de facto independent as of 1996, the OSCE was forced to evacuate the assistance group to Moscow; the lack of an international presence in the conflict area during the Second Chechen War, as of October 1999, was conspicuous.¹¹² In 2001 the OSCE assistance reinstated itself in Chechnya, in Znamenskoye, a location that had been largely spared by the war. However, its remit was severely restricted and it was ultimately unable to fulfil its original far-reaching mandate – mediating between the parties involved in the conflict, observing human rights, promoting the rule of law, protecting the population, and facilitating the return of refugees. In late 2002 its mandate was not renewed. Its mission, and an international presence in Chechnya, ended just as Moscow was initiating its policy of Chechenisation, and the rise of the Kadyrov clan began.

And yet developments in Chechnya and the North Caucasus continue to have international importance and an impact on Europe due to the flow of refugees and migrants. Since the start of the Second Chechen War, between 130,000 and 150,000 refugees and migrants from Chechnya have made their way to the EU, especially to France, Austria, Belgium and Germany. During the First Chechen War, many inhabitants also fled the large-scale violence, but they remained in their close or extended neighbourhood: Dagestan, Ingushetia or the Russian interior. A flow of refugees towards Europe mainly began during the Second Chechen War. In 1999, only 368 Russian nationals applied for asylum in Germany; a year later it was already 3,001 (including 1,025 Chechens), and in 2001 4,824 (including 1,994 Chechens). Since 2012 the figures have risen again, peaking in 2013 with 14,487 applications. Their success rate was highest between 2003 and 2005 (2004: 32 percent). By contrast, in 2016 just over 4 percent of applications were

107 “Zajavlenie Kadyrova o gotovnosti k otstavke stalovtorym za chetyre mesjaca” [Kadyrov’s statement on his willingness to resign: the second in only four months], *Kavkazkii Uzel*, 29 November 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/313122/>.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Quoted in Andreas Rüesch, “Herrscher über eine Sackgasse”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26 January 2018.

111 Cf. *Europa im Tschetschenienkrieg. Zwischen politischer Ohnmacht und Gleichgültigkeit*, ed. Martin Malek and Anna Schor-Tschudnowskaja (Stuttgart, 2008).

112 “Rückkehr der OSZE nach Tschetschenien”, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 15 June 2001; Wolfgang Grycz, “Tschetschenien vor Ort. Interview mit dem OSZE-Beauftragten Botschafter Jorma Inki”, *Ost-West. Europäische Perspektiven (OWEP)*, no. 4 (2003): 311–16.

accepted. Of the more than 12,000 citizens of the Russian Federation seeking asylum in Germany that year, 9,850 were Chechens, i.e. over 80 percent.¹¹³ Representatives of the Chechen diaspora in Paris, Berlin and Vienna point out that the migration and refugee crisis in the EU is noticeably transforming asylum policy.¹¹⁴ The German intelligence service has recently warned of increased terror threats from battle-hardened Islamists from the North Caucasus, who have been involved in armed conflicts on foreign jihad fronts in the Middle East.

However, equating Chechen migrants with militant Islamists must be treated cautiously. Human-rights abuses on Kadyrov's territory are not only forcing the markedly reduced armed underground to emigrate from Chechnya, but also those affected by collective punishment, those identified as opponents and critics of the head of the republic, or accused of transgressing Chechen tradition through their sexual orientation.

The link between migration problems and human-rights problems demands international attention for the situation in Chechnya. Accordingly, international organisations and governments in Europe and the USA have expressed their concern about the precarious human-rights situation in the Caucasus republic more frequently since March 2017 than at almost any other time during the past decade.

Abbreviations

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
FSB	Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii (Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation)
IS	"Islamic State"
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
OMON	Otryad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniya (Special Purpose Police Unit)
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
VTsIOM	Vsyerossiyskiy tsentr izucheniya obshchestvenno-go mneniya (Russian Public Opinion Research Centre)

113 Olga Gulina, "What Happens When Chechens Seek Asylum in Europe?", *Intersection (Russia/Europe)*, 2 October 2017, <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/russia-europe/what-happens-when-chechens-seek-asylum-europe>.

114 "Chleny diaspory rasskazali o strache pered vlastjami Chechni" [Members of the Diaspora report on their fear of the Chechen authorities], *Kavkazskii Uzel*, 27 December 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/314365/>.