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## NORTH CAUCASUS

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## Radical Islam in the North Caucasus

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### Abstract

After the Chechen wars, the North Caucasus and other regions of Russia were shaken by numerous terrorist attacks. Most of them were committed by the Caucasus Emirate, founded in 2007 and based on a radicalized version of Salafism and al Qaeda terrorism tactics. Russian security measures, internal tensions and above all the rivalry with the Islamic State (ISIS), which from 2014 had the backing of many North Caucasus fighters in the Middle East, have led to a loss of importance for the Caucasus Emirate.

### Violent Upsurge

Russia's North Caucasus experienced an upsurge in violence after the fall of the Soviet Union. After the hundreds of thousands of casualties from the two Russian–Chechen wars of the 1990s, the emergence of a jihadist insurgency in the 2000s brought with it numerous terrorist acts. Jihadists expanded the geography of violence from Chechnya to most North Caucasus regions and beyond. Two violent jihadist movements adopted radical Islam as their ideology. The Caucasus Emirate established a network of jihadists in each region and organized terrorist acts beginning in 2007. Pro-ISIS jihadists emerged in the North Caucasus on the eve of the 2014 Sochi Olympics. The Caucasus Emirate leaders denounced the pro-ISIS movement in the North Caucasus. However, many insurgents and would-be fighters went to the Middle East and joined ISIS. With the Caucasus Emirate under pressure, pro-ISIS jihadists gained more popularity in the North Caucasus.

### The Caucasus Emirate

The Caucasus Emirate (CE) proclaimed its authority on the territory of most North Caucasus republics in 2007, establishing radical Islam as its political ideology. The CE carried out terrorist acts in Ingushetia, Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as outside of the Caucasus. The establishment of the CE brought with it a radical version of Islam, though radical Islam had existed since the end of the First Chechen War as a marginal movement. The CE transformed radical Islam into a political force, crystallizing the extremist trend.

While the First Chechen War was fought mostly by local recruits and was based on a nationalist ideology, the insurgent leaders of the Second Chechen War sought to expand the insurgency across the North Caucasus, using religious radicalism as their ideology. The cooperation between local extremist groups started in Kabardino-Balkaria and Chechnya, though no formal structure existed until 2005.

Anzor Astemirov, the leader of the Kabardino-Balkaria insurgents, first proposed to unite all the anti-Russian religious groups in the North Caucasus in early 2005, however, the president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), Abdul-Khalim Sadullayev, rejected the proposal. After the death of Sadullayev in Summer 2006, the new president of the ChRI, Doku Umarov, accepted Astemirov's offer and created the Caucasus Emirate. The CE included six vilayats (administrative divisions). The new ideology, based on radical Islam without nationalism, was established as the foundation of the Caucasus Emirate in October 2007. Umarov became the executive leader (Emir), and Astemirov became the ideological and judicial leader (Kadi of the sharia court).

CE existed as a decentralized structure both institutionally and ideologically. Each vilayat could have its own independent structure and policy. When Umarov announced that the CE should increase its activities during the run up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics, some other vilayats pursued differing goals, including the Ingush vilayat's decision to prioritize nationalist goals and stop targeting local police officers and the Kabardino-Balkaria-Karachai vilayat's decision to intensify targeting "hypocrites, idolaters, and necromancers," alongside the law enforcement structures.

Despite the differences among the CE branches, targeting the Sochi Olympics remained the main strategy of the insurgents. CE terrorist activities became the biggest challenge facing Russia's domestic security forces. Thanks to extraordinary security measures, the Russian authorities managed to prevent any terrorist acts in Sochi and the overall numbers of terrorist attacks dropped starting in 2010. However, the CE organized a number of terrorist attacks in other parts of Russia, including two explosions in Moscow, in 2010–2011, a series of explosions in Volgograd, in 2013, and a terrorist attack in the capital city of the North Caucasus Federal District, Pyatigorsk, on New Year's Eve 2014.

After the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the Russian security services interrupted the CE network infrastructure and

killed the leaders of CE one by one, including the founder of the CE, Doku Umarov, in April 2014, the second leader Aliaskhab Kebekov, in April 2015, the third leader, Mukhamed Suleimanov, in August 2015, and the fourth leader, Zalim Shebzukhov, in August 2016.

### Radical Islam as a Version of Salafism

Different branches of the CE developed specific tactical skills, like targeting civilians, law enforcement officers, and the Sochi Olympics. However, the disputes among the different branches over the tactical preferences remained ideological/theological. The ideology of radical Islam in the North Caucasus was based on Salafism from the beginning. Although Salafi Islam is not necessarily radical, the CE adopted a radicalized version of Salafism, suggesting that all spheres of society should be based on the law and spirit of Islam. The CE brand of Salafism also practiced intolerance, extremist behaviors, and hostility toward Muslims with differing beliefs, labeling them “hypocrites.” The founders of the CE shared a common ideological ground, agreeing both on terrorist measures against Islamic leaders who worked with the Russian state and toward Russian law enforcement agencies (*siloviki*). As the executive leader of the CE, Umarov organized planned terrorist actions against both “infidels” and *siloviki*, while as the judicial leader of the CE, Astemirov issued ideological statements against “traitorous Imams.”

Initially, the Caucasus Emirate did not have a unified approach toward non-Salafi Muslims. Some of the insurgency leaders, including Umarov, advocated violence against civilians, including non-Salafi Muslims and argued for a broader definition of the enemy, beyond those who attacked insurgents directly. Other leaders, including Astemirov, spoke against unnecessary violence against Muslims and for seeking the support of the local population and for converting all Muslims to Salafism and radical Islam. Those ideological debates did not split the movement, but shaped differences in tactics between CE vilayats.

### Clashes Between Different Trends of Radical Islam

The leaders of the Caucasus Emirate initially announced their loyalty to al Qaeda, following al Qaeda’s tactics of international terror, and organizing terrorist attacks on the “enemy’s territory.” However, in 2014, clashes inside the radical Islam movement in the North Caucasus took place around the question of how to approach international terror.

On the eve of the 2014 Olympics, three terrorist attacks took place outside the North Caucasus, in Volgograd. The CE did not take responsibility for these actions

in spite of the fact that Umarov announced targeting the Sochi Olympics as a priority. Instead, an unknown insurgency group released a video taking responsibility for the attacks and threatening to conduct more attacks during the Sochi Games. The new insurgency group was not connected to the CE and named themselves Ansar al-Sunna, after the terrorist organization fighting against the United States in Iraq. The split between the CE and Ansar al-Sunna became the first indication of a split between the pro-al Qaeda jihadists and pro-ISIS jihadists in the North Caucasus.

In September 2014, ISIS threatened to begin a war in the North Caucasus as retaliation for Russia’s help to the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad. On 21 November 2014, the first insurgent from the North Caucasus, Suleiman Zainelabidov, openly pledged his allegiance to ISIS. CE leaders announced that Zainelabidov was not an official member of the CE and accused him of causing a split among the insurgents.

More importantly, on 19 December 2014, the leader of the CE’s Dagestan branch, Rustam Asildero, pledged his allegiance to ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The leader of the CE, Aliaskhab Kebekov, responded condemning Asildero as a traitor and of splitting the insurgency. Kebekov replaced Asildero, which did not prevent a number of other senior CE commanders following Asildero, including the leader of the Ingush branch of the Caucasus Emirate, Beslan Makhauri, and the leader of a suicide squadron, Aslan Byutukaev.

After Kebekov’s death, in April 2015, the third leader of CE, Mukhamed Suleimanov continued the pro-al Qaeda policy. At the same time, the number of pro-ISIS insurgents in the North Caucasus increased. In June 2015, Caucasus Emirate branches in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachai-Cherkessia announced their support for ISIS. After that, ISIS announced that it had established a branch in Russia’s North Caucasus under the leadership of Asildero. The North Caucasus insurgents organized a number of terrorist attacks in the name of ISIS, including in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Astrakhan.

One of the main splits among the pro-al Qaeda and pro-ISIS insurgents took place in Kabardino-Balkaria, where the pro-al Qaeda political ideology initially emerged under the leadership of Astemirov. On 12 August 2015, Robert Zankishiev pledged allegiance to ISIS. The leader of the Caucasus Emirate’s Kabardino-Balkaria branch, Zalim Shebzukhov, on 28 December 2015, refused to pledge allegiance to ISIS and issued an audio statement appealing to militants who joined ISIS to return to the North Caucasus. Some experts interpreted the statement as a sign that the Caucasus Emirate was disoriented, because of its rivalry with

ISIS jihadists. However, there have not been any open clashes between pro-al Qaeda and pro-ISIS supporters in Kabardino-Balkaria.

After Suleimanov's death on 17 August 2016, Zelim Shebzukhov became the leader of the Caucasus Emirate and continued his predecessor's pro-al Qaeda policy. The fourth leader of the Caucasus Emirate was killed during an antiterrorist operation in St. Petersburg in 2016 and the position of the Caucasus Emirate in the North Caucasus has remained weak since then.

Though the ideological split took place only in 2014, the tactical split between pro-al Qaeda and pro-ISIS insurgents started a year earlier. A significant number of pro-ISIS insurgents from the North Caucasus joined ISIS in Syria. The Russian authorities announced in 2013 that 2,800 Russians were fighting for ISIS in Syria. With some of the insurgents leaving Russia to join ISIS, radical Islam lost some of its hold in the North Caucasus. In 2017, the number of Russian insurgents in ISIS was 3,417, including 1,200 from Dagestan, 1,700 from Chechnya, 183 from Kabardino-Balkaria, 200 from Ingushetia, 70 from Astrakhan, and 22 from Adygea. Insurgents from Russia joined ISIS via different routes,

including directly via Turkey and Europe, as well as during the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca.

## Conclusion

The main disagreement between pro-al Qaeda and pro-ISIS fighters in the North Caucasus concerned the strategy of insurgency. Pro-al Qaeda ideologists in the Caucasus Emirate argued that the war of terror should be conducted in the countries hostile to Islam, including Russia. Pro-ISIS ideologists in the North Caucasus prioritized the idea of creation of a state based on radical Islamist ideology and wanted to join ISIS in its struggle to create a new Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East.

A number of factors contributed to decreasing the number of radical Islamic followers in the North Caucasus, including the split inside the insurgency, the lack of support among the local Muslim population, and Russian security measures. The number of CE followers dropped significantly thanks to the split among the insurgents after the 2014 Sochi Olympics; and after 2017, the flow of young Muslims leaving Russia in order to join ISIS stopped.

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## ANALYSIS

## Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov

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### Abstract

In the more than ten years of his rule over Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov has succeeded in largely pacifying and rebuilding the Chechen republic. He turned the former break-away entity into a totalitarian enclave, ruled by repression and fear. Kadyrov's loyalty to the Kremlin guarantees him and his entourage impunity and significant economic preferences, as well as Chechnya's very special status within the Russian Federation. However, this status is dependent on the highly personalized relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov, and any status quo change in the Kremlin is likely to present a serious challenge to the Russo–Chechen relationship.

### A Decade of Ramzan

Ramzan Kadyrov, the 42-year-old leader of Russia's former breakaway Chechen republic, has been ruling the region for over ten years. In 1991, Chechnya—a predominantly Muslim region in Russia's North Caucasus—declared its *de facto* independence and has since fought two devastating wars with Russia, the last of which was officially referred to as a “counter-terrorism operation” and was completed in 2009. By that time, Chechnya was already under the iron rule of Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of the late Akhmad Kadyrov, a Sufi cleric and Mufti of separatist Chechnya, who later swapped sides and welcomed the Russian troops in 1999. After Akhmad Kadyrov was killed in a bomb blast during the Victory Day parade on May 9, 2004, his son was installed as the new ruler. However, no authentic conflict-resolution process had preceded the power transfer; the Kadyrov family was installed in imitation of a political transition.<sup>1</sup>

Ramzan Kadyrov, commonly referred to as simply Ramzan, has turned Chechnya into a state within the Russian state, with its own laws, parallel economy, foreign policy and locally controlled security services. Today, when the Russian Federation has become a highly centralized and *de facto* unitary state, the Chechen leader enjoys unprecedented autonomy, greater than any other Russian regional leader.

Nonetheless, the Kremlin does not seem to worry about losing control over the potentially separatist region: there is hardly any other person in Russia whose *physical* survival and that of his political clan depends so much on Vladimir Putin. Ramzan has numerous enemies among the Chechens, Russian federal politicians, and security services. He has never been elected

in free and fair elections and thus lacks legitimacy; he is well aware that his current privileged political and economic position and the impunity of his regime are fully dependant on the Russian president and the Russian military presence. Ramzan offers the Kremlin his loyalty, in return, the Russian president grants Chechnya a special status within the Russian state.

### Putin's Foot Soldier

The Chechen leader's expressions of loyalty range from delivering 99 percent of electoral votes to Vladimir Putin and the United Russia party in Chechnya to symbolic and rhetorical gestures and military support in hybrid wars abroad. Ramzan brings more than 100,000 people into the streets for celebrations of Putin's birthday, he wears T-shirts with Putin's portrait, he advocates that Putin should be the president for life, and has renamed the historical Victory Avenue in the heart of Grozny in honour of the Russian leader.

Ideologically Kadyrov is a passionate supporter of Putin's official lines: his discourse is aggressively laudatory of great power Russia and staunchly anti-Western. Kadyrov blames the West for the wars in Chechnya and accuses it of aiming to destroy Russia.<sup>2</sup> Kadyrov has also repeatedly called himself the foot soldier of Vladimir Putin, ready to fight whenever necessary on the order of the General commander-in-arms. In February 2014, he gathered a stadium with 20,000 armed Chechen police and declared, “We are tens of thousands who have had special training. We ask our national leader to consider us a voluntary special unit of the commander-in-chief. We are ready to protect Russia, its stability and borders and carry out tasks of any difficulty.”<sup>3</sup> The same day 10,000 security servicemen submitted written reports

1 <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/46963aff0.pdf>

2 <http://www.chechnya.gov.ru/page.php?r=126&id=19549>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgdBgozvLWk>



expressing their wish to be sent to any part of the world upon the order of the president.<sup>4</sup>

Since that pledge in 2014, Ramzan Kadyrov's men have been indeed used outside Russian borders during the armed escalation in the Ukrainian Donbass. Given that Russia denied the involvement of its security forces in Ukraine, Kadyrov distanced himself from admitting the formal deployment of his men there, insisting that these fighters were volunteers rather than servicemen. Thus, he provided a valuable service to the Kremlin, ordering his men to do the job that the Russian official security services could not afford to do.

The Kremlin officially used the Chechen security services at the end of December 2016 when the first Chechen battalion of military police was sent to Syria, followed by another battalion sent to Aleppo soon after. Since then the Chechen military police has played an important role in Syria where Russia needed a Sunni actor to balance its Shiite-Alevite alliance and to deploy a well-trained police force without much public opposition or resistance.<sup>5</sup>

In Kadyrov's own words, "our guys serving in the military police have been entrusted with guarding the most important sites, [providing] law-enforcement, patrol and accompanying humanitarian cargoes in the most important areas and complicated districts... the city of Palmira and the adjacent area are under full control of fighters from the Chechen Republic, as well as all the key strongholds in Syria."<sup>6</sup> Sources among Syrian civil society actors testified that Chechen police played a major role during the process of relocating the population from Eastern Ghouta to Idlib. In addition, Kadyrov's charity fund has undertaken the restoration of the historical mosques in Aleppo and Homs, something that Christian Russia—which had heavily bombed the country—would have never had the legitimacy to do.

Thus, since Vladimir Putin came to power Chechnya has morphed from a breakaway separatist entity into Russia's most loyalist region, zealously supporting the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policy and implementing its military tasks in hybrid wars. Ramzan has become one of Russia's most prominent politicians and

lobbyists and joins Vladimir Putin in strategic high-level meetings with some heads of states.<sup>7</sup> Grozny quite frequently receives high-level official delegations and hosts prestigious international conferences.<sup>8</sup> Ramzan often presumes to speak on behalf of all Russian Muslims and since August 2017 has led the federally supported effort to bring Russian children and women back from ISIS. Never before has a North Caucasus national republic been given such high political status in state affairs. This special status for a formerly separatist region would have qualified as a textbook example of effective conflict resolution, had it not been for the fact that the elevation of Chechnya in Russia has nothing to do with recognition, protection or respect for the rights, opinions and interests of the Chechen people. Instead, it is a high tribute to its leader for keeping the "trouble-making" Chechens under tight control, or what President Putin has called the "effective management" of the region.<sup>9</sup>

### "Effective Manager"

In the Kremlin's view Ramzan Kadyrov is not just a loyal regional politician, but a competent leader able to deliver what is required from him in Chechnya. Key requirements are ensuring election results, controlling dissent, reconstruction management and counter-terrorism.

In the 2012 presidential elections, Chechnya delivered 99.76 percent of its votes to Putin, with a turnout of 99.61 percent. In the State Duma elections in 2016, Chechnya gave United Russia 96.29 percent approval. After widespread public criticism of the electoral sultanates, in the 2018 presidential elections, Vladimir Putin received a modest 91.44 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup>

What cannot be overlooked however is that Kadyrov has managed to raise Chechnya from rubble. Since 2006, Grozny has been transformed from a city in ruins into one of Russia's most glamorous capitals in just a few years, with skyscrapers, shopping centers, fountains, opulent mosques and trendy cafes. Huge funds have been allocated with no transparency by the federal center for reconstruction; egregious corruption and violations have been recorded during this effort. However, regardless of

4 "Боевая пехота Владимира Путина готова к любому приказу" ["Combat infantry of Vladimir Putin is ready for any order"], Vesti.ru, 28 December 2014.

5 Given the level of repression no one would dare to challenge this decision in Chechnya, while Russians are unlikely to mobilize against Chechen fatalities in Syria—ethnic hostilities between Russians and Chechens still have not been overcome.

6 <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/society/91981/>

7 <https://www.thenational.ae/world/gcc/king-salman-and-putin-hold-substantive-talks-in-moscow-1.664449>; <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/asia/20171017/1023632925/pridatim-harakter-sistemnosti-cto-obsuzhdali-kadyrov-mirziyoev-tashkent.html>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4agdNwZBI5s>; <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/politic/102450/>

8 For example, the 2016 seventh international meeting of high-ranking security officials that brought together 300 people from 75 countries to Grozny <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/multimedia/photos/72871/>

9 <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/27511166.html>

10 <https://riafan.ru/1037203-rezultat-vyborov-putin-lidiruet-v-chechne-s-91-44-golosov>

the cost, Grozny looks like “one of the business cards” of Russia, according to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.<sup>11</sup>

The Kremlin promotes the Chechen model of counter terrorism to the outside world. In 2017 Ramzan Kadyrov announced that Chechnya didn't have a single terrorist act on its territory.<sup>12</sup> He did not mention the attacks on the artillery regiment of the Russian guard in March 2017—killing six servicemen—the attack on the Russian guard in October 2017, and the attack on a police checkpoint in November.<sup>13</sup> In fact, according to the Caucasus Knot, in 2017 the number of victims of armed conflict in Chechnya increased by 74% compared to 2016, but remained relatively low (75 casualties, 59 killed and 16 injured).<sup>14</sup> In 2018, there were 11 armed clashes or attacks in Chechnya with 26 people killed and 9 injured.<sup>15</sup> So far in 2019 only one incident has occurred and was claimed by ISIS on April 22, however, the Chechen officials deny that it happened.<sup>16</sup> Obfuscation aside, these numbers reflect a significant difference compared to ten years earlier when Kadyrov took over Chechnya. According to the Caucasus Knot, in 2008, 39 terrorist acts took place, leading to the death of 97 and injury of 138 security servicemen, as well as 25 deaths and 25 injuries of civilians.<sup>17</sup>

These impressive developments in suppressing insurgency are the result of three factors: 1) heavy-handed counter-insurgency methods, 2) the ideological and territorial transformations of the insurgency and its own ideological crisis, 3) the massive outflow of radicals to Syria and Iraq.

The Chechen security forces' counter-insurgency methods have been notorious: they systematically took hostage, illegally detained, subjected to violence, expelled from villages, and burnt the homes of insurgents' families, and more, as punitive measures for accused and suspected fighters. Torture of suspects and witnesses who could provide information has been overwhelmingly applied when investigating such crimes; numerous summary executions have been documented. Compared to the federal security services, the Chechen police have had much better local intelligence that allowed them to effectively disrupt clandestine networks.

As early as 2002, the armed conflict spilled over from Chechnya first to Ingushetia and then to Kabardino-Balkaria; since 2009, the epicenter of violence has shifted

to Dagestan, which decreased Chechnya's prominence as the insurgency center. The Chechen separatist insurgency underwent two phases of transformation. First it moved from a nationalist project to a region-wide Islamist agenda in 2007 when the leader of the so-called Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Dokku Umarov, declared the creation of Imarat Kavkaz. The second transformation occurred in June 2015 when most of the remaining Imarat Kavkaz leaders swore allegiance to ISIS.<sup>18</sup> By that time, Imarat Kavkaz had been largely defeated—it was in ideological decline and incapable of competing with the jihadist projects in Syria. Hundreds of Chechen men joined combat groups in Syria and Iraq, both in ISIS and non-ISIS units, and many quickly made their way to the upper echelons of military power in their organizations. As a result of these developments the armed conflict in Chechnya had significantly quieted.

However, attacks continue to occur in Chechnya and since 2015 ISIS-inspired terrorists have been overwhelmingly very young people, often teenagers, the youngest of which was only 11 years old.<sup>19</sup> Thus, since the collapse of the USSR, we are witnessing the third generation of Chechens socialized into armed conflict.

## The Land of Intimidation and Fear

For years, Chechnya has been a territory under immense fear. Along with insurgent and terrorist networks, the Chechen government has suppressed all political rivals, independent civil society and critical voices. The regime is based on the acute personality cult of Ramzan, who is referred to by his supporters as “*Padishah*” (royalty, sovereign). Chechnya is deprived of any mechanisms of protections for its citizens: the prosecuting agencies and investigative authorities are afraid to openly challenge the republican authorities and are not capable of investigating crimes allegedly committed by the powers that be. Chechen security services run a system of secret prisons where people can be kept incommunicado for days or sometimes months, are subjected to torture and other degrading treatment, and are deprived of food and medical aid.<sup>20</sup>

Any critic of Ramzan Kadyrov or his elite can be subjected to violence, publicly humiliated, and forced

11 <https://www.ekhhokavkaza.com/a/26677364.html>

12 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3520124>

13 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3520124>

14 <https://twitter.com/KSokirianskaia>

15 <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/330852/>

16 [https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/335146/?fbclid=IwAR2gD\\_8E9uXye25e2Uouo0FGLPfRlkLlinCSXkyhXli-ZJyjCVao1cswKxs](https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/335146/?fbclid=IwAR2gD_8E9uXye25e2Uouo0FGLPfRlkLlinCSXkyhXli-ZJyjCVao1cswKxs)

17 [https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/north-caucasus-itogi\\_2008/](https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/north-caucasus-itogi_2008/)

18 For more details, see <http://cap-center.org/report-will-new-waves-of-radicalization-in-the-north-caucasus-be-prevented/#eng>, pp.12–16

19 <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/324404/>

20 <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/10/16/136184-geroy-rassledovaniya-novoy-gazety-publichno-rasskazal-o-pytkah-v-sekretnoy-tyurme-dlya-geev-v-chechne>, [https://memohrc.org/ru/news\\_old/chechnya-massovoe-pohishchenie-zhiteley-groznogo](https://memohrc.org/ru/news_old/chechnya-massovoe-pohishchenie-zhiteley-groznogo)

to apologize. In order to put pressure on critics, their relatives are taken hostage, threatened or subjected to violence.<sup>21</sup> Human rights organizations and activists are under attack: their offices have been burnt and they themselves have been threatened, attacked, killed, subjected to torture, and have had criminal cases falsified against them with complete impunity.<sup>22</sup>

Since 2018, effective human rights documentation in Chechnya has become nearly impossible. The last independent Russian human rights group, Memorial, had to close its office after its regional director was arrested on bogus charges of drug possession and subsequently sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

The totalitarian Chechen state controls private life as well; it “helped” 1,030 divorced couples “reunite” to raise their children together, frequently under strong pressure.<sup>23</sup> It imposes “morality” by enforcing dress-codes and rules of “proper behavior” for women, supporting honor killings, bans on alcohol, and by the brutal (extrajudicial) prosecution of homosexuality.<sup>24</sup> Ramzan is keenly promoting “Islamic values” and traditionalism, trying to win support of conservative Chechens.

In addition to a deprivation of rights, the Chechen government runs a parallel economy by *inter alia* collecting illegal tributes and extortions from state-employees and businesses, which significantly affects the already low incomes of the population. Despite a large-scale anti-corruption campaign that has affected neighboring republics, Chechnya’s egregiously corrupt elites enjoy full impunity, which only emboldens their ambitions.

Ramzan is developing clout not only politically, but also by training his special task forces. Since 2015 much attention has been paid to the construction of the International Training Center for Special Task Forces, which is designed to train anti-terrorism groups for combat in the forests, mountains and under water.<sup>25</sup> The center has the most modern equipment and was in 2017 renamed as Russia’s special task forces university.<sup>26</sup> Another train-

ing center exists in Kadyrov’s native village of Tsentaroï. Trainings are supervised by Kadyrov’s personal assistant for the security services, the former FSB special Alpha-group fighter Daniel Martynov.<sup>27</sup>

Kadyrov uses his influence to strengthen Chechnya’s position vis-à-vis other Russian regions. He often speaks out when Chechens’ rights are violated outside Chechnya and financially supports Muslim communities in big Russian cities. The Chechen officials have repeatedly verbalized Chechen territorial claims on neighboring republics.<sup>28</sup> The delineation of the Chechen-Ingush border, which was seen as unfavorable by the Ingush, resulted in mass protests and unrest in Ingushetia since October 2018. Delineation of the border with Dagestan has been less painful, but has kept the Avar population tense.<sup>29</sup> Such moves are supported in Chechnya as Ramzan is keenly playing on nationalist sentiments; however, territorial disputes create acute tensions between Chechens and their neighbors which can in the long-run backfire.

## Conclusion

Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov is a repressive totalitarian enclave with a glossy façade of newly rebuilt cities. There has been no authentic conflict resolution to the Russo–Chechen conflict and the current political arrangement is based on the highly personalized relationship between Ramzan Kadyrov and Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin understands that to maintain Ramzan’s loyalty it has to satisfy the young leader’s appetite for expansion and career growth. The Kremlin believes that it will keep its protégé under control given his vulnerabilities without its support and his blood and political enemies at home and abroad. This will probably be the case until the status quo is changed in the Kremlin. Any new elites in a position to effect relations with Chechnya are likely to be faced with a serious challenge of how to reformat relations with the “omnipotent” Kadyrov, with his well-trained special forces, loyal police, huge

21 [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/chechnya0816ru\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/chechnya0816ru_web.pdf), <https://memohrc.org/ru/news/chechnya-ciloviki-prodolzhayut-primenyat-princip-kollektivnoy-otvetstvennosti-v-otnoshenii>, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/chechnya0709ruweb.pdf>

22 <https://memohrc.org/ru/specials/spravka-o-sostoyanii-rassledovaniya-ugolovnyh-del-vozbuzhdennyh-po-faktu-ischeznoeniya>, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/02/27/75636-sledstvennyy-tupik>

23 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVsfZ-8\\_jb4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVsfZ-8_jb4)

24 In April 2017 Novaya Gazeta published its investigation that claimed that dozens of gay men in Chechnya had been detained in illegal detention facilities, subjected to systematic torture and some of them killed. “Чечня: борьба за моральный облик женщин приобретает все более жестокие формы” [“Chechnya: the fight for the moral image of women is taking on increasingly harsher methods”], <http://memo.ru>, 21 March 2012. “В Грозном похищена девушка, утверждает ее мать” [“Young woman kidnapped in Grozny, her mother said”], Caucasian Knot, 29 July 2013. “Chechen women face strict rule of Islam”, *The Washington Times*, 2 March 2009. For more on honour killings and gender-based violence in Chechnya, see: “Чеченцы в России” [“Chechens in Russia”], Memorial and Civic Assistance, 2014

25 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2dWr9L\\_Pyw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2dWr9L_Pyw)

26 <https://ruspetsnaz.ru/>

27 <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/politic/89653/>

28 [https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/category/kak\\_kadyrov\\_chechnyu\\_ukrupnyaet](https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/category/kak_kadyrov_chechnyu_ukrupnyaet)

29 Author’s interviews with Avar community leaders and intellectuals, Makhachkala, May 2019.



wealth, international connections and criminal proxies in and outside Russia. It is unclear whether the Kremlin has a plan for the transition and better integration of Chechnya into the rest of the country, or if the current incumbents are consciously planting a landmine

for the future elites that could fuel a major confrontation. In the meantime, the residents of Chechnya who do not belong to the Kadyrov clan remain the most suppressed and deprived of rights, freedoms and voices of any category of Russian citizens.

#### *About the Author*

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#### ANALYSIS

## The Reintegration of the Balkars and Intercommunal Peace in Post-Soviet Kabardino-Balkaria

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### Abstract

Unlike some of its North Caucasian neighbors, Kabardino-Balkaria has been spared major interethnic violence since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like several other peoples of the North Caucasus, the Balkars were deported to Central Asia during the Second World War, but they successfully reintegrated after their return. In fact, one of the key factors that inhibited separatism and the outbreak of intercommunal violence in Kabardino-Balkaria during the Soviet collapse was the fact that, in contrast to other North Caucasian communities, Balkar communities had experienced late-Soviet modernization processes on a relatively equal level with their Kabardian neighbors. This stability has endured to this day.

### Oasis of Peace

As waves of intercommunal violence engulfed the Caucasus region from Abkhazia to Chechnya in the 1990s, the multiethnic Kabardino-Balkar Republic, located at the center of Russia's restive North Caucasus, remained a relative oasis of peace. To be sure, as Chechnya and Dagestan's Islamist insurgency branched out after about 2005, Kabardino-Balkaria, as the republic is more commonly known, experienced a low-level insurgency which largely subsided by 2012. But this Islamist violence was *intra*communal rather than *inter*communal. This is not to say there were no intercommunal tensions in Kabardino-Balkaria. In the 1990s, the Turkic-speaking Balkars, the smaller of the republic's two autochthonous

nationalities, experienced ethno-nationalist mobilization around the idea of separating from Kabardino-Balkaria so that they could end their perceived political and economic subordination to the numerically larger Circassian-speaking Kabardian communities.<sup>1</sup>

The Kabardian movement, which emerged as part of the wider Circassian mobilization in support of the ethnically related Abkhaz in their war with Georgia, led counter-mobilizations in opposition to Balkar separatism. Some Kabardians within the Circassian movement called for the revision of regional borders so that the Circassians of the North Caucasus, who had been divided administratively among three national autonomies, could share a common national territory.<sup>2</sup> Finally,

1 K.I. Kazenin, *Tikhiye konflikty na Severnom Kavkaze: Adygeia, Kabardino-Balkariia, Karachaevo-Cherkesiia*. (Moscow: Regnum, 2009), 63–77.

2 Sufian Zhemukhov, "The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 40 no. 4 (2012): 503–24.

many of Kabardino-Balkaria's Russians who traced their ancestry to the Terek Cossacks—military societies that fought in the service of the tsar and colonized the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—joined a resurgent Cossack movement, forming a paramilitary-*cum*-political organization in support of Cossacks autonomy.<sup>3</sup> In the face of these centrifugal forces, Kabardino-Balkaria, unlike neighboring republics facing similar ethno-political tensions, avoided intercommunal conflict. There are certainly crucial short-term causes of Kabardino-Balkaria's post-Soviet intercommunal peace, but by placing Kabardino-Balkaria in its larger historical and regional context, important long-term structural factors that contributed to this peace come into view. Most importantly, differences between the experiences of the Balkars and other North Caucasus communities sharing similar fates as “punished peoples”<sup>4</sup>—nationalities deported under Stalin's orders on false charges of collective treason during the Nazi occupation—help explain the limited success of the mobilizational efforts of Balkar ethno-political entrepreneurs.

### Deportation and Return

On March 8, 1944, Soviet NKVD troops deported virtually the entire Balkar population of the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) to Central Asia. Of the 37,713 Balkars loaded onto boxcars—over 11 percent of Kabardino-Balkaria's population—37,103 Balkars reached their final destinations on the barren steppe of Kazakhstan and Kirgizia. During brief stops, the Balkars buried the bodies of the children and elderly who died of malnutrition and disease. Upon arriving in their places of exile, Balkar deportees did not receive proper housing and provisions, leading to further sickness and death. While the Balkars' living conditions gradually improved, discrimination in education and employment impeded the Balkars' social mobility throughout their thirteen-year exile. Moreover, with the dissolution of their national autonomy (the Kabardino-Balkar ASSR was renamed the Kabardian ASSR in 1944), the Balkars lost their national-cultural rights—on paper, the Balkars ceased to exist as a nationality.<sup>5</sup>

The Balkars endured the same fate as a half-dozen other nationalities charged with collective treason, including the Chechens, Ingush, and Karachais of the North Caucasus, all of whom longed to return to their historic homelands and reconstitute their national existences. This dream became reality after Nikita Khrushchev's “Secret Speech” at the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, which, among other Stalin-era crimes, condemned the ethnic deportations.

The Soviet government took measures to facilitate the return and reintegration of the “punished peoples.” Except for the Balkars, however, the reintegration of North Caucasian peoples returning from exile was incomplete and flawed. The Karachais, Ingush, and Chechens returned to reconstituted national homelands in which Russians monopolized the local administration and economy, and the state did little in terms of affirmative-action style programs (e.g. nativization or *korenizatsiia*) to redress this colonial legacy. Moreover, there were wide discrepancies between the pre-deportation and post-1957 borders and demographic makeup of the national homelands of Chechen, Ingush, and Karachai peoples. Settlers occupied former Chechen and Ingush villages.<sup>6</sup> For the Karachais, the discrepancy between their pre-deportation and post-1957 autonomous territory meant that they shared an autonomous homeland with another nationality, the Cherkess, and that their shared regional capital was in a majority Cherkess region.<sup>7</sup> In addition to the physical and psychological scars of deportation, the Karachais, Ingush and Chechens continued to live with socio-economic and political disadvantages and disparities vis-à-vis their neighbors that were created by the experience of deportation and exile.

### Successful Reintegration

Though not without its difficulties, the reintegration of the Balkars was more successful than was the case for the other “punished peoples.” Among the factors that contributed to this outcome, three were central: outside communities had not colonized the Balkars' mountain valleys during their exile;<sup>8</sup> with brief exceptions, harmony and symbiosis marked the relationship between

3 Yo'av Karny, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 32–46

4 A.M. Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York: Norton, 1978).

5 K.-M.A. Sabanchiev, *Byli soslany navechno: deportatsiia i reabilitatsiia balkarskogo naroda* (Nalchik: Elbrus, 2004), 16–71

6 Nicholas Werth, “The ‘Chechen Problem’: Handling an Awkward Legacy, 1918–1958,” *Contemporary European History*, 15, no. 3 (2006): 347–66

7 Kazenin, 116–17.

8 Aslan Borov, “Deportatsiia i reabilitatsiia balkarskogo naroda kak problema obshchestvenno-politicheskoi zhizni Kabardino-Balkarii,” *Istoricheskii vestnik Instituta gumanitarnykh issledovaniï pravitel'stva Kabardino-Balkarskoi Respubliki* no. 4 (2006): 310–13.

Kabardian and Balkar communities;<sup>9</sup> and in the decade leading up to the Balkars' return, state-sponsored modernization processes tailored to the context of a national republic took place in the Kabardian ASSR.<sup>10</sup> The first two factors need little explaining. The Balkars were able to return to their villages without having to confront the obstacle of well-entrenched newcomers and, with minor exceptions, they returned to a political and administrative arrangement to which they had been accustomed before their deportation. Moreover, given the generally harmonious relations that existed among Kabardino-Balkaria's communities prior to the deportations, it is unsurprising that the regional reports from the late 1950s indicate that local communities were enthusiastic about the return of the Balkars.<sup>11</sup> The role of the state-led modernization campaigns in the decade prior to the Balkars' return in facilitating the Balkars' reintegration is less self-evident.

Starting in the late 1940s, the Kabardian ASSR underwent a renewed nativization campaign in which the state devoted significant resources to training native Kabardian cadres to fill positions previously occupied by Russians in industrial and agricultural management, local and regional administration, and education. The development of a native higher-education infrastructure accompanied this campaign. This new educational infrastructure allowed the government to conduct an effective Balkarization campaign to help reintegrate the Balkars into the political, economic, and social life of the republic. This campaign included the training of new Balkar cadres, the nativization of the administration and economy of Balkar districts, and the closing of the educational gap between Balkars and the rest of the republic's population.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Kabardino-Balkaria, the regions to which the Chechens, Ingush, and Karachais returned lacked the necessary cultural infrastructure and the political will to pursue full reintegration of returnees.

Balkarization leveled disparities between the republic's Balkar and non-Balkar populations in terms of socio-economic status and representation in the local cultural intelligentsia and *nomenklatura* (i.e. those in positions of political, administrative, and economic leadership). Data from the last decades of Soviet rule demonstrate that the large socio-economic gaps that natu-

rally existed between Kabardians and Balkars after the latter's return had been overcome. Similar gaps between the Chechens, Ingush, and Karachais and their respective surrounding communities remained. Nativization in the Kabardian ASSR in the late 1940s and early 1950s created the preconditions for the creation of a national intelligentsia and *nomenklatura* in Kabardino-Balkaria. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, a sizable native intelligentsia and *nomenklatura* of both Kabardians and Balkars had developed in the republic. On the eve of *perestroika*, while Kabardians and Balkars were dominant in their republic's cultural intelligentsia and *nomenklatura*, the Chechens, Ingush, and Karachais were underrepresented in these strata in their national homelands.

The other "punished peoples" of the North Caucasus remained, to varying degrees, marginalized in their homelands.<sup>13</sup> In addition to the physical and psychological scars of deportation, these communities continued to live with the socio-economic and political disadvantages created by deportation. During the volatile years of the Soviet collapse, these disadvantages helped to sustain high levels of nationalist mobilization.

### National Mobilization and Rehabilitation

While Balkar communities may have been reintegrated into the socio-economic fabric of their homeland, their experience of exile, collective humiliation of being unjustly labelled traitors, and permanent loss of ancestral homes and property lives on in their historical memory and continues to shape their sense of national identity.<sup>14</sup> The historical memory of the deportations and exile played a central role in Balkar ethno-political discourse during nationalist mobilizations of the 1990s. The idea of full rehabilitation—as opposed to reintegration—became the issue around which Balkars mobilized during the early 1990s. The idea and practice of rehabilitation, as it developed by the Confederation of Repressed Peoples of Russia, was multifaceted: (1) political rehabilitation through the attainment of an official apology from the state condemning Stalin's ethnic deportations, the cancelation of all Stalin-era decrees and legislation on the "punished peoples," the ethno-territorial restoration of their homelands as they existed on the eve of deportation, and the full right of return; (2) socio-economic rehabilitation through pro-

9 Based on an analysis of Kabardian-Balkar relations over the longue durée, I make this argument in my dissertation. Ian Lanzillotti, "Land Community, and the State in the North Caucasus: Kabardino-Balkaria, 1763–1991" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2014).

10 Ian Lanzillotti, "Towards an Explanation of Intercommunal Peace in Kabardino-Balkaria: Post-War Nationalities Policy and Late Soviet Society in the North Caucasus," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 2 (August 2018): 942–965.

11 Sabanchiev, 81–82.

12 Borov, 329–32.

13 Lanzillotti, "Towards an Explanation," 960–63.

14 I.I. Maremsheva, *Balkariia i Karachai v etnokul'turnom prostranstve Kavkaza* (Nalchik: Elbrus, 2003), 90–109.

grams designed to compensate for and alleviate the deleterious social and economic effects caused by deportation and exile; and (3) cultural rehabilitation through state programs for the revitalization of the languages and cultures of the deported peoples and the banning and criminalization of publications defaming the punished peoples as traitors.<sup>15</sup>

The ability of Balkar ethno-political entrepreneurs to sustain high levels of mobilization foundered because the Balkars' successful reintegration over the late-Soviet period meant that socio-economic rehabilitation—the most pressing and difficult-to-achieve facet of rehabilitation—had largely been achieved before the Balkars' rehabilitation campaign got off the ground. In addressing other aspects of the rehabilitation program, officials in Moscow and Kabardino-Balkaria disarmed the Balkar ethno-political entrepreneurs' best weapon for mobilization. In November 1989 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued the "Declaration on the Recognition of Repressive Acts against Peoples Subjected to Forced Deportation as Illegal and Criminal and the Securing of their Rights."<sup>16</sup> After the Soviet collapse, Boris Yeltsin issued formal apologies to the deported peoples of Russia.<sup>17</sup> In 1991 a Russian federal law "On the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression" allocated monetary compensation to victims of the deportations. The Russian government formed commissions to develop a plan for further rehabilitation measures for each deported nationality. In 1996 the Russian government enacted a four-year federal program "On the Socio-Economic Development and National-Cultural Rebirth of the Balkar People."<sup>18</sup> At the republican level, in addition to a series of important symbolic gestures (official condemnation of the deportations; the designation of March 8 as the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Violent Deportation of the Balkar People and March 28 as the Day of the Rebirth of the Balkar

People; and the construction of a memorial to the victims of the deportation), the government allowed Balkar villages to vote on the reconstitution of their pre-deportation districts and, subsequently, decreed the creation Elbrus District. This gave the Balkars an absolute majority in a second district and addressed one of the few roadblocks to the Balkars' territorial rehabilitation.<sup>19</sup> In addition to federal compensation, the Kabardino-Balkar government also provided monetary compensation to Balkar families who lost property as a result of the deportation. In placing Sufian Beppaev, the leader of the National Council of the Balkar People, in charge of his Commission for Human Rights and the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression, President Valery Kokov gave this former champion of Balkar separatism great control over the distribution of funds allocated for Balkar compensation and rehabilitation.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

Through the co-opting of Balkar elites and the pursuit of rehabilitation measures, Kabardino-Balkaria's post-Soviet leadership managed to stabilize intercommunal relations and marginalize proponents of Balkar separatism. Balkar grievances, however, are never far from the surface in contemporary Kabardino-Balkaria and changes of officials and patronage networks within the Republic's administrative apparatus are frequently accompanied by a resurfacing of the Balkar question. Nevertheless, unlike the situation in neighboring republics, where official apologies, days of remembrance, and modest monetary compensation could not alleviate deep-seated socio-economic inequalities, political marginalization, and territorial losses, in Kabardino-Balkaria these moments of tension have not spiraled into intercommunal violence and have largely been defused through political negotiations and compromise.

## About the Author

Ian Lanzillotti, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of History, Bethany College, West Virginia. His broad thematic interests revolve around the study of nationalism, ethnicity, empire, borderlands, and intercommunal conflict. He has published articles on border delimitation and land disputes during the early Soviet period, contemporary political and social issues in Russia's Kabardino-Balkar Republic, and the highly politicized historiography of land relations in the North Caucasus.

15 "Zakon Rossiiskoi Sovetskoi Federativnoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki 'O reabilitatsii repressirovannykh narodov,'" in *Balkartsy: vyselenie i vozvrashchenie*, ed. Kh.-M. A. Sabanchiev (Nalchik: Elbrus, 2008), 415–17.

16 "Deklaratsiia Verkhovnogo soveta Soiuzu Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik 'O priznanii nezakonnykh i prestupnykh repressivnykh aktov protiv narodov, podvergnutym nasil'stvennomu pereseleniiu, i obespechenii ikh prav,'" in *ibid.*, 410–11.

17 "Prezident Rossiiskoi Federatsii balkarskomu narodu (5 marta 1994 g.)," in *ibid.*, 425.

18 Sabanchiev, 99–101.

19 "Administrativnye tsentry Kabardino-Balkarii" in *Administrativno-territorial'nye preobrazovaniia v Kabardino-Balkarii*, ed. Arsen Karov, (Nalchik: El'-Fa, 2000), 556.

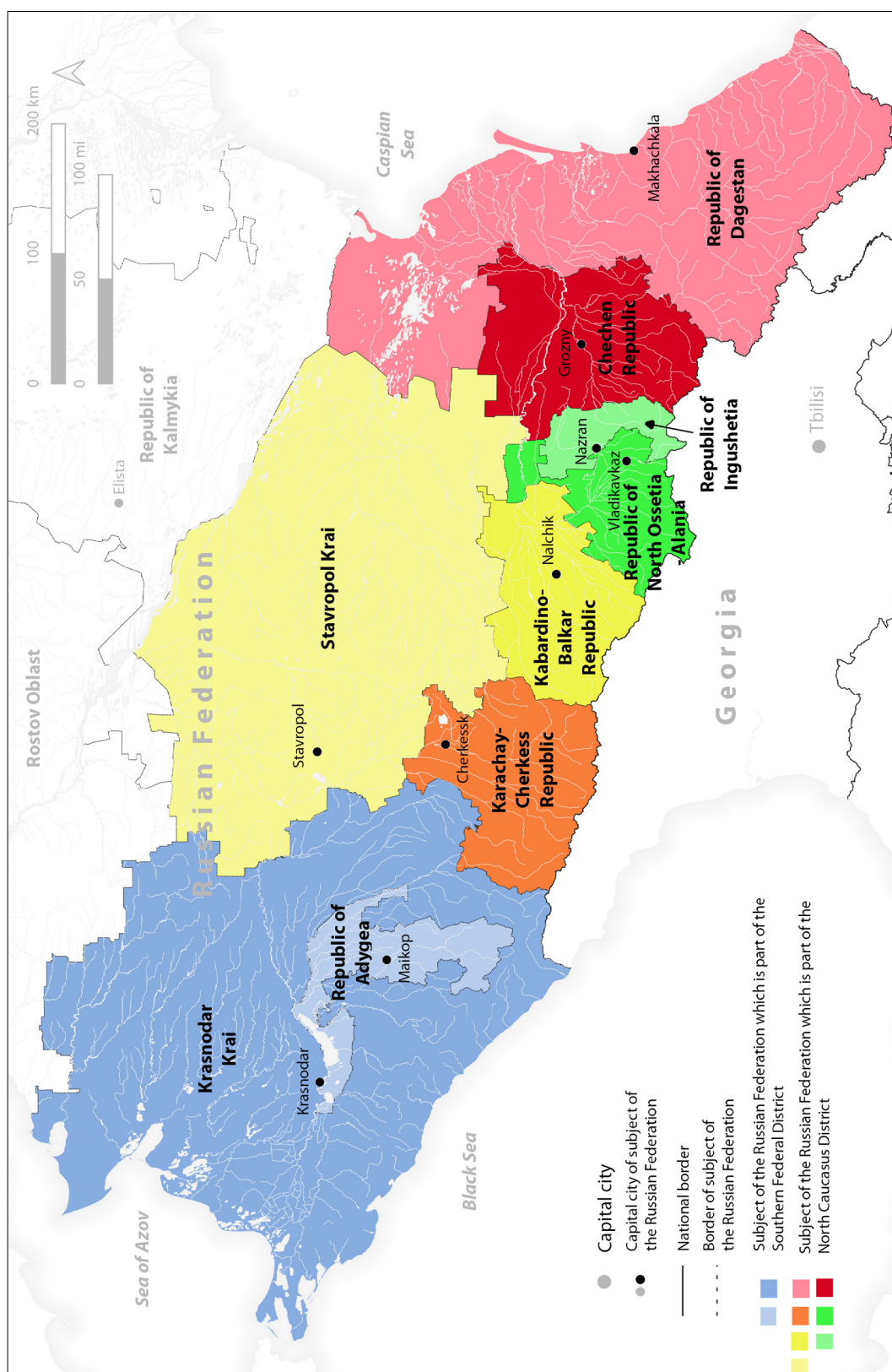
20 Kazenin., 77, 90–104.



## MAP

## Regions (“Subjects”) of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus

Map: Regions (“Subjects”) of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus



Map created by the Research Centre for East European Studies in QGIS; sources for geodata: <https://www.diva-gis.org/gdata>, <http://www.marinerregions.org/gazetteer.php?p=details&id=4282>, and [Flanders Marine Institute \(2018\). IHO Sea Areas, version 3. Available online at http://www.marinerregions.org/](http://www.marinerregions.org/) <https://doi.org/10.14284/323>



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