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Rising from the Ashes

The Role of Chechnya in Contemporary Russian Politics



The “Chechen Problem” – resistance to Russian and Soviet rule in the North Caucasus – is not new: in Tsarist times there was intense resistance to incorporation into the Russian Empire, and the Soviet mass deportation of Chechen and Ingush people in the 1940s ranked amongst the most brutal of Stalin’s repressions, even by his standards (Eide 2001; Werth 2006). However, this chapter focuses on the general importance of Chechnya in and for Russian politics from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and up to the present day. The main argument pursued is that the post-Soviet wars on Chechnya have had a profound impact on Russian power politics. The First Chechen War, in 1994–1996, epitomized the turmoil and disarray that post-Soviet Russia was in at the time, and served to undermine Boris Yeltsin’s presidency and delegitimize him personally. On the other hand, the Second Chechen War, taken up in 1999 while Vladimir Putin was still a freshman Prime Minister, earned him the reputation of being a man of resolute action, and a guarantor of stability and order, using authoritarian means if need be. Those are ascribed traits that, after more than 20 years, still seem to legitimize Putin’s hold on power. From being a symbol of chaos and separatist ambition, Chechnya has in official discourse increasingly come to signify stability, growth, and loyalty to the federal center. In several respects Chechnya is depicted as it were as a metonymy of the Russian Federation. This includes the way that the figure of the regional strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, is communicated as a mirror image of the federal president, Vladimir Putin, albeit with an even greater penchant for using harsh and uncompromising methods to secure him power and allegiance. †

The First War and Yeltsin's downfall



Shortly before the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the seizure of power in Chechnya by retired air force general Dzhokhar Dudaev and the republic's unilateral declaration of independence eventually led to the First War on Chechnya 1994–1996. The war was patently unpopular among the citizens. As more and more young Russian men were brought home in body bags the popular discontent with the incumbent president, Boris Yeltsin increased, as he was attributed much of the blame. Some six months before the first round of presidential elections in the spring of 1996, Yeltsin's rating in the opinion polls was still written in single digits, and he was trailing far behind more popular candidates, notably the communist Gennadii Zyuganov.

After his campaign was profusely supported financially by Russia's industrial tycoons, the oligarchs (apparently in exchange for significant economic and political influence), Yeltsin made a highly unexpected comeback. He made it to the second round of the elections and, once there, beat Zyuganov in the contest for the presidency. However, the campaign had put a tremendous strain on him, and it is probably no exaggeration to state that the war on Chechnya had indirectly taken a heavy toll on his health. He required major heart surgery in late 1996, following prolonged illness, and he never regained his political or physical strength fully thereafter.

In 1996 the separatists had forced the Russian central state to the humiliating Khasavyurt peace accord through which Chechnya's status of *de facto* independence was confirmed. In 1997, internationally observed and recognized presidential elections were held in Chechnya, whereby Aslan Maskhadov was elected as a legitimate president (OSCE 1997). In May 1997 he was invited to the Kremlin, symbolically signing a vaguely-worded (though ultimately short-lived) peace treaty with Yeltsin (Zainetdinov 1997). Though leaving important decisions to the future, it contained a significant concession by Russia that affairs between the two entities would be regulated on the basis of international – not domestic – law. Though formal sovereignty was not relinquished by Russia, Chechnya *de facto* now operated outside Russia's legal, economic and security sphere (Hughes 2007, 92–94). At the same time, the economy of the Russian Federation was in disarray, political instability and chaos reigned, and there seemed to be very little that the federal center could do to stop Chechnya from fulfilling its ambitions to go for full indepen-

dence. Aside from the geopolitical implications of the fact that key Baku-Novorossiisk oil pipeline traversed the republic (Hughes 2007, 62–65), this also prompted fears of a row of falling dominoes from the point of view of Moscow. If one of the constituent parts of the Federation were to leave, the perceived risk was that it would soon be joined by others, such as Tatarstan or regions in the Far East.

In short, the Chechnya debacle had brought Yeltsin's presidency into disrepute, and as contemporary history was written, that also seemed to be the impression left for posterity. The years of the Yeltsin administration of the unruly 1990s became synonymous with the most recent reincarnation of the cyclically recurring periods in Russian history of *smuta*, or Times of Trouble (Petersson 2013), and there was no single event or process that bore this out with more brutal clarity than the developments in Chechnya.

The Second War and Putin's rise to political stardom

By way of forceful contrast, Chechnya contributed very strongly to Vladimir Putin's rise to the stars. When Putin was elected president for the first time in 2000, it was largely thanks to his tough policies on Chechnya. When Putin was elevated to the Prime Minister's office in August 1999 by the ailing Yeltsin, it did not take him long to reopen the war on Chechnya which had been paused since 1996. Chechen militants had initiated small-scale armed incursions into the neighboring Republic of Dagestan just before Putin became prime minister in August 1999, raising the specter of spreading the militant insurgency and avowed Islamic fundamentalism into the wider region of North Caucasus. This was followed by a series of terrorist attacks in September 1999 against apartment blocks in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk, in which several hundreds of people were killed (Cornell 2003). Even if their guilt was never conclusively proven and the circumstances of the bomb blasts were shrouded in mystery, the attacks were widely attributed to Chechen terrorists (Dawisha 2014, 207–223). Together, these events provided Putin with the *casus belli* that he needed to initiate the Second Chechen War. On 23 September 1999, Russian forces took up heavy air bombardment of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya (Golotyuk 1999), and on 30 September troops started massive ground operations.

The dice had indeed been rolled, and in passing this Rubicon, Putin succeeded in initiating a hold on power in Russia which has so far lasted (in four presidential terms and an interregnum as prime minister) for more than twenty years. Following the constitutional changes introduced in the Russian Federation in the spring of 2020, it may, his health and the political conjunctures permitting, even be extended as far as until 2036. By comparison, Peter the Great served as the czar for 43 years (1682–1725), the reign of Catherine the Great lasted for 34 years (1762–1796), and Joseph Stalin was the uncontested leader for around 29 years (1924–1953). The predicted length of Putin’s presidencies would put him in the same league as those prominent leaders of Russian and Soviet history, whom Putin himself on different occasions has referred to as sources of inspiration, albeit in different ways. The argument pursued here is that it was the unfolding of the Chechen War that made it possible for him to claim that position.

Winning hearts and minds: the importance of framing

As unpopular as Yeltsin’s unsuccessful campaign on Chechnya had been in 1994–1996, as popular was Putin’s reopened war in 1999, especially since the initial swift and decisive victories were generously reported, particularly by state-controlled media. Moreover, in the prevailing political discourse during the time leading up to the presidential elections in 2000, Chechnya epitomized everything that was bad in Russian society and almost all threats against the country: the specters of irredentism and separatism, Islamic fundamentalism, and organized crime, to mention but a few (Pettersson 2018). The Chechen hydra was thus depicted as having many heads. By reopening a merciless war campaign against the recalcitrant republic, Putin took them all off in one fell swoop.

No doubt, the authorities had learnt their lesson from the First War in the 1990s: a war needed to be won not only on the battlefield itself but also in the hearts and minds of the people at the home front (Shayk-hutdinov 2019). The First Chechen War in 1994–1996 had seen examples of almost unprecedented media freedom in Russia, with media outlets reporting on losses, atrocities, dismal material standards of equipment, and inept leadership. Without doubt, the critical media attention contributed to bringing the First War to an end (Wagnsson 2000). Against

this vocal and unified public opinion, the authorities could not win.

Again by way of contrast, the Second Chechen War was framed very differently by the powers that be. Whereas the First War had been described as a fight against ethnically inspired warlords who wanted to secede from the motherland, the Second Chechen War was depicted as a staunch and merciless fight against terrorism where Russia was described as taking a global lead (Wilhelmsen 2017). Indicatively, when the United States had been hit by the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Vladimir Putin was among the first to get in touch with his US counterpart, President George W. Bush, to declare his support and collaboration in the unwavering struggle against global terrorism. Putin's quick expression of sympathy served the purpose of underlining the common struggle that Russia and the United States had to undertake. Russia's reputation for combating terrorism played a very central part in building the Putin regime's global influence and domestic legitimacy, and it was in relation to Chechnya that this repute started to be built (Hedenskog 2020).

Moreover, by successfully framing the Chechen separatist struggle as a case of global terrorism, Putin gained increasing international acceptance for the Russian war effort to bring Chechnya back into the fold (Lapidus 2002), thus winning a *carte blanche* of sorts for waging a war where Russia had earlier drawn much international criticism for excessive human rights abuses. In addition, in pace with increasing Russian success on the battlefield in Chechnya, the Chechen separatists became ever more radicalized, as more militant forces got the upper hand in relation to Maskhadov-style moderates. The violent and bloody actions taken outside of Chechen territory, most prominently in the seizure of the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002 and the North Ossetian Beslan school siege in 2004, were widely condemned by the outside world. Even if much of the bloodshed was caused by heavy-handed countermeasures by Russian security forces, the attacks made the Chechen rebel cause lose much of the international moral support that it had once had. The sympathies tilted increasingly to the federal side (Gerber and Mendelson 2008).

It was also in connection with the Second Chechen War that Putin, first as Prime Minister, then as Acting President, started to establish his reputation for being a doer, a real man of action, a posture which was signaled both in deeds and words. In response to a question from a journalist about the aforementioned aerial bombardment of Grozny in September 1999, the new prime minister vowed to "take out" the Chechen separatists

wherever they were, even “in the shithouse” (Wood 2011). The expression he used – “*my ikh v sortire zamochim*” – is almost impossible to translate into English in an adequate manner, but the remarkable thing was not just the vulgarity of the implied location, but that the phrase came from the jargon of hardened convicts and criminals, and hardly of respectable heads of state or government. The message was strong: the new man at the top could both talk the talk and walk the walk.¹

In addition, by depicting Chechnya as Russia’s universal enemy, Putin could buy time in relation to the electorate, as he really had no political program for his presidential tenure, except for bringing Chechnya back to heel (Pettersson 2018). The strategy was successful indeed. This was Othering institutionalized (Clowes 2011, 140-163). By pointing out who was the Other of the contemporary Russian Federation, he managed to get the message across that there was something uniting the Russian Self, if only disdain against that outlying Other. By all appearances, the electorate loved Vladimir Putin for that. He could successfully claim to have saved the country from disintegration and to have reestablished order and stability in Russia, delivering it safely from the Time of Troubles. This would turn out to become a familiar theme; he was to go on to exploit this legacy throughout his presidencies (Pettersson 2017).

Indeed, Chechnya was consistently depicted as the litmus test and the crucial turning point in Russian post-Soviet political history. In the following years Putin would allude to the Chechen Wars as a time when scheming foreign powers, especially the United States, were tacitly supporting the insurgency, trying to bring Russia to the same situation as Yugoslavia ended up in before its dissolution in the 1990s (President of Russia 2014). By resolutely putting an end to such attempts, Russian sovereignty was resurrected, and Russia could again emerge as the master of its own house – thanks to the leadership exerted by its President. By all appearances, the popular majority believed this, and have responded by voting Putin into presidential power four times over.

1 Reflecting on the incident 12 years later, Putin claimed that he had initially regretted the vulgar choice of words until he was told a day or two later about a taxi driver with whom a friend of his in St Petersburg had travelled. The driver had heard the phrase and apparently commented “there is a guy who says the right things”. In Putin’s version, this made him realize that his words and actions vis-à-vis the Chechen rebels had struck a chord with ordinary people (Government of Russia 2011)

The importance of Chechnya to Putin's support

The recapture of Chechnya was thus a central motif of Vladimir Putin's ascent to and consolidation of power. Using a series of nationwide representative opinion surveys conducted at regular intervals since early 2000, it is possible to chart the importance of Chechnya to the narrative of his presidency over the past two decades.

In January 2000 – three weeks after Putin had become Acting President due to Yeltsin's resignation, three months into the Russian counter-offensive, and a few days before the siege of Grozny ended in its capture by Russian troops – the war dominated the headlines. Reflecting this, the importance of stabilizing Chechnya was one of the most important issues facing the country, as cited by Russians at the time. Asked what issues the next government should give 'highest priority' to (as opposed to general 'importance', 'lower priority' or 'unimportant'), the war in Chechnya was cited by 72 per cent of respondents as a top-line issue, as was the threat of terrorist attacks in Russian cities (68 per cent) (NRB8 survey 2000, C13). Only concerns about price increases were regarded as more pressing.

Unlike in 1994–1996 – in which the disastrous course of the war led to a loss of trust in Yeltsin and perception of state weakness (Vaughn 2007, 57–77) – the Kremlin managed to retain public support for its actions in Chechnya throughout the 1999–2000 war and beyond. Following the apartment bombings, the issues of Chechen militancy was suddenly one that could affect people in their everyday lives, rather than a distant war in a remote corner of the country. As Table 1 shows, the Russian government's 1999–2000 actions to fight back in Chechnya had the support of about three-quarters of Russians in January 2000 (a third offering 'full support' and 40 per cent 'to some degree'). Fewer than one in ten 'definitely opposed' it (NRB8 survey 2000, C23).² Over the following decade, after the official end to the war in 2000 but during a continued series of terrorist attacks attributed to Chechen rebels, support for the government's actions on Chechnya fluctuated, but still enjoyed the backing of over half the electorate in 2008.

2. Among the nearly half the electorate who planned at that point to vote for Putin in the presidential election due on two months later, the numbers were higher still, with 42 per cent fully supportive and a further 39 per cent somewhat supportive.

Table 1: Support for the Russian government's policy on Chechnya (per cent)³

	2000	2004	2008
Strongly support	33.6	21.5	20.1
Somewhat support	39.5	30.9	40.5
Somewhat critical	18.2	28.9	27.0
Strongly disapprove	8.7	18.7	12.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sources: NRB8 survey 2000; Russian Research surveys 2004, 2008.

As Table 2 shows, despite having viewed the almost choreographed progress of the Russian army towards Grozny in evening news bulletins way since the start of the conflict, fewer than half of respondents were optimistic of a Russian victory in January 2000. The majority thought that it would either end with enormous losses on both sides (as in 1994–1996) or ignite conflict in the whole Northern Caucasus region (NRB8 survey 2000, C25).⁴ By April 2001, Russian public opinion had hardened: 45 per cent of respondents thought that Russia should ‘act more severely, to destroy the bandits and their bases’, compared with only 12 per cent who thought the country should seek agreement with respected Chechen leaders (Russian Research survey 2001, D2).⁵ Such sentiment was mirrored in Putin’s public pronouncements over the following few years.

Remarkably, pessimism was more widespread in 2004 even if several years had then passed since the military recapture of Chechen territory. However, these results should be seen in the context of the high-profile terrorist attacks that had taken place in and outside Chechnya in the interim: Dubrovka, Beslan and the assassination of the Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov. Also, a regular series of lower-level attacks (such as car bombs) threatened to undermine the message that the Chechen issue was solved.⁶ On each occasion, Putin generally vowed to crack down harder on renegade Chechen fighters, but fear of contagion was even

3 The question asked was “How do you feel about the actions of the federal authorities in Chechnya?”, with the four answers listed. “Don’t know” answers excluded.

4 The question asked was ‘How do you think the conflict in Chechnya will end?’, with the four answers listed in Table 2. “Don’t know” answers excluded.

5 The question asked was “What policy should the Russian government conduct in Chechnya now?”

6 For an overview of the continual struggles of the counterinsurgency and Chechen attacks, see Kremer (2004).

greater by 2004, and the chances of Russia's ultimate victory considered lower (Russian Research survey 2004, E12). Looked at in the longer-term perspective, one recent analysis has argued that support for the President receded at times of major terrorist attacks but increased with minor incidents that tended to remind that harsh corrective action was still justified (Fedotenkov 2020).

Table 2: Expected outcomes in Chechnya 2000 and 2004 (per cent)

	2000	2004
Fighters will be overcome / Chechnya returns to Russia	39	33
Chechnya north of River Terek returns to Russia	6	4
Enormous losses for both sides / end as in 1996	19	24
Protracted / will spread to other North Caucasus	35	39
Total	100	100

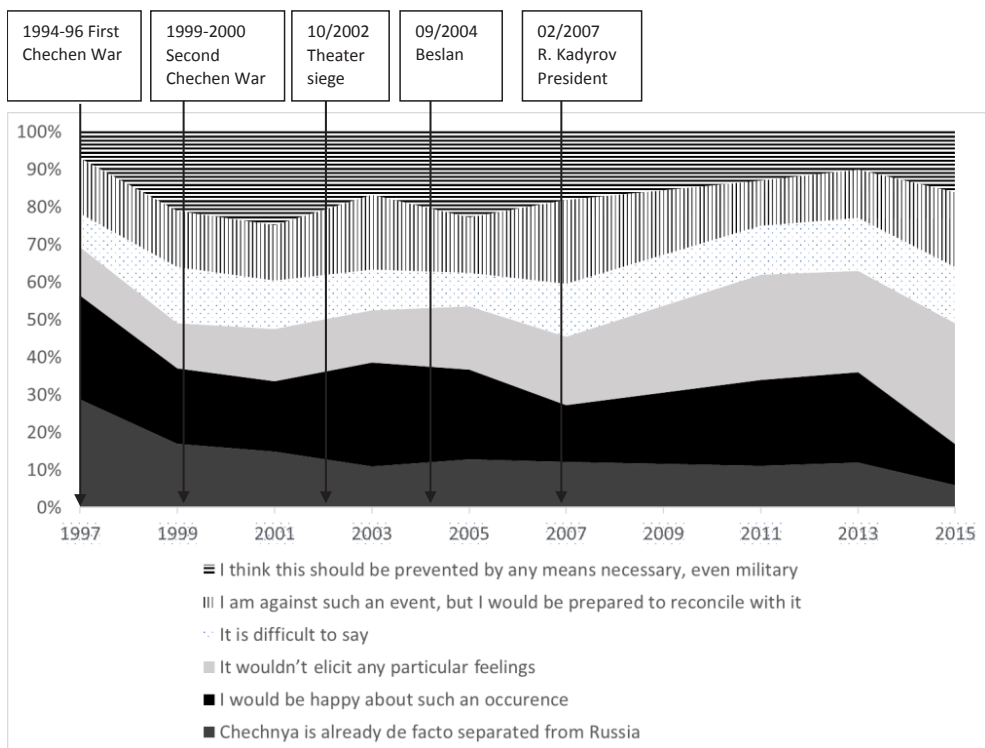
Sources: NRB8 survey 2000, C25; Russian Research survey 2004, E12.

In view of this gloomy public mood it is perhaps less surprising that fewer people at the time viewed the Second Chechen War as critical for Russia's territorial integrity than the later post-victory narrative might suggest. After the First Chechen War back in 1996, as many as 35 per cent would actually have been happy to see Chechnya go, roughly a quarter (24 per cent) thought that a separation of Chechnya would not elicit any particular feelings in them, and 21 per cent were in principle against a secession but would accept it. Only 8 per cent thought that such an outcome had to be prevented by any means necessary, up to and including military intervention (Levada-Center 2015b). In late 1997, which is the first point in figure 1, 29 per cent regarded Chechnya as *de facto* separated from Russia already, and almost the same number (28 per cent) would in principle have been happy to see it becoming so.

From figure 1 it is also visible that support for preventing Chechnya from leaving the Federation had increased by the time of the Second Chechen War, but that a sizeable minority regarded it as either *de facto* likely or even desirable that Chechnya would attain its independence. Throughout the early 2000s – despite (or perhaps because of) the series of terrorist attacks that continued to remind people of the problems in the North Caucasus – the number of people who thought that Chechen independence should be prevented by any means necessary was never more than a quarter, even as late as in 2007.



Attitudes to Chechen independence, 1996–2015



Chechenization and the Kadyrov rule

As the previous section has shown, attitudes towards the Chechen question changed substantially between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s. Whereas the majority of people after the First Chechen War would have been happy to see the Chechens go their own way, the resolve to crack down on Chechen terrorism grew in the early Putin years. At the same time, there was a continued weariness on the part of the Russian people as Chechen issues frequently intervened in the domestic security agenda. Since around 2007, however, the matter has essentially been considered resolved – or has at least faded from public consciousness.

To understand the fundamental change of scenery from disarray to stability and from resignation to optimism in public opinion about the retention of Chechnya in the federal fold, it is necessary to shift focus of attention to the republican level of politics. The “doer” image so densely associated with Putin has been remarkably replicated and magnified on

the regional level. The Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov (born in 1976), has been the head of the republic since 2007, when he, following a few years of interregnum, was elevated into that position replacing his father Akhmad Kadyrov, who had been assassinated by Chechen militants in 2004. Ramzan Kadyrov has come to epitomize the so-called Chechenization of the conflict of the 1990s, which has meant a considerable amount of stabilization and avoidance of large-scale conflict by the iron-clad use of domestic Chechen forces and structures of security (Russell 2009; Zhirukhina 2018). Indeed, Kadyrov's personal impact has been so deep that the term 'Kadyrovization' has been suggested as more adequate than Chechenization to describe the current situation in the Republic (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016).

Just like Putin has done at the federal level, Kadyrov has, albeit with more repressive means, constructed his legitimacy on the republican level by living up to the image of a macho man of deeds, a strongman, a builder and rebuilder of post-war Chechnya (Souleimanov 2007; Scicchitano 2019). Moreover, by controlling the republic so completely, whilst at the same time publicly subordinating himself to Putin, Kadyrov simultaneously demonstrates to the federal center its dependence upon him to keep order, whilst in exchange giving it his loyalty (Wilhelmsen 2018). According to a survey undertaken by the Levada-Center in January 2015 this image seems to have landed well among the public in the Federation at large. 1600 respondents over the age of 18 and distributed in 134 localities of 46 of the country's regions took the poll which included a question about their attitude towards Kadyrov. 56 per cent associated him with positive characteristics, such as respect or sympathy, whereas 33 per cent were neutral or undecided, and only 12 per cent assessed him negatively, with dislike, annoyance or other bad feelings (Levada-Center 2015a).

On the Russian presidential website (www.kremlin.ru), official working meetings between Putin and Ramzan Kadyrov, particularly discussing the socio-economic situation of the republic, are regularly reported on. The summaries and excerpts provided of the talks are brief, but always convey the same message. The republic is making steady progress toward reconstruction and further development, and often Kadyrov is quoted referring to the unemployment figures that reigned in the republic when he took office in 2007. At that time, they were at an appalling 76 per cent and were then successively reduced to 23 per cent in August 2013, to 13.9 per cent in December 2015, 12.1 per cent in March 2016, 9.2. per cent in April 2017, and 8 per cent in August 2019 (President of Russia 2013,

2015, 2016, 2017, 2019). This is still a high figure, of course, but vastly better than the disastrous figure of the baseline year of 2007. By way of response, Putin makes a habit at the working meetings of underlining that the trends are positive, but that much remains to be done in terms of battling corruption, reconstructing schools, building and renovating housing, improving the basic infrastructure, et cetera (President of Russia 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019). However, given all these problems, Putin indicated in December 2015 that Chechnya could serve as a role model for the country at large:

I saw for myself how Grozny is developing. It certainly serves as a role model for many. I recall the situation when it was in such a state that we were considering whether the capital of Chechnya should remain there at all [...] And you were able to rebuild the city, so that now it is in excellent shape. I ask you to continue to give this matter your attention, because it is important for the republic and for all of the North Caucasus as a good example of development (President of Russia 2015).

Later during that meeting, Putin expressed himself in an even more appreciative manner when he assessed the work of his Chechen counterpart: “You are the one that made it happen”, even if he also extended his gratitude to all Chechen residents and their “hands, care and labor” (President of Russia 2015).

During those working meetings other kinds of progress are also reported on. At a meeting in 2016, Kadyrov provided another success story while still using 2007 as a baseline year. At that time, the Chechen president told, there were “157 murder attempts [against law enforcement personnel], and 56 law enforcement officers were killed. There were 56 illegal armed groups, of which 14 were of a terrorist nature”, but in 2015 there was “not a single murder attempt in 2015 and not a single law enforcement officer was killed in special operations carried out. At the same time, 19 gunmen were killed and around 50 arrested” (President of Russia 2016). This is another way of saying that the operations of Chechen separatist forces have practically been quenched and that the harsh and uncompromising policy of Chechenization has been implemented successfully. Stability has finally been achieved, albeit at a high price. At the working meeting with Putin in March 2016, Kadyrov seemed very content to conclude that “We have no serious problems now in the republic” (President of Russia 2016). Putin appeared to agree and again praised the Chechen president greatly:

I know that Chechnya has been transformed over these last years. We see this with our own eyes. This is a clear fact. The transformations are not just external. Where we once saw devastation, towns and villages in ruins, we now see flourishing places, and this is no exaggeration. We see towns and villages in which people live comfortable, convenient lives. We see ever more beautiful new buildings that are the pride of not just Chechnya and the Caucasus, but all of Russia too (President of Russia 2016).

During the same meeting Putin went on to conclude that “Chechnya really has become a safe place for our citizens, for the republic’s people, and your efforts have contributed to achieving this. Chechnya is perhaps an even safer place than some other parts of Russia” (President of Russia 2016).

Chechnya as metonymy

It is a reasonable conclusion to draw that the reign of Ramzan Kadyrov, and his loyalty, however conditional, to the Kremlin, have transformed public perceptions in the Russian Federation at large. The image of Chechnya as a source of threat to the rest of Russia has thus clearly diminished as compared to what was the case in the early 2000s. However, it seems as though it took several years after Ramzan Kadyrov’s ascent to power for this image to take hold. By June 2015, the balance of people who thought that the amount of terrorism from the North Caucasus had diminished over the previous 10 years relative to those who thought it had increased was +38 per cent, compared with -1 per cent in 2011 (Levada-Center 2015b). By way of heavy contrast to the early 2000s, people largely saw Chechnya as an integral part of Russia again. As noted in Figure 1, only 6 per cent regarded it as de facto separate from the rest of the Federation, and just 11 per cent would have been happy if it left (Levada-Center 2015b). Indeed, nearly half were indifferent or could not say their opinion. This indicates the extent to which the Chechen problem has been, in the views of the Russian public, solved or subordinated to new issues. On the other hand, according to these estimates, the attributed importance of retaining Chechnya inside the Federation also seems to have increased among the populace as stability and order have tended to increase in the republic and the Federation at large.

All this confirms the impression of *post hoc* mythmaking that ties together Chechnya’s renewed loyalty and Putin’s role as guarantor and

restorer of stability in Russia. Back in 2001, more people (33 per cent) personally blamed President Yeltsin retrospectively for the conflict than the Chechens themselves (29 per cent) or the Russian side generally (23 per cent) (Russian Research survey 2001, D1).⁷ Despite being appointed as Yeltsin's hand-picked successor, Putin gradually cast himself as the antithesis of the elderly, erratic Yeltsin, and with that, as the restorer and guarantor of stability. From 2008 to 2014 the numbers of people who thought that Putin had been very or mainly successful in dealing with the challenges posted by Chechen separatists and settling the political question of Chechnya (as president up to 2008 and from 2012 onwards, and prime minister in the interregnum) remained very stable, at around two-thirds of respondents in both cases. These figures remained constant even when perceptions of his other successes – bringing economic prosperity, stability and international respect to Russia – declined slightly from 2008–2014 (Russian Research surveys 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014).

Moreover, the hard-won stability in Chechnya under Ramzan Kadyrov's rule has come to signify a metonymy of the Russian Federation in its experiencing increasing stability and internal order at a price of heightened authoritarianism and repression. In his talks with Putin in April 2017, Kadyrov, without naming the source or whether it was domestic or foreign, complained about “provocative articles” that according to him spread unfounded allegations about repression and human rights violations in Chechnya (President of Russia 2017). It seems as if the frequent media image projected of the situation in the republic was an irritant to him. Likewise, he has claimed that the frequent allegations of purges and harassment of LGBT activists in Chechnya (Scicchitano 2019) were nothing but “an invention by foreign agents who are paid a few kopecks”. According to him, the alleged human rights abuses were an outright falsification since LGBT persons simply did not exist in the republic. To corroborate this, he added that “If there were such people in Chechnya, the law-enforcement organs wouldn't need to have anything to do with them because their relatives would send them somewhere from which there is no returning” (Independent 2018).

At other times also Kadyrov has showed a propensity for attacking media which he believes has treated Chechnya unfairly. In the spring of 2020, during the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Moscow-based news-

7 The question was “Whose fault was it, in your opinion, that the war in Chechnya arose?”. Respondents could choose between the Chechen side, the Russian side, President Yeltsin, Middle Eastern extremists, or the United States.

paper *Novaya Gazeta* was particularly branded by him. Addressing the fact that the newspaper published articles about the Chechen regime's harsh measures to combat the virus, Kadyrov exclaimed: "How long will this provocative and explosive anti-Chechen harassment brazenly and shamelessly organized by *Novaya Gazeta* continue?" (New Times 2020b), adding that a named journalist of the newspaper was in practice "a foreign agent" and that the paper tried hard to "label my people as hardened criminals, medieval heathens and stranglers of freedom with their myths" (New Times 2020b).

From time to time there are reports suggesting that the federal authorities consider the actions of the Chechen regime to be over-zealous. Maybe some concern over the local authorities' eagerness to resurrect stability in Chechnya could even be gleaned between the lines of Putin's statement during the working meeting in March 2016. At the time, he pointed out that there was a need for closer cooperation with federal authorities, especially on security matters (President of Russia 2016).

Kadyrov has thus remained in power since 2007, which is a long time given the fact that his power ambitions often seem to have stretched beyond the borders of the Chechen Republic and he therefore would have been likely to strain the patience of powerful federal elites. His behavior is often erratic, which is prone to create some tension. Kadyrov's ostentatious appearance would at first glance seem not to go well together with Putin's decidedly more calculated and rational manners. The flamboyance of the Chechen president's style came through during the FIFA Football World Cup in Russia in 2018. The championship was dispersed across twelve different stadiums in eleven cities across the Federation, and Chechnya served as a local point of accommodation quarters of a couple of the competing teams. Kadyrov happily posed before the camera together with the Egyptian star footballer Mohammad Salah, who was subjected to harsh criticism for showing a poor sense of political judgement.

The happy but maybe less than statesmanlike snapshot with the footballer was a trifle and a lighthearted diversion, but Kadyrov's impulsiveness could have serious consequences when applied to other fields. In the spring of 2020, Kadyrov caught the headlines when he commented that Chechens who had been infected by the coronavirus and disregarded the rules of self-isolation and quarantine should be punished with death (Moscow Times 2020b). Against the background of this rash statement, it was almost an irony of fate when Kadyrov himself contracted Covid-19 and was flown to Moscow for hospital treatment (Roth 2020).

Personality traits aside, there have been rumors of Putin and Kadyrov being on the point of falling out over important political matters. Such speculations were particularly intense in relation to the involvement of Chechen assassins in the murder of the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in 2015. However, so far, the relations between Putin and Kadyrov seem based on calculations of mutual benefit. The federal center continues to prop up the Chechen republic through extensive economic support. The price tag is almost staggering, and in 2015 federal funding still made up 82 per cent of the republic's budget (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016, 122).

On the other hand, Kadyrov continues to be a guarantor of iron-clad stability in the Chechen republic, that delivers, time after time, near-unanimous levels of support for the Kremlin's favored candidates in federal official electoral statistics. As one Western journalist, profiling Kadyrov, cynically put it, "There are times when you need every vote you can get, and it's nice to know where you can find 611,578 without having to worry" (Bullough 2015). Moreover, Kadyrov has often expressed a total devotion to Putin's persona, giving loyalty for the President a face throughout the federation. By often showing that his range of activities extends beyond the republic as such he may also signal that any opposition to the President may meet with tough countermeasures from his hardliner supporters. Overall, despite his brazen manners, Kadyrov has basically remained within "Moscow's comfort zone" and advanced its interests (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016). There seem to be no immediate signs that the strategic accord between the federal center and the republic is about to break up any time soon.

Conclusion

The main argument of this chapter is that political and military processes involving the republic of Chechnya in the 1990s and onwards meant the decline of Boris Yeltsin's presidential career and provided the take-off and the very preconditions for Vladimir Putin's long presidential tenures. The First Chechen War in 1994–1996, so unsuccessful for the federal center, underlined the waning of Yeltsin's presidency and the faltering of the Russian Federation itself. It almost cost Yeltsin the victory in the 1996 presidential elections and left him hamstrung for the rest of his presidential tenure. Developments in Chechnya symbolized the general dissolution and disarray of the Federation characterizing the turbulent 1990s.

Putin, on the other hand, could use the Second Chechen War, which was victorious for the Federation, from 1999 to 2009 to bring home the message that it was he who salvaged the Federation, resurrected stability and order, defeated the separatist enemy within, and brought this latter-day Time of Troubles to a close. His Chechnya policies brought him the reputation of being a man of action, a staunch defender of national sovereignty and a fierce opponent of terrorism, nationally as well as globally. The strategy won him formidable popular support at home and helped him construct a platform for political legitimacy which, 20 years on, in combination with authoritarian policies, is still largely there to secure him the electoral wins that he needs for his repeatedly renewed tenures of power.

This chapter has shown that developments in Chechnya have a greater overall significance for Russia than the republic's limited size and peripheral geographical location would seem to suggest. Chechnya continues to play a significant role for the Putin administration, as a symbol for the reestablishment of political stability in the South and the Federation at large, and as a region which under Ramzan Kadyrov's rule demonstrates total loyalty and allegiance, albeit conditional, to the Putin presidency. In going from chaos and dissolution in the early 2000s to stability and national role model status a decade later, Chechnya stands as a metonymy of the overall situation in the Federation. This is further borne out by Kadyrov's presidency. Ever since he took up the position of President of the Chechen Republic in 2007 (later renamed to Head of the Republic in 2011), he has represented an amplified mirror image of traits that are customarily attributed to Putin – a macho “doer” and guarantor of stability, often accused of using authoritarian practices to achieve his aims. The fact that Kadyrov – who began his career as a militia leader against the rule of Yeltsin's Russia in the mid-1990s – is the underwriter of the Republic's loyalty to Putin's modern-day Russian Federation, has huge symbolism. From being the greatest existential threat to Russia in the 1990s, the symbiosis of the Chechen–Russian relationship means that it has now become one of its strongest symbols of its stability.

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NRB8 survey (2000) and Russian Research surveys (2001, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014) used with kind permission of original compilers or according to normal Data Archive rules (where appropriate). The original compilers bear no responsibility for any errors of interpretation of the survey data by the current authors. Where appropriate, the datasets have been reweighted by demographic attributes and actual election turnout by the current authors.

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