



Feature Article
April 17, 2025

Kadyrov's Chechnya: The State Within Putin's State

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Kadyrov's Chechnya presents a deepening dilemma for Russia's federal state. Putin relies on Kadyrov for stability in exchange for unprecedented autonomy—a system where "personalized loyalty substitutes for institutional coherence." This arrangement has created a parallel power structure where Kadyrov implements religious legal codes, commands his independent Kadyrovtsy militia, and pursues contradictory foreign policies.

The paradox is clear: Moscow's strategy to suppress separatism has created a regional actor whose "loyalty is conditional and whose power increasingly transcends the bounds of federation." This precedent could inspire other republics like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan to seek similar arrangements. With Russia facing pressure from sanctions and war costs, Moscow's options are limited if Kadyrov's loyalty wavers.

Introduction

The consolidation of power by Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya presents a dilemma for the Russian federal state. While President Vladimir Putin has relied on Kadyrov to maintain stability in a region with a history of sovereignty movements, their relationship extends beyond mere financial incentives to a complex arrangement of mutual

loyalty and strategic pragmatism. This personalized political alliance—where Kadyrov receives a degree of autonomy and resources in exchange for ensuring Chechnya's continued allegiance to the Russian Federation—has exposed institutional vulnerabilities in Russia's federal system. By implementing an unofficial legal system rooted in religious and



Grozny, Russia. Photo Credit: Keleny

traditional legal codes, Kadyrov has eroded the supremacy of federal law. His personal militia, the Kadyrovtsy, operates with near-total independence, undermining the Russian state's monopoly on force. Beyond domestic challenges, Kadyrov independently cultivates relationships with Middle Eastern leaders and engages in diplomatic activities that occasionally contradict Moscow's strategic interests.

Despite these challenges to Russia's internal unity, Putin deliberately cultivates this relationship as part of a strategic calculus. Following the conclusion of two devastating Chechen wars, Putin secured regional stability by appointing Akhmad Kadyrov and later supporting his son Ramzan as loyal lieutenants in Chechnya. These concessions of autonomy have allowed Putin to outsource the suppression of extremism while maintaining plausible deniability. The fundamental paradox lies in its inherent contradiction: Moscow's empowerment of Kadyrov has created a regional actor whose actions often diverge from Russia's strategic interests yet serves as a useful tool of Russian statecraft when properly directed. This arrangement's sustainability hinges primarily on Moscow's continued patronage. As Russia's economy faces mounting pressure from sanctions and war costs, Kadyrov's loyalty could waver,

transforming a currently manageable contradiction in Russia's federal structure into a potential threat to the Kremlin's authority over its federal subjects.¹

Historical Context

The First Chechen War (1994-96) emerged after Chechnya declared independence following the Soviet Union's collapse—a move Chechens viewed as reclaiming historical sovereignty but Moscow considered a threat to territorial integrity. The Russian Armed Forces, weakened by post-Soviet downsizing and demoralization, faced determined Chechen fighters defending their homeland with superior knowledge of local terrain. The resulting military stalemate led to the 1996 Khasavyurt Accord, where Russia withdrew and temporarily recognized Chechen autonomy—celebrated by many Chechens as a victory for self-determination. The interwar period saw Chechnya struggle with governance challenges and economic isolation, while some factions embraced more radical ideologies. The Second Chechen War (1999-2009) began when militants, including some Chechen fighters, launched an incursion into neighboring Dagestan—viewed by Russia as terrorism and by some Chechens as part of a

¹ Jean-François Ratelle and Emin Souleimanov, "A perfect counterinsurgency? Making sense of Moscow's policy of Chechenisation," *Europe-Asia Studies*,

vol. 68 no. 8, pp. 1287-1314. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26156979>)

broader struggle against Russian influence. Russia's response was a methodical campaign with overwhelming force and an aggressive information strategy that framed the entire conflict as counter-terrorism rather than suppression of independence. As Chechen resistance was systematically dismantled amid widespread civilian suffering and human rights abuses on both sides, Moscow installed a pro-Russian Chechen government under Akhmad Kadyrov, which many Chechens viewed as collaboration while others accepted as a pragmatic end to devastating conflict.²

This settlement, however, came at the expense of the moderate, democratically elected Chechen leadership that had initially sought peaceful coexistence within the Russian Federation. Figures like Aslan Maskhadov, who had won internationally recognized elections and opposed both Islamist extremism and Russian militarism, were sidelined and eventually eliminated. During the early 2000s, high-level dialogues—including quiet meetings in Switzerland and Liechtenstein involving Chechen and Russian Duma officials—attempted to broker a peaceful,

federalist solution. These efforts, endorsed by American and European leaders, were ultimately torpedoed by Kremlin hardliners and disinformation campaigns. The death or exile of nearly all key moderates—Maskhadov, Mironov, Shchekochikin—cleared the path for Moscow's installation of the Kadyrov regime.³⁴

Akhmad Kadyrov secured the presidency by shifting allegiances from the Chechen independence movement to the Russian federal forces during the Second Chechen War—a decision viewed by many Chechens as betrayal but portrayed by Moscow as pragmatic reconciliation. As Chief Mufti in the interwar period, he had opposed rising radical Wahhabism in Chechnya, aligning with traditional Sufi practices more prevalent in the region, which positioned him as a useful ally for Moscow in its counter-extremism narrative. As Putin's appointed head of Chechnya's pro-Russia administration (2000) and later as elected president (2003) in a vote criticized by international observers, Kadyrov played a key role in establishing what Moscow termed 'normalization' while many Chechens experienced as occupation. Kadyrov's

² G. D. Bakshi, "The war in Chechnya: A military analysis," *Strategic Analysis: A Monthly Journal of the IDSA*. (https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/sa/sa_aug00bag01.html)

³ S. Frederick Starr, "A solution for Chechnya," *The Washington Post*, September 17 2004, p. A27.

⁴ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, "The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe," *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. (https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPap-ers/2006_06_SRP_CornellStarr_Caucasus.pdf)

personal militia, the Kadyrovtsy, not only protected him but became an instrument of authority in Chechnya, ensuring both the dominance of the Kadyrov family and Moscow's continued influence until his assassination in 2004 during a Victory Day parade.⁵

Akhmad's son, Ramzan Kadyrov (hereafter referred to as 'Kadyrov'), rose to power following his father's assassination, quickly becoming First Deputy Prime Minister despite his youth and limited political experience. His influence grew as he implemented elements of Sharia law—creating a hybrid legal system that both asserted Chechen cultural autonomy and established control over the population—and launched reconstruction projects funded primarily by Moscow. While presented by Russian media as a force for development and stability, many Chechen citizens and human rights organizations reported widespread intimidation, disappearances, and extrajudicial punishments under his leadership. With Putin's support, Kadyrov was officially appointed as Chechnya's president in 2007, consolidating a personalized power structure that would blend

traditional Chechen authority patterns with loyalty to the Kremlin.⁶⁷

Legal System

Under Kadyrov's leadership, Chechnya has become a highly centralized, authoritarian regional government with a cult of personality centered around him, while he has continued to market his rule as essential to Russia's security interests in the North Caucasus. Putin, in favor of suppressing Chechen separatism through Kadyrov's tight-fisted rule, has allowed Kadyrov to develop an alternative legal framework within Chechnya.⁸

This framework's existence undermines the supremacy of federal legal authority and weakens the legitimacy of the Russian Federation by directly contradicting the Russian constitution. Chechnya's unofficial legal system integrates elements of religious and traditional legal codes and functionally functions beyond the scope of Russia's official judiciary. The constitution states in Article 13 that federal law holds the highest legal authority throughout the Russian Federation

⁵ Piotr Kowal, "Chechnya: A litmus test of Russia's power," GIS Reports Online, April 20 2023. (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/chechnya-russia/>)

⁶ Liz Fuller, "The unstoppable rise of Ramzan Kadyrov," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, January 19 2015. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/profile-ramzan-kadyrov-chechnya-russia-putin/26802368.html>)

⁷ Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson, "War as a peace strategy: Chechnya and Ramzan Kadyrov in the Putin era," DiVA Portal. (<https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1557806/FULLTEXT01.pdf>)

⁸ Nikolai Silaev, "Chechen Nation-Building under Kadyrov: A Belated "Korenizatsiya"?", *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 71 no. 1, pp. 49–58. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2022.2092517>)

and in Article 14 that Russia is a secular state. In Article 118, it also vests judicial authority solely in federally recognized courts. Chechen officials unofficially permit elements of Islamic law (Sharia) and Chechen customary law (Adat) within Chechnya in violation of these constitutional principles, which has effectively led to the development of a local legal system operating beyond federal oversight.

The implementation of Islamic code in Chechnya has occurred periodically since the conclusion of the Second Chechen War. For example, in 2010, there were reports Chechen authorities were enforcing Sharia-based societal expectations, including the closure of restaurants during Ramadan and the harassment of women who declined to wear headscarves, demonstrating state-sanctioned adherence to religious laws, despite Russia's constitutional secularism.⁹ Additionally, in 2024, it was reported that blood feuds (part of Adat) still play a role in Chechen culture, allowing disputes to be resolved through

vigilante justice rather than through the Russian judicial system.¹⁰

The selective application of federal law in Chechnya is further exemplified by the enforcement of Russia's 2002 anti-extremism law. While this law grants the federal government broad authority to prevent and suppress activities deemed extremist, Kadyrov's regime ironically incorporates elements of religious governance that would likely be classified as extremist elsewhere in Russia. However, Kadyrov has leveraged his political necessity in the eyes of the Kremlin to selectively enforce or ignore these regulations. By adopting elements of Islamic traditions within Chechnya, Kadyrov undermines opposition to his rule and curries favor with local populations.¹¹ This contradiction is tolerated by Moscow primarily because Kadyrov's governance ensures regional stability, despite its constitutional inconsistencies. This arrangement benefits Putin by allowing him to placate religious sensibilities in Chechnya without having to formalize these exceptions at the federal level. By maintaining this unof-

⁹ Reuters, "Sharia law threatens Moscow control in Muslim Chechnya," Reuters, April 1 2025. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/economy/sharia-law-threatens-moscow-control-in-muslim-chechnya-idUSLDE6700S0/>)

¹⁰ Abubakar Yangulbaev, "Kadyrov's blood feud is a new escalation in his power play," The Moscow

Times, October 15 2024. (<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/15/kadyrovs-blood-feud-is-a-new-escalation-in-his-power-play-a86695>)

¹¹ Miriam Katharina Heß, "Leveraging Islam and internal conflict: Strategies and consequences in Russia's war against Ukraine," German Council on Foreign Relations. (<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/leveraging-islam-and-internal-conflict>)

ficial dual system, Putin can preserve the appearance of constitutional integrity nationwide while still accommodating regional religious practices that help maintain stability in Chechnya.

Further, over 133 official Chechen legal acts explicitly reference Islam in education, cultural policies, and governance, among other topics, demonstrating the institutionalization of religion in Chechnya's legal and government system, despite prohibitions in the Russian constitution.¹² While these policies may reflect local cultural practices, their cumulative impact establishes a parallel legal order that challenges the federal legal structure.

This legal pluralism challenges the principle of legal uniformity mandated by the federal government, raising concerns about the long-term stability of Russia's legal and political cohesion. While questions can be raised as to the Russian federal government's respect for the constitution, there is a drastic difference between violations directed by Putin's regime for their own ends versus those permitted in regional contexts like Chechnya. By allowing the development of a separate Che-

chen legal system, Putin has effectively surrendered the Russian government's monopoly on the law in this region—a significant concession that highlights the pragmatic compromises made to maintain territorial integrity at the expense of constitutional consistency.

Kadyrovtsy

Beyond a regional restructuring of the legal system, Kadyrov's private militia, the Kadyrovtsy, undermines Russian internal unity. The Kadyrovtsy, though technically within the chain of command of the Russian Rosgvardia, function as Kadyrov's private army and are loyal first and foremost to the Chechen leader.¹³ Despite its blurry status, the militia has been documented fighting in Ukraine. By allowing Kadyrov control over legitimate use of force in Chechnya and by deploying Kadyrovtsy in Ukraine, Putin has weakened his own integrity, regionally, nationally, and within the context of Russia's war of attrition in Ukraine.

As of 2022, reports indicated Moscow contributed around \$6.5 billion per year to Chechnya.¹⁴ This funding both contributes to

¹² Sébastien Laymond, "Chechnya: A Wild Tale of Syncretism," SSRN, December 1 2023. (<https://ssrn.com/abstract=4650151>)

¹³ Sam Cranny-Evans, "Chechens: Putin's loyal foot soldiers," Royal United Services Institute, September

12 2022. (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chechens-putins-loyal-foot-soldiers>)

¹⁴ Thomas Grove and Evan Gershkovich, "Chechen warlord does Putin's dirty work in Ukraine," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15 2022.

the incomes of the Kadyrovtsy and pads Kadyrov's own pockets. Beyond being bankrolled by Russia, the Kadyrovtsy are also largely armed by Moscow. In 2004, the Russian Interior Ministry legalized the force, creating the legal conditions for the supply of arms to Chechen militants.¹⁵

Kadyrovtsy have been present in Ukraine since the beginning of conflict in the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR-LPR) in 2014.¹⁶ Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Kadyrovtsy have fought alongside Russian armed forces. Kadyrov leverages a combination of financial incentives, network loyalties, and religious appeal to recruit fighters. For Putin, this recruitment system provides additional combat-ready troops without requiring formal Russian military mobilization, allowing him to maintain the fiction of a "limited military operation" rather than full-scale war.

In April 2022, Ukrainian intelligence sources reported Kadyrovtsy had killed Russian soldiers who failed to comply with orders in Ukraine.¹⁷ In May 2022, local government officials in and near Bucha reported Chechen fighters were killing wounded Russian soldiers at a local hospital. The same report also alleges the majority of Kadyrovtsy were being held in rear areas to perform "internal security duties," such as beating and even executing low-quality DPR-LPR and Russian Army troops attempting to retreat or desert against military orders.¹⁸

Though these reports were not confirmed by independent media, the allegations are concerning as they indicate the willingness of the Kadyrovtsy to use violent enforcement tactics against Russian soldiers. According to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, as of spring 2022, desertion or failure to comply with orders were punishable by imprisonment and restriction of military activity.¹⁹

(<https://www.wsj.com/articles/chechen-warlord-kadyrov-putin-dirty-work-ukraine-11671204557>)

¹⁵ Julie Wilhelmsen, "Inside Russia's imperial relations: The Social Constitution of Putin-Kadyrov Patronage," *Slavic Review* 77.4, pp. 919-936

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Ukraine says Kadyrov's troops killed Russian soldiers who refused to fight," *Business Insider*, April 25 2022. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-says-kadyrov-troops-killed-russia-soldiers-refuse-fight-2022-4>)

¹⁸ "Chechen Kadyrovtsy unit in Bucha killed wounded Russian soldiers along with civilians," *SOFREP*, April 2 2022. (<https://sofrep.com/news/chechen-kadyrovtsy-unit-in-bucha-killed-wounded-russian-soldiers-along-with-civilians/>)

¹⁹ "Может ли контрактник отказаться от боевых действий? [Can a contractor refuse to participate in hostilities?]," *PenzaInform*, March 25 2022. (https://www.penzainform.ru/news/reasoning/2022/03/25/mozhet_li_kontraktnik_otkazat-sya_ot_boevih_dejstvij.html)

²⁰ ²¹ Therefore, the Kadyrovtsy would have directly defied Russian law by conducting extrajudicial executions of Russian soldiers, to say nothing of the human rights violation of killing an injured soldier. There is no evidence, however, to indicate that Putin or the Russian military opposed this use of violent enforcement tactics. Kadyrovtsy violence against Russian soldiers would, in fact, benefit Putin's war campaign as their relative independence from the hierarchy of the Russian military insulates the Rosgvardia from the fallout of the violent enforcement tactics while still allowing them to profit from the control it exerts over their untrained forces. While satisfied with the benefits, the Rosgvardia is still weakening its own position by granting a semi-autonomous armed group the right to take punitive actions against its forces. This arrangement reveals a paradoxical power dynamic where Moscow tolerates the Kadyrovtsy's autonomy in exchange for maintaining order in Chechnya

and discipline among Russian forces in Ukraine.

Russia has a long history of state-supported mercenary groups going back to the Cossacks in the Russian Empire. The Kadyrovtsy are not even the only militia to fight in Ukraine. The Wagner Group is perhaps the most notorious example, especially following leader Yevgeny Prigozhin's rebellion against Putin. The Wagner group is a "quasi-private company... under Russian government oversight."²² According to President Putin himself, from May 2022 to May 2023 the Russian government paid the Wagner Group nearly one billion U.S. dollars.²³ On June 23, 2023, Prigozhin launched an attack against the Russian Ministry of Defense, seizing the headquarters of the Southern Military District in Rostov-on-Don and pushing within several hundred miles of Moscow before Prigozhin and Putin were able to reach a "deal."²⁴ Prigozhin, of course, was later

²⁰ Igor Mirzoev, "Особенности кадировцев в Украине [Features of the Kadyrovtsy in Ukraine]," Dzen, February 15 2023. (<https://dzen.ru/a/Yo9oI-vwM20zZfgK9>)

²¹ Russian Federation Ministry of Defense, "Порядок отказа от участия в боевых действиях [Procedure for refusing to participate in hostilities]," voensud-mo.ru. (<http://voensud-mo.ru/doc/help/operation/rejection/chance>)

²² Andrew S. Bowen, "Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia (CRS Report No. IN12186)," Congressional Research Service. (<https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IN12186>)

²³ Jennifer Maddocks, "Putin admits to funding the Wagner Group: Implications for Russia's state responsibility," Lieber Institute, July 19 2023. (<https://lieber.westpoint.edu/putin-admits-funding-wagner-group-implications-russias-state-responsibility/>)

²⁴ Bowen, "Wagner Group Mutiny in Russia (CRS Report No. IN12186),"

killed, but the rebellion highlighted the tenuous stability on Russia's home front. By sponsoring and supporting the Wagner Group, Putin created the grounds for well-armed and well-trained rebels who in the future - if gone unchecked - could threaten insurgency. The Kremlin had, in effect, funded and armed a coup against itself by sponsoring a militia whose loyalties were to neither Putin nor to the Russian Constitution.

Even with this history and despite taking steps to dismantle the Wagner Group as it was, the Kremlin still takes significant risk in allowing regional strongmen to maintain a high degree of autonomy. He continues to arm and fund the Kadyrovtsy, who are primarily loyal to their regional president not to the Kremlin. Unlike in Prigozhin's case, the Kadyrovtsy's legitimacy is territorially bound within Chechnya, so a mutiny could manifest as a new wave of Chechen separatism.

The Wagner mutiny likely reinforced Kadyrov's awareness of both opportunity and risk. While the ultimate disaster of Prigozhin's mutiny demonstrates the consequences of open rebellion in Putin's Russia, it also revealed weaknesses in Kremlin control. Kadyrov appears to have calculated that

demonstrating steadfast loyalty in the immediate aftermath would strengthen his position, potentially allowing for greater autonomy within the Russian system while avoiding Prigozhin's fate. And so far, this has paid off: Putin sought to tighten the reins on other proxy forces following the mutiny, while Kadyrov has maintained the functional independence of the Kadyrovtsy.²⁵

For now, Kadyrov remains loyal to Putin, especially as his funding, both for Chechnya and his personal lifestyle, comes primarily from Moscow. However, Russia's economic forecasts suggest this arrangement may become unsustainable by late 2025. Should funding decrease significantly, Kadyrov may leverage his territorial control and armed forces to negotiate more favorable terms with Moscow or pursue greater autonomy.

Foreign Relations

Kadyrov has also increasingly charted an independent course in the realm of diplomacy and foreign affairs. Because of Kadyrov's special status within Russia and Putin's reliance on Kadyrov to maintain stability in Chechnya, Kadyrov is largely permitted free reign over Chechen foreign relations. This is exemplified in part through his relations

²⁵ Dr. Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, "The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022-24," Royal United Ser-

vices Institute. (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>)

with Middle Eastern countries, relations Putin has fostered as an inroad to deeper cooperation with countries such as Saudi Arabia, but which have ultimately undermined the strength of the Russian state as a regional leader develops independent and sometimes contradictory foreign policy.

This relative independence in international relations is propelled by Kadyrov's image as a religious leader and "defender of Islam, opposing Western heretics who are trying to destroy traditional values."²⁶ Thanks in part to his outward projection of devout religiosity, Kadyrov has set himself as a convenient tie between Moscow and Middle Eastern regimes, especially critical as Russia remains largely isolated from its historic trading partners.²⁷

Kadyrov's carefully cultivated Islamic persona—including his prominent beard and public displays of piety—represents a strategic appropriation of religious symbolism previously associated with separatist opposition. By positioning himself as a legitimate Islamic leader, Kadyrov has effectively co-

opted the religious authority that once challenged Russian rule. His willingness to incorporate diverse Islamic practices from Middle Eastern states further strengthens his relationships with regional powers while maintaining his religious legitimacy.

Kadyrov has established working relationships with various Middle Eastern heads of state, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salam of Saudi Arabia, as well as with representatives of Jordan and Bahrain. Kadyrov has cultivated these relationships to the point where, during a state visit to Russia in 2017, the king of Saudi Arabia spent longer with Kadyrov than with Putin. In 2013, Kadyrov independently visited Saudi Arabia seeking Saudi investment in Chechnya, and he returned in 2015, deepening his connection to elite Saudi officials.^{28,29}

Beyond relations with foreign dignitaries, Kadyrov has been has occasionally contradicted official Russian foreign policy, as in Libya. Moscow backs Khalifa Haftar and the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Heß, "Leveraging Islam and internal conflict: Strategies and consequences in Russia's war against Ukraine"

²⁸ Heß, "Leveraging Islam and internal conflict: Strategies and consequences in Russia's war against Ukraine"

²⁹ Ivan U. Klyszcz, "Chechnya's paradiplomacy (2000–2020): The emergence and evolution of external relations of a reincorporated territory," *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 51 no. 6, pp. 1397–1413. (<https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.8>)

Libyan National Army while Kadyrov maintains diplomatic channels with the Government of National Accord, Libya's United Nations-recognized government.³⁰ This trend can also be seen in the evolution in Chechnya's relations with Azerbaijan.

The relationship between Azerbaijan and Chechnya has changed significantly since 1991.³¹ In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse and during the First Chechen War, Azerbaijan, itself newly independent and embroiled in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, provided tacit non-military support to Chechen separatists, including medical aid and refuge to civilians. This alignment stemmed from shared concerns over Russian dominance and a search for regional allies against perceived threats, particularly Armenia and Moscow. However, after the Second Chechen War and Kadyrov's consolidation of power, Azerbaijan shifted to pragmatic cooperation, aligning with Moscow's preferred Chechen leadership to maintain stability and appease Russia. Further, Azerbaijan's authoritarian governance model, centralized power, and reliance on Russian support fostered collaboration between Baku and Grozny.

This cooperation was driven by strategic interests. Stability in Chechnya under Kadyrov

was crucial for securing Azerbaijan's northern border and preventing ethnic conflicts from spilling into Dagestan. While bilateral trade primarily involved SOCAR-Rosneft oil agreements rather than direct commerce with Chechnya, Azerbaijan leveraged economic ties to maintain regional stability. Additionally, Baku's influence extended through the Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Caucasus, where Sunni clerics played roles in shaping North Caucasus dynamics. As Kadyrov solidified his power and deepened loyalty to Putin, Azerbaijan established direct ties with Grozny as part of its broader geopolitical strategy, reinforcing stability along its northern frontier within Russia's federal structure.

Despite this period of strategic alignment, recent years have witnessed a noticeable deterioration in Azerbaijan-Chechnya relations. This shift can be attributed to a confluence of factors, most notably the evolving regional power dynamics and Kadyrov's increasingly autonomous behavior within Russia. Azerbaijan's decisive victory in the 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War marked a significant turning point. This military success dramatically enhanced Azerbaijan's regional stand-

³⁰ Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, "The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare."

³¹ Svante Cornell, "Azerbaijan Since Independence," M.E. Sharpe.

ing and reduced its perceived need for an alliance with Chechnya. With its territorial integrity largely restored, Azerbaijan could adopt a more assertive and independent foreign policy, engaging directly with global actors and regional powers like Turkey, as evidenced by Türkiye-mediated gas deals with the EU. As analyst Irakli Sirbiladze notes, "Moscow had to take Ankara into account when considering how to respond to Baku's military actions in 2020 and in 2023",³² highlighting Azerbaijan's growing regional leverage. A crucial incident further straining bilateral ties was the downing of a civilian airliner belonging to Azerbaijan Airlines.³³ Reports indicate an Azerbaijani aircraft may have been downed, with allegations that Kadyrov's apparent protection of implicated family members in the air defense command, sparked criticism from Baku. Kadyrov's refusal to bring those responsible to justice, allegedly including his nephew, underscored the limits of Russian federal authority over Kadyrov's governance.

Diverging stances on the Russia-Ukraine war have contributed to recent tensions. While Azerbaijan maintains strategic neutrality—supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity

while avoiding direct confrontation with Moscow—Kadyrov has been a vocal advocate for Russia's military campaign, deploying Chechen forces to the front lines. Kadyrov's unwavering loyalty to Putin and his prominent role in the war have created friction with Baku, particularly after incidents implicating Chechen forces in regional security breaches.

The deterioration in Azerbaijan-Chechnya relations illustrates Kadyrov's growing autonomy and the paradox of Russian federalism. The civilian airliner incident demonstrated Kadyrov's authority within Chechnya can supersede Moscow's ability to enforce accountability, even in matters with international repercussions. This autonomy directly challenges the central authority of the Russian Federation.

Kadyrov's strengthening position—likely leveraging his Ukraine war support to secure greater autonomy from Moscow—introduces unpredictability into regional dynamics. With fewer Kremlin constraints, his actions could destabilize the North Caucasus. As Cornell notes: "Azerbaijan's post-war confidence enables direct engagement with

³² Irakli Sirbiladze, "Conclusion and Policy Implications," *The End of Russia's "Unipolar Moment" in the South Caucasus*. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep62978.9>)

³³ Yaron Gamburg and Arkady Mil-Man, "*The Downing of the Azeri Plane—A Lesson for Relations in the Post-Soviet Space*," *INSS Insight*, no. 1932, January 14, 2025. (<https://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-downing-of-the-azeri-plane/>)

global actors, bypassing Moscow's weakening intermediaries."

The Azerbaijan-Chechnya relationship under Kadyrov illustrates the paradox within Russia's federal structure. Their initial pragmatic cooperation has fractured due to Azerbaijan's growing regional power and Kadyrov's increasing autonomy from Moscow. This case study reveals how Moscow's strategy of empowering regional leaders to maintain order inadvertently undermines its central authority and destabilizes established relationships—demonstrating the fundamental tension in Russia's North Caucasus management.

Shifts in Moscow-Grozny Relations, 2020-2025

While Kadyrov's semi-autonomous governance of Chechnya has been entrenched for nearly two decades, recent developments from 2020 to 2025 suggest a notable evolution in the dynamics between Grozny and Moscow. Over the past five years, Kadyrov has increasingly positioned himself as both indispensable to and independent from the Kremlin, often asserting roles that challenge or bypass federal authorities.

In December 2024, Kadyrov publicly rebuked Investigative Committee Head Alexander Bastrykin and Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev, accusing them of failing to protect ethnic minorities and of targeting migrants with police brutality.³⁴ These remarks were not isolated but part of a pattern: earlier in June 2024, Kadyrov had already clashed with Bastrykin over counter-extremism policy. His statements reveal a calculated strategy to present himself as a protector of Russian Muslims and non-Slavic minorities—an identity at odds with the Kremlin's broader civic nationalist messaging. The widening gulf between Kadyrov and Moscow's security elite highlights a growing autonomy in rhetoric, if not formal structure.

This divergence is further evident in Kadyrov's military reach. Chechen Akhmat special forces have been deployed to Ukraine with an unusually high profile, often appearing in propaganda and maintaining direct loyalty to Kadyrov himself. These deployments occur outside typical Russian military hierarchies, emphasizing the de facto independence of Chechen forces. Kadyrov's ability to project force while avoiding full integration into the Russian chain of command

³⁴ Angelica Evans, Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Olivia Gibson, Nate Trotter, William Runkel, and George Barros, "Russian offensive campaign assessment, December 5, 2024," Institute for the Study of

War, December 5 2024. (<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-5-2024>)

underscores his enduring leverage within the Russian system.

At the same time, there are signs of federal anxiety. In late 2024, the Russian government tested sovereign internet controls in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia, temporarily blocking foreign websites and messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram.³⁵ These exercises suggest a Kremlin effort to prepare for potential unrest in its restive Muslim-majority republics. Such steps reveal an underlying fear of losing control in regions nominally integrated but politically fragile.

The relationship between Moscow and Grozny in the past five years reflects a paradox: the Kremlin increasingly depends on Kadyrov to project stability, both domestically and abroad, even as it subtly braces for instability should that relationship sour. This tension reveals a fragile balance—one in which Kadyrov's "state within a state" has not only persisted but deepened.

Potential Implications for Other Federal Republics

Kadyrov's consolidation of power in Chechnya has broader implications for other fed-

eral subjects within Russia. His model of governance—marked by near-total autonomy, a personalized militia, and a parallel legal system—sets a precedent that could inspire other regional leaders to pursue similar arrangements. The erosion of federal authority in Chechnya raises questions about the Kremlin's ability to maintain centralized control over its diverse regions, particularly those with distinct ethnic, cultural, or religious identities.

Regions such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, which have historically sought greater autonomy within the Russian Federation, could begin to view Kadyrov's success as a blueprint for negotiating their increased regional independence. These republics already possess unique cultural identities and some level of constitutional autonomy, but Kadyrov's ability to operate outside federal constraints could embolden their leaders to demand further concessions from Moscow. For example, they might seek greater control over local resources, legal systems, or security forces.

Additionally, Kadyrov's unchecked power risks creating a domino effect in the North

³⁵ Angelica Evans, Davit Gasparyan, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, and George Barros, "Russian offensive campaign assessment, December 7, 2024," Institute for the Study of War, December 7 2024.

(<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-7-2024>)

Caucasus. Neighboring republics such as Dagestan and Ingushetia, which share similar socio-political challenges and ethnic compositions, could leverage Chechnya's model to push for more autonomy or resist federal oversight.³⁶ This fragmentation would weaken Russia's federal structure and exacerbate tensions between Moscow and its regional administrations at a time when Moscow already faces great outside pressures from the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions.

The case study of the Wagner Group mutiny further highlights the dangers of decentralized power within Russia. If other regions perceive that Moscow tolerates or even rewards strongman leadership styles like Kadyrov's, it could lead to the proliferation of semi-autonomous paramilitary groups loyal to regional leaders rather than the Kremlin. Such developments would undermine Russia's monopoly on violence and destabilize its internal security.

Moscow's Limited Options: Future Scenarios

Should Kadyrov's loyalty waver, Moscow

faces severely constrained options for reasserting central authority in Chechnya. Direct military intervention—similar to the First and Second Chechen Wars—would prove enormously costly given Kadyrov's well-armed, battle-hardened forces and their territorial entrenchment. Further, the Russian Armed Forces are currently bogged down in Ukraine and severely lacking in reserves, limiting the ability of Moscow to respond to domestic crises with military force.

The Kremlin might attempt to exploit internal Chechen divisions by supporting rival faction leaders, but years of Kadyrov's systematic elimination of opposition have left few viable alternatives. Thus, assassination—the fate that befell Wagner's Prigozhin—remains an option, but without a controlled succession plan, could create a dangerous power vacuum. Economic pressure through reduced subsidies could force compliance but risks destabilizing the region entirely through mass unemployment and economic collapse.

Perhaps most likely is a renegotiation of the social contract between Moscow and Grozny, granting Kadyrov even greater autonomy in exchange for nominal loyalty to the Russian

³⁶ Georgy Poroskoun, "Riots in Dagestan and the Prigozhin revolt: Social-security stability flaws in Russia," Institute for National Security Studies. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep55312>)

state. This scenario would further hollow out federal authority while maintaining the façade of Russian territorial integrity. All these options underscore Moscow's dilemma: having outsourced stability to Kadyrov, the Kremlin has few mechanisms to discipline him without potentially destabilizing both Chechnya and the broader Federation.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Russian federal state and Kadyrov's Chechnya represents a calculated gamble in Russia's governance strategy. By empowering Kadyrov to maintain stability in the North Caucasus, Moscow has secured immediate benefits while accepting significant long-term risks to its constitutional authority and federal coherence. This arrangement manifests across three critical domains—legal frameworks, armed forces, and foreign relations—where the current balance of advantages and compromises merits careful assessment.

Kadyrov's implementation of an alternative legal system rooted in religious and traditional legal codes contradicts Russia's constitutional principles yet provides Putin with a valuable mechanism for managing a complex, historically rebellious region without

imposing culturally disruptive federal standards. This legal accommodation has prevented the resurgence of separatist sentiment that twice plunged Russia into costly wars. However, the tacit acceptance of this parallel legal order threatens the broader coherence of the Russian judiciary and signals to other regions that federal law is negotiable, potentially creating dangerous precedents throughout the Federation.

The Kadyrovtsy's existence as Kadyrov's personal militia constitutes a significant breach of the state's monopoly on legitimate force. Yet these forces have proven tactically useful for Moscow, providing deployable troops for Ukraine without requiring broader Russian mobilization and handling the "controversial enforcement actions" of regional security that the Kremlin prefers to distance itself from.³⁷ The 2023 Wagner mutiny demonstrated the inherent dangers of this approach, but Putin evidently calculates that Kadyrov's territorial entrenchment and personal loyalty—reinforced through financial dependence—differentiate the Kadyrovtsy from Wagner's more mercenary structure.

Perhaps most overt is Kadyrov's growing autonomy in foreign relations, where he has de-

³⁷ Marat Iliysov and Yoshiko M. Herrera, "Russia's war strategy: what Chechnya suggests for Ukraine,"

Post-Soviet Affairs, vol. 40 no. 5, pp. 383–400. (<https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2024.2330882>)

veloped independent ties with Middle Eastern leaders and pursued diplomatic projects that sometimes contradict official Russian policy. The deterioration of Azerbaijan-Chechnya relations illustrates how Kadyrov's autonomous actions can damage Russia's broader regional interests. By allowing Kadyrov to conduct his own foreign policy, Moscow has effectively created competing centers of diplomatic authority within the Russian Federation.

Currently, the benefits Putin derives—regional stability, plausible deniability for rights abuses, deployable forces, and expanded diplomatic reach—appear to outweigh the risks of federal inconsistency. This balance, however, hinges precariously on Russia's economic capacity to bankroll Kadyrov. With forecasts suggesting diminishing reserves by late 2025, the relationship faces unprecedented strain. Should funding decrease significantly, Kadyrov's continued loyalty cannot be taken for granted, potentially triggering a reassessment of the power balance between Moscow and Grozny.

These developments raise questions about the future of Russian federalism. Putin's strategy of empowering a regional strongman like Kadyrov has provided short-term stability at the cost of long-term federal coherence. As Russia faces mounting economic and geopolitical challenges, the contradic-

tions within this system may become increasingly difficult to manage. Kadyrov's Chechnya thus serves as a microcosm of broader underlying tensions and unresolved grievances within the Russian state, where the very mechanisms designed to ensure control ultimately undermine central authority.

It is important to acknowledge that while Kadyrov currently professes unwavering loyalty to Putin personally, his region's functional autonomy creates structural weaknesses in the Russian Federation that transcend individual relationships. The Chechen case does not necessarily presage Russia fracturing along ethnic lines as the Soviet Union did in 1991, but it does indicate potential for internal crises wherein republics become functionally autonomous, drawing Russian attention and resources away from its self-proclaimed "sphere of influence."

For Western policymakers, understanding this nuanced relationship offers strategic insights. While Russia presents a united front internationally, its federal structure contains inherent contradictions that may create pressure points for more targeted diplomatic engagement. The paradox of Kadyrov's Chechnya—simultaneously strengthening Putin's immediate control while weakening Russia's constitutional integrity—illustrates that even autocratic systems must sometimes sacrifice

consistency for stability, highlighting fractures in Russia's seemingly centralized power structure.

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