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Still Waters Run Deep: Federal, Regional, and Local Dimensions of Conflict in the North Caucasus

Introduction

In his February 2008 speech at the State Council before handing over the Russian presidency to Dmitry Medvedev, Vladimir Putin stated that his administration had managed to terminate the war in the North Caucasus. He argued that the Russian army had made “a decisive and crushing blow” against the separatist and terrorist activities in the region, and asserted: “Chechnya is now a full-fledged region within the Russian Federation.”¹ Some others were quick to agree. A Guardian journalist visited Chechnya after the war ended and contended that “it is over, and Putin won”.² The Russian propaganda machine repeated Putin’s message: North Caucasus had been “pacified”.³

In this contribution, I argue the opposite: The conflict in the North Caucasus has not been pacified, but frozen. The central mechanism for stability and order is based on support for Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov from Putin, who became Russian President again in 2012, with the strong personal ties between the two leading to a superficial peace in the region, while deeper grievances and tensions remain.

At the local level, North Caucasians are increasingly dissatisfied with the brutal and corrupt regimes established by their leaders. Although these leaders, Kadyrov in particular, have brought order and security to the region, the grievances among the local people within the region’s republics are growing. Many Chechens are resentful of Kadyrov’s brutal regime in Chechnya. His personal ties to President Putin have allowed him to set up a repressive persecution machine in Chechnya and brutally suppress anyone who goes against his regime and clan. While, in general, older Chechens viewed Russian forces as their enemy, many younger Chechens who did not fight in the Russo-Chechen wars see pro-Russian Chechen forces as their major target. The Chechen leader’s idiosyncratic rule and maltreatment of his citizens have even stirred up some resentment amongst the *Kadyrovtsy*, his personal army.

At the regional level, there are rising tensions among ethnic groups and leaders in the North Caucasus and many people are alarmed by Kadyrov’s increasing influence in the region. The first line of ethnic tensions goes between

1 President of Russia, President Vladimir Putin, Speech at Expanded Meeting of the State Council on Russia’s Development Strategy through to 2020, The Kremlin, Moscow, 8 February 2008, at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24825>.

2 Jonathan Steele, It’s over, and Putin won, The Guardian, 30 September 2008, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/sep/30/russia.chechnya>.

3 Quoted in: John Russell, Kadyrov’s Chechnya-Template, Test or Trouble for Russia’s Regional Policy? In: *Europe-Asia Studies* 3/2011, pp. 509-528, p. 510.

the Chechens and Ingush people. Although both share the same historical ethnic root (Vainakh) and were part of the same oblast during the Soviet Union (the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), the growing Chechen influence in the North Caucasus has led to Chechen-Ingush clashes. President Putin's support for Kadyrov has left the Ingush leaders unable to address local grievances amongst their people, but led them to agree to the Chechnya land swaps, which the people deeply resented, as they had already lost some of the territories they considered their historical lands during the war with North Ossetia. The Dagestani people are also in a state of alarm, fearing similar land swaps, and tensions are rising between the Chechens and Dagestani Avar settled in the area some Chechens view as part of Chechnya. The recent ethnic clashes between the Chechens and the Avars in the small Dagestani localities of Leninaul and Kalininaul and a Chechen convoy marching from the Chechen capital Grozny provided direct evidence that regional ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus are far from pacified but growing. Kadyrov was quick to blame the Dagestani officials for their failure to adequately address the concerns of Dagestan's Akkin Chechen minority. Should President Putin withdraw his support for Kadyrov, the other leaders and ethnic groups are likely to retaliate.

At the federal level, Russian law enforcement bodies are resentful of Kadyrov's growing influence, not only in the North Caucasus, but across the Federation as a whole, and of his disrespect for federal laws. The antagonism between the Russian Federal Security Service (*Federalnaya sluzhba bezopasnosti*, FSB) and Kadyrov has grown, in particular, since the assassination of the Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in 2015, coming close to open clashes many times. Kadyrov has used his strong personal relationship with President Putin to counterbalance pressures from Russian law enforcement services and expand his influence in the North Caucasus. It is only thanks to Putin's personal support that Kadyrov has not been subjected to large-scale violence. Should this support wane, federal forces may also retaliate, which may drag the region into civil war.

The Federal Dimension

The federal dimension of conflict in the North Caucasus is directly linked to Ramzan Kadyrov's growing influence in Russia and the growing antagonism between him and Russian law enforcement agencies. The Russian *siloviki*⁴

4 “*Siloviki*” (derived from Russian “sila”, “force”, “strength”, “power”) is generally used to describe members of the so-called “power ministries” or “power structures” (“*silovye struktury*”) who hold influential positions or management functions and usually have a military or intelligence background. The power structures or “power ministries” include, among others, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and other secret services as well as law enforcement agencies. Cf. Michael Rochlitz, *The Power of the Siloviki: Do Russia's Security Services Control Putin, or Does He Control Them?* In: *Russian Analytical Digest* No. 223, 12 September 2018, pp. 2-4;

have been deeply angered by the Chechen leader's idiosyncratic rule and autonomous behaviour that has many times surpassed the Chechen borders. Under President Putin's Chechenization policy, Russian federal forces withdrew from the North Caucasus and ceded power in Chechnya to the pro-Russian Chechen forces,⁵ and empowered them under Kadyrov's leadership to curtail insurgency in the North Caucasus, providing stability and order in the region. When Kadyrov's father Akhmad was President of Chechnya, Ramzan headed his presidential security service and former separatist militia, the *Kadyrovtsy*. As soon as Ramzan turned thirty, the required minimum age for the post of presidency, he was nominated by Putin, and the Chechen parliament appointed him President of Chechnya, granting him ultimate power and authority in the republic.⁶

Since taking full control in Chechnya, Kadyrov's influence has been growing in the North Caucasus and in the rest of the Russian Federation. After the withdrawal of the federal forces from Chechnya, Kadyrov strengthened the *Kadyrovtsy*, which was a central guarantor for security in Chechnya after the Second Russo-Chechen War. Kadyrov has built a strong reputation, not only in the North Caucasus, but also in the rest of the Federation. He has been repeatedly engaged in federal politics and actively involved at the federal level. The Chechen leader has appeared to readily participate in the release of Russian citizens arrested abroad, including, for example, the Russian journalists detained in Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian tensions after the Euro-maidan.⁷ Kadyrov even helped a Russian navy officer to escape captivity in Libya.⁸ Kadyrov's proactivity has been evident in providing assistance to the victims of ISIS, helping bring minors who had joined ISIS back to Russia.⁹ One four year old child, Bilal, was traced in war-torn Mosul and brought back to his grandmother in Grozny.¹⁰

Although federal laws forbid forced marriages, the Chechen leader has approved them in Chechnya. Under police intimidation, one Chechen girl was forced to marry a police officer and Kadyrov supported the marriage despite its illegality under federal law. This incident seemed to suggest that: "Chechen

Marc Oprach, Dimitri Medwedjew – Präsident auf Abruf oder ebenbürtiger Nachfolger Putins? [President on Demand or Equal Successor to Putin?], in: KAS-Auslandsinformationen 2/2008, S. 6-30, Executive Summary, pp. 6-10, here: p. 6.

- 5 Cf. John Russell, Ramzan Kadyrov: The Indigenous Key to Success in Putin's Chechenization Strategy? In: *Nationalities Papers* 4/2008, pp. 659-687.
- 6 Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, 'Chechnya: has Moscow won?', in: *Survival* 50/2008, pp. 97-112.
- 7 Cf. Causasus Report, Chechen Leader Claims Credit For Release Of Russian Journalists, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 26. May 2014, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-kadyrov-claims-freed-journalists/25399432.html>.
- 8 Cf. Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Is Chechnya Taking Over Russia? *New York Times*, 17 August 2017, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/opinion/chechnya-ramzan-kadyrov-russia.html>.
- 9 Cf. Marcin Mamon, The Lost Children of ISIS, *Foreign Policy*, 2 January 2018, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/02/the-lost-children-of-isis/>.
- 10 Sokirianskaia, cited above (Note 8).

tradition [is] standing above Russian law” in some circumstances.¹¹ Kadyrov’s personal security force has also been blamed for killing anti-Chechen political figures in Russia. Many have asserted that Kadyrov’s inner circle was involved in the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, once an important opposition figure in Russia.¹² In calling the suspected murderer of Boris Nemtsov a “true patriot of Russia”, Kadyrov seemed to demonstrate that he had little respect for federal laws.¹³ He also appeared to intervene in Russian foreign policy when he explicitly said that he would protest against the federal government if they refused to sign the UN resolution on the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, calling upon Chechens to organize demonstrations in front of the Myanmar embassy in Moscow to protest against their ill-treatment.

These actions have brought the Chechen leader into a direct confrontation with the Russian *siloviki*. Some security circles have even viewed the success of President Putin’s Chechenization policy as a “victory in a mine field”¹⁴. Kadyrov has attempted to dictate federal security services in Chechnya where the federal forces have kept their symbolic authority.¹⁵ When he learned about the Russian security services’ attempts to conduct security operations in Chechnya without his approval, Kadyrov even ordered his personal security force to open fire “if anyone appears on your territory without your knowledge [...] whether they’re from Moscow or Stavropol”.¹⁶

The relationship between President Putin and Kadyrov resembles a kind of indirect rule, “one of the means that central authorities have long employed in hopes of defusing communal conflict and civil war in multicultural societies”.¹⁷ Indirect rule is a system central leaders establish in their relationship with local rulers to contain rising violence and ethnic conflicts in peripheries.¹⁸ It enables the central rulers to set up an administrative unit in the peripheries of multicultural countries where co-ethnic rulers sustain order and security by

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- 11 Anna Arutunyan, Why Putin won’t get tough on Kadyrov, *European Council on Foreign Affairs*, 25 April 2017, at: http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_why_putin_wont_get_tough_on_kadyrov_7278.
 - 12 Cf. Emil Souleimanov, Nemtsov’s Assassination and the Chechen Trace, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 18 March 2015, at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13164-nemtsov%E2%80%99s-assassination-and-the-chechen-trace.html>.
 - 13 Cited in: Mikhail Fishman/Daria Litvinova, The Man Who Definitely Didn’t Kill Boris Nemtsov, *The Moscow Times*, 21 April 2017, at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/04/21/the-man-who-definitely-didnt-kill-boris-nemtsov-a57779>.
 - 14 Uwe Klußmann, Russia Claims Victory in Chechnya, *Spiegel Online*, 17 April 2009, at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-long-war-in-the-caucasus-russia-claims-victory-in-chechnya-a-619532.html>.
 - 15 Cf. Vladimir Isachenkov, Chechen leader threatens foes in bid to gain Putin’s support, *AP News*, 10 February 2016 at: <https://www.apnews.com/26980c1b47734726a4a7d16de77218a4>.
 - 16 Paul Sonne, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov Gives Shoot-to-Kill Order on Outside Forces, *Wall Street Journal*, 23 April 2015, at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chechen-president-ramzan-kadyrov-gives-shoot-to-kill-order-on-outside-forces-1429812489>.
 - 17 David Siroky/Valeriy Dzutsev/Michael Hechter, The differential demand for indirect rule: Evidence from the North Caucasus, in: *Post-Soviet Affairs* 3/2013, pp.268-286.
 - 18 Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism*, Oxford, 2000.

controlling their ethnic groups. Rather than directly controlling from the centre, the central leaders devolve power to the local rulers. Thus, the withdrawal of Russian federal forces and ceding power to the pro-Russian forces in Chechnya constituted the institution of indirect rule in the North Caucasus. Local rulers are also supposed to lend some assistance to the central rulers, as Kadyrov has done, by providing military personnel for the Russian army involved in the war in Syria¹⁹ and for pro-Russian forces in Ukraine.²⁰ While indirect rule is an effective way of maintaining peace and security in multicultural ethnic countries, as President Putin's success in curtailing insurgency in the North Caucasus has shown, it also has some drawbacks. The primary challenge is the principal-agent problem that has been widely identified by many in political science²¹ and economics²². The principal-agent problem occurs when agents (indirect or local rulers) fail to accomplish the tasks the principals (central rulers) assign to them.²³ In particular, the principal-agent problem arises when the principal and the agent have more diverging preferences than overlapping ones.²⁴ Kadyrov and President Putin have a common interest in curtailing insurgency in the North Caucasus and providing peace and security in the region. While Kadyrov has successfully accomplished this task, he has also attempted to challenge Russian law enforcement bodies and increase his power outside of the North Caucasus. The Chechen leader's ambition for power and his increasing influence have taken him away from the tasks his principal set for him. This principal-agent problem led directly to the confrontation between Kadyrov and the Russian *siloviki*. On several occasions, Grozny has clashed with Moscow regarding oil exploration in Chechnya. Kadyrov's men appeared to challenge Gazprom²⁵ and Russia's largest bank in Chechnya. Grozny has persistently pushed for economic autonomy in the exploration of Chechnya's oil resources.²⁶ However, in spite of Kadyrov's rising influence, President Putin has expressed his support for the Chechen leader from time to

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- 19 Cf. Neil Hauer, Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens, *FP*, 4 May 2017, at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/04/putin-has-a-new-secret-weapon-in-syria-chechens/>.
- 20 Cf., Shaun Walker, "We like partisan warfare." Chechens fighting in Ukraine – on both sides, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2015, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/chechens-fighting-in-ukraine-on-both-sides>.
- 21 Cf. Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, Agency Theory: An Assessment and Review, in: *The Academy of Management Review* 1/1989, pp. 57-74.
- 22 Cf. Sanford J. Grossman/Oliver D. Hart, An Analysis of the Principal-Agent Problem, in: *Econometrica: Journal of the Econometric Society*, 1/1983, pp. 7-45.
- 23 Cf. Barry M Mitnick, The Theory of Agency and Organizational Analysis, in: Norman E. Bowie/Edward Freeman (eds), *Ethics and Agency Theory: An Introduction*, New York, 1992, pp. 75-96.
- 24 Cf. Ethan Corbin, Principals and Agents: Syria and the Dilemma of Its Armed Group Allies, in: *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 2/2011, pp.25-46.
- 25 Cf. Tony Wesolowsky, A Chechen Court Ruled To Forgive \$135 Million In Gas Debt. Gazprom Isn't Happy, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 23 January 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/a-chechen-court-ruled-to-forgive-100-million-in-citizens-gas-debt-gazprom-isn-t-happy-/29726966.html>.
- 26 Cf. Liz Fuller, Chechnya to Acquire Federal Oil Industry Assets On Its Territory, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 6 January 2016, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-chechnya-oil-refinery/27472661.html>.

time. For instance, during his meeting with Kadyrov in April 2017, Putin had stated that “some issues are still unresolved, but they’ll be settled soon – I see it happening now – and that’s a good thing”.²⁷ These remarks suggest that Kadyrov still had Putin’s support.

Hence, the Chechen leader’s direct personal ties with President Putin have allowed him to expand his influence in Russia and control Chechnya “with its own laws, security services, taxation system and even foreign policy”²⁸. His growing power and disrespect for federal laws has angered Russian law enforcement bodies, and it is only Putin’s strong support that has kept them at bay. Once the FSB’s rising dissatisfaction looks likely to “undermine elite support for his regime”,²⁹ Putin will probably withdraw his backing. There is also a chance that this could lead to civil war in the North Caucasus as the regional ethnic groups and leaders are also likely to retaliate against Kadyrov’s growing influence in the region.

The Regional Dimension

The second dimension of the conflict in the North Caucasus is regional. While Putin’s Chechenization policy has brought peace and security in the North Caucasus, ethnic grievances still remain among some groups, and have led to rising tensions, which are directly linked to the Chechen expansionism in the region. However, these tensions have a long history.

The Ingush are the first to be affected by Chechen expansionism in the North Caucasus, although these two Caucasian ethnic groups share the same historical root. In 2018, the Ingush people were shocked to hear about a land swap deal between Kadyrov and Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the Ingush leader, transferring around 20,000 hectares of the Ingushetia land to Chechnya.³⁰ They were also surprised to come across Chechen construction workers and security forces on their territory near the Chechen border.³¹

The root of the current border issue between Chechnya and Ingushetia goes back to 1992. Both were part of the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR; from May 1991 Checheno-Ingush Republic). Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Dzhokhar Dudayev, the Chechen leader at the time, declared the independence of Chechnya, but Ingushetia refused to join Chechnya in the independence declaration and preferred to stay in the

27 Fishman/Litvinova, cited above (Note 11).

28 Sokirianskaia, cited above (Note 7).

29 Amanda Taub, Is Putin’s elite security service feuding with his own puppet regime in Chechnya? *Vox*, 11 May 2015, at: <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/11/8585661/putin-kadyrov-fsb>.

30 Cf. Neil Hauer, Ramzan Kadyrov’s Next Target, *Riddle*, 12 May 2018, at: <https://www.ridl.io/en/ramzan-kadyrovs-next-target/>.

31 Cf. Neil Hauer, Putin’s Bubbling Crisis in the North Caucasus, *The Moscow Times (Op-Ed)*, 5 October 2018, at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/10/05/putin-bubbling-crisis-in-the-north-caucasus-opinion-a63103>.

Russian Federation under President Yeltsin's leadership.³² This led to the official split of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR into two separate republics, Chechnya and Ingushetia, in June 1992. Although the sides officially separated, the official borderline had never been demarcated.

The land transfers to Chechnya frustrated the Ingush, as they had already lost some territories they considered their historical lands. After the Ingush were deported in 1944, the Prigorodny region was given to North Ossetia. On returning from exile in Central Asia (1957-1959) the Ingush were never able to go back to the Prigorodny region, which, in the meantime, had been inhabited by North Ossetians. The Ingush-Ossetian war in November 1992 left the Ingush with some territory losses, some dead, and many displaced.³³ These traumatic memories provided the backdrop to massive protests against the land swap in Magas, Ingushetia's capital. In response, Kadyrov publicly threatened the protesters and even visited Ingushetia with a large entourage of armed men to challenge a leader of the protests.³⁴ Although their confrontation ended without violence, it "raised concerns about the possibility of a regional conflict in Russia" and "amplified concerns about the power and influence of the Kremlin-backed Kadyrov [...]".³⁵ The Ingush were even concerned about the eventual annexation of the whole of Ingushetia to Chechnya.³⁶ Their leader Yevkurov resigned in June 2019 after his popularity in Ingushetia decreased dramatically.³⁷

Ingushetia is not the only republic affected by Kremlin-backed Kadyrov's rising influence in the North Caucasus. After the land swap deal with Ingushetia, Chechnya turned its sights towards a Dagestani border region where some local Akkin Chechens are settled in a district near to the Chechen border. The Chechens call this area Yurt-Aukh, or simply Aukh. The historical Aukh district is among "Kadyrov's latest quest[s] to expand his influence beyond the borders of the Chechen Republic".³⁸ This historical district has recently been

32 Cf. Varvara Pakhomenko, Ingushetia abandoned, *Open Democracy*, 16 August 2009, at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ingushetia-abandoned/>.

33 Cf. Svante E. Cornell, Conflicts in the North Caucasus, in: *Central Asian Survey* 17/1998, pp. 409-441.

34 Cf. Russian Constitutional Court Says Controversial Chechen-Ingush Border Deal Legal, *Radio FreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 6 December 2018, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-constitutional-court-says-controversial-chechen-ingush-border-deal-legal/29640892.html>.

35 Thousands Rally In Ingushetia To Protest Chechnya Land Swaps, *Radio FreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 26 March 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/thousands-rally-in-ingushetia-to-protest-chechnya-land-swaps/29843003.html>.

36 Cf. Paul Goble, Kadyrov Says Chechnya Won't Absorb Ingushetia, Rejects Amalgamation Elsewhere as Well, *Window on Eurasia*, 28 October 2018, at: <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2018/10/kadyrov-says-chechnya-wont-absorb.html>.

37 Head of Russia's Volatile Ingushetia Region Resigns Amid Border-Deal Tensions With Chechnya, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 25 June 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/head-of-russia-s-volatile-ingushetia-region-resigns-amid-border-deal-tensions-with-chechnya/30018903.html>

38 Hauer, Ramzan Kadyrov's Next Target, cited above (Note 30).

the locus of ethnic tensions, the root of which goes back to long before Kadyrov came to power in Chechnya.³⁹

Established in 1943 within the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Aukh district had been predominantly populated by the Akkin Chechens until 1944, when the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin deported North Caucasus's Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia. In 1957 after Stalin's death, the Chechens and Ingush were able to return to their historical homelands and resettle in their previous lands except the Prigorodnyi district, which had been inhabited by the North Ossetians, and the Aukh district, which had been settled by the Avars and Laks. While the Chechens were in exile in Central Asia, the Aukh district had been renamed Novolaksky district within the Dagestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and the Avars and Laks had moved to its areas.⁴⁰ Leninaul and Kalinaul, two important villages that cover around 40 per cent of the former Aukh district and that are now home to the Akkin Chechens, Avars, and Laks, have been the locus of ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus since the Chechens returned from exile in 1957. Although an agreement was reached to restore the historical Aukh district in 1991, it was never put into practice due to instability and a shortage of funds. Meanwhile, the Chechens had attempted to grab the Aukh district in 1999 by force. However, Saigidpasha Umakhanov, the Avar leader, had organized a militia group of Avar men and prevented a Chechen takeover of the district. Fighting against the Chechens in the 1990s had allowed Umakhanov to secure Moscow's support.⁴¹ Thus, the former Aukh district has remained in Dagestan and the area has become the centre of ethnic clashes between the Avars and Akkin Chechens.

Since Kadyrov came to power in Chechnya, he has attempted to challenge Umakhanov.⁴² Aside from a brief rapprochement in 2009, the sides have verbally attacked each other repeatedly.⁴³ Kadyrov has lambasted Dagestani officials many times for their failure to take care of Chechens in the former Aukh region. While the Laks have generally avoided clashes with the local Chechens and tended to move to the area in the northern city of Makhachkala, the Avars have been reluctant to move and have come into conflict with the local Chechens many times. The sides live separately with very little interethnic integration and they even pray at separate mosques. Ethnic tensions between the Avars and the local Chechens escalated in summer 2017, when intercommunal fighting between the Akkin Chechens and Avars broke out on 7 June 2017 thus

39 Cf. Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic threat*, New Haven/London 2007, p. 114.

40 Cf. Ekaterina Neroznikova, 'The burning land of Lenin-Aul', *Open Democracy*, 11 August 2017, at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/burning-lands-leninaul-dagestan/>.

41 Cf. Robert Bruce Ware, 'Recent Russian federal elections in Dagestan: Implications for proposed electoral reform', in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 57/2005, p. 586.

42 Cf. Mairbek Vatchagaev, 'Tensions Heighten Between Chechnya's Leader and Influential Dagestani Figure', in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11/2014.

43 Cf. Ivan Sukhov, 'Why Russia Won Nothing in Chechnya', *Moscow Times*, 18. March 2015 at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/18/why-russia-won-nothing-in-chechnya-a44887>.

threatening peace and security in the North Caucasus. Within hours, Chechen vehicles rushed toward the Dagestani border to help their ethnic kin, and some Avars settled in Khasavyurt were also quick to head to the area to do the same. While guns were fired and some were injured, the Chechen officials were finally able to stop a full-scale ethnic conflict.⁴⁴

However, the tensions are far from pacified. After the Ingush-Chechen land swaps, the Avars were alarmed to learn that border delineation talks between Chechnya and Dagestan had also been started. A map on the website of the Chechen assembly marked some Dagestani land near the Chechen border as a part of Chechnya.⁴⁵ The ethnic groups living in Dagestan near the Chechen border feared a repeat of “the Ingush scenario”. The Chechen and Dagestani officials then stated that they had suspended the border delimitation talks amid the massive protests against land swaps in Ingushetia.⁴⁶

Kadyrov has attempted to rule “through repressive measures and has created a climate of impunity for security forces in the North Caucasus” and President Putin has given him “free rein because [... Putin] relies on him to rein in separatists and militants after two wars in Chechnya”.⁴⁷ Putin’s personal support for Kadyrov has left the regional forces in the North Caucasus unwilling to challenge him, but should Putin withdraw his support other leaders and ethnic groups could retaliate.

The Local Dimension

At the local level, grievances and tensions within the North Caucasian republics are growing. Many Chechens have been angered by Kadyrov’s brutal regime in Chechnya. Younger Chechens, who did not participate in the Russo-Chechen wars, view pro-Russian Chechen forces as their primary enemy.⁴⁸ The grievances in Ingushetia reached a new level following the Chechen-Ingush land swap agreement. Some local people including the Kumyk and the Nogais in Dagestan have been protesting against the Dagestani officials’ failure to address their concerns.

First, some local Chechens have been resentful of Kadyrov’s repressive regime in Chechnya. Since the Chechen leader came to power, he has taken

44 Cf. Neil Hauer, Ethnic clashes in southwest Dagestan incite Chechen nationalism, *Medium*, 20 September 2017, at: <https://medium.com/@NeilPHauer/ethnic-clashes-in-southwest-dagestan-incite-chechen-nationalism-3c6d407333f1>.

45 Cf. Chechen authorities ascribe Dagestani territories in a new map, *Caucasian Knot*, 11 November 2018, at: <https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/45136/>.

46 Cf. Russia’s Dagestan, Chechnya Halt Border Talks Amid Ingushetia Unrest, *The Moscow Times*, 17 April 2019, at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/17/russias-dagestan-chechnya-halt-border-talks-a65268>.

47 Thousands Rally In Ingushetia To Protest Chechnya Land Swaps, cited above (Note 35).

48 Cf. Emil Aslan Souleimanov/Namig Abbasov/David S. Siroky, Frankenstein in Grozny: vertical and horizontal cracks in the foundation of Kadyrov’s rule, in: *Asia Europe Journal* 1/2019, pp. 87–103, here: p. 89.

harsh measures to fight anyone who attempts to criticize him and his clan. Recently, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported “torture; enforced disappearances; and extrajudicial executions” and other “very serious human rights violations” and abuses in Chechnya.⁴⁹ The OSCE report states that “a special regime of impunity is tolerated for the sake of stability”⁵⁰ in Chechnya. Kadyrov once threatened to “break fingers and tear out tongues” of anyone who “insult[s] my blood, my clan, my family, my people”.⁵¹

After the end of the Chechen war, local Chechens were oppressed by pro-Russian Chechens rather than Russians. The *Kadyrovtsy* appeared to be “much more dangerous for local residents in terms of persecuting entire families [...]”⁵² Chechen forces have proved to be more effective to curtail insurgency, since they had more information about the local Chechens. They could effectively “identify insurgents within the population” and “issue credible threats against civilians for noncooperation”.⁵³ Having some insurgency experience also allowed the Chechen soldiers to fight it effectively in the North Caucasus. The *Kadyrovtsy* did not only target the insurgents, they also used collective punishment methods, torturing the families and relatives of the insurgents and burning their houses.⁵⁴ Several mass graves found in Chechnya have been associated with the *Kadyrovtsy* killings.⁵⁵

These repressive measures alienated many Chechen youth who are biding their time to take their revenge against the Kadyrov regime. The harsh measures did “little to convince radicalised parts of the population to give their allegiance to the Russian state”, but seemed instead to “stimulate a new generation of disillusioned youth to ‘join the forest’ [...] in search of revenge or a

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- 49 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), OSCE Rapporteur’s Report under the Moscow Mechanism on alleged Human Rights Violations and Impunity in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, ODIHR.GAL/76/18/Corr.1, 21 December 2018, pp. at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/407402>; pp. 2, 32 (34); cf. also OSCE Cites Torture, Executions Among “Grave” Rights Violations In Chechnya, *Radio FreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 20 December 2018, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/osce-cites-torture-executions-among-grave-rights-violations-in-chechnya/29667900.html>.
- 50 OSCE Rapporteur’s Report, cited above (Note 48), p. 32; OSCE Cites Torture, Executions Among “Grave” Rights Violations In Chechnya, cited above (Note 48).
- 51 Quoted in Chechen Leader Threatens To “Break Fingers And Tear Out Tongues”, *Radio FreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 13 June 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/chechen-leader-threatens-to-break-fingers-and-tear-out-tongues-/29997721.html>.
- 52 Rights Activists: Kadyrovtsy Are Chechnya’s Main Problem, *The Jamestown Foundation – North Caucasus Weekly*, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/rights-activists-kadyrovtsy-are-chechnyas-main-problem-2/>.
- 53 Jason Lyall, Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War, in: *American Political Science Review* 1/2010, pp. 1-20, here: p. 1.
- 54 Lawrence Uzzell, Ramzan Kadyrov Embraces Collective Punishment, *The Jamestown Foundation – North Caucasus Weekly*, at: <https://jamestown.org/program/ramzan-kadyrov-embraces-collective-punishment-2/>.
- 55 Cf. Emil A. Souleimanov/Huseyn Aliyev, Asymmetry of Values, Indigenous Forces, and Incumbent Success in Counterinsurgency: Evidence from Chechnya, in: *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5/2015, pp. p. 691.

different political order”⁵⁶ “Blood revenge, the practice of seeking blood retribution for a grave offense committed against an individual or his or her relatives”⁵⁷ is one mechanism that has pushed local Chechens to retaliate against the oppression of their families and relatives, motivating them to join anti-regime forces and prepare for future revenge. When different clans fight based on blood revenge, “[c]onflict is sure to spread like wildfire”⁵⁸.

Thus, local Chechens are “antagonized by the brazen-facedness and impunity of kadyrovtsy and local police”⁵⁹ and their grievances have been growing since Kadyrov took control of Chechnya. Young Chechens who attacked the Chechen police in 2016 in Grozny and in 2017 in the village of Geldagan and the town of Shali grew up during Kadyrov’s regime and did not experience the Chechen-Russian wars. This new generation of Chechens view Kadyrov, his clan, and his Kadyrovtsy as their main enemy.⁶⁰ It is only President Putin’s strong support of Kadyrov and fear of brutal persecution at the hands of his personal army that keep potential avengers at a bay.

Second, local grievances have been growing in Ingushetia since the Ingush-Chechen land swaps. Despite the preventive police force, thousands of Ingush protested against the controversial deal after the news about the transition of the Ingush lands to Chechnya spread around. A public referendum on the deal and the resignation of Yunus-bek Yevkurov were among the major demands of the protesters. Ingushetia’s Constitutional Court ruled [that the land swap agreement was illegal because “it changes the territory of [the] Republic of Ingushetia” without a public referendum].⁶¹

Despite the rejection of the agreement by Ingushetia’s Constitutional Court, the Ingush leader took the issue to Russia’s Federal Constitutional Court, who approved it.⁶² This intensified the protests, forcing Yevkurov to step down in June 2019.⁶³

56 International Crisis Group, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (II), Islam, the Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency*, Europe Report 221, 19 October 2012, p. i.

57 Emil A. Souleimanov/Huseyn Aliyev, *Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization: Evidence from the Chechen Wars*, in: *International Security* 2/2015, pp. 158-180, here: p. 158.

58 Emil Souleimanov/Ondrej Ditych, *The Internationalisation of the Russian-Chechen Conflict: Myths and Reality*, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 7/2008, pp. 1199-1222, here: p. 1220.

59 Emil Souleimanov, *Attacks in Chechnya Suggest Opposition to Kadyrov is Far from Eradicated*, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 24 March 2017, at: <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13436-attacks-in-chechnya-suggest-opposition-to-kadyrov-is-far-from-eradicated.html>.

60 Cf. Liz Fuller, *Will Kadyrov Reap The Whirlwind In Chechnya?*, *RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 10 February 2017, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/caucasus-report-chechnya-kadyrov-attacks/28302929.html>; cf. also Souleimanov/Abbasov/Siroky, cited above (Note 47), p. 89.

61 Quoted in: *Russian Constitutional Court Says Controversial Chechen-Ingush Border Deal Legal*, *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 6 December 2018, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-constitutional-court-says-controversial-chechen-ingush-border-deal-legal/29640892.html>.

62 Cf. *ibid.*

63 Cf. *Head Of Russia's Volatile Ingushetia Region Resigns Amid Border-Deal Tensions With Chechnya*, *Radio FreeEurope/Radio Liberty*, 25 June 2019, at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/head-of-russia-s-volatile-ingushetia-region-resigns-amid-border-deal-tensions-with-chechnya/30018903.html>.

Finally, the Dagestani leaders also have failed to address the local grievances within Dagestan. In particular, the Kumyk and the Nogais, two Turkic ethnic groups, have long resented the Dagestani officials' unwillingness to tackle the challenges they have faced in Dagestan.⁶⁴ In particular, these ethnic groups have attempted to press the Dagestani government to find solutions to their land problems. There is some evidence that the activism of these two Turkic groups, as well as the protests of other ethnic groups "contributed to Ramazan Abdulatipov's forced resignation from his post" as head of the Republic of Dagestan.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Given the growing grievances and ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus, I have argued that the conflict in the region has not been pacified, but frozen. Although President Putin's support for Ramzan Kadyrov has led to a superficial security and order in the North Caucasus, deeper grievances and tensions remain across three dimensions: local, regional, and federal. At the federal level, the antagonism between Russian *siloviki* and Kadyrov is growing. At the regional level, the ethnic tensions are increasing in the republics of the North Caucasus, with many people alarmed by Kadyrov's rising power in the region. At the local level, the brutal and corrupt regimes established by leaders in the North Caucasus are causing tensions to rise.

It is only President Putin's personal support to Kadyrov that has prevented large-scale violence in the North Caucasus so far. At the federal level, the Russian *siloviki* have avoided open confrontation with Kadyrov because of the President's support, and at the regional level, the ethnic groups and leaders in the North Caucasus have hesitated to openly challenge him because he is backed by the Kremlin. At the local level, Putin's support has allowed Kadyrov to establish his persecution machine in Chechnya and other local leaders, too, have set up regimes to repress the unrests among the local population. Should President Putin's support for Kadyrov's rule decline, the local, regional, and federal forces may retaliate, potentially dragging the region into civil war.

64 Cf. Paul Goble, Ethnic Conflicts in Dagestan Multiply, Threatening Far More Than Only That Republic, in: Eurasia Daily Monitor, 11 July 2017.

65 Mikhail Kaplan, Seventy years on, the Kumyk people in Dagestan are still fighting territorial claims, *Open Democracy*, 2 May 2018, at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/kumyk-people-are-still-fighting-territorial-claims/>.