



# Frankenstein in Grozny: vertical and horizontal cracks in the foundation of Kadyrov's rule

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## Abstract

Many scholars have suggested that organized violence in Chechnya has ended, and that Russia's Chechenization policy and Ramzan Kadyrov's presidency deserve the credit. We suggest that Putin has created a Frankenstein-like ruler over whom he risks losing control. As a result, the conflict only appears resolved, and we draw attention to both vertical and horizontal cracks in the foundation of Kadyrov's rule that could lead to renewed violence. Vertically, the Chechen strongman and his growing clout in regional and federal politics have antagonized Russian *siloviki*. Horizontally, thousands of Chechens appear to be in a state of postponed blood feud toward Kadyrov, his clan, and the *kadyrovtsy*, his personal army. Backed by President Putin's personal support, Kadyrov has put in motion a brutal machine of persecution over which some signs indicate he has lost control. Fear of extermination at the hands of the Kadyrov and his personal army has kept most prospective avengers at a bay. Once President Putin's support wanes, locals will retaliate against Kadyrov and against Russian troops stationed in the republic, and Russian law enforcement circles will openly challenge Kadyrov's rule. Putin's support is only likely to wither if the costs of continued support (which grow with Kadyrov's increasing independence) exceed the benefits (derived from an enforced peace). Either a renewed insurgency or ever more recalcitrant behavior would demonstrate a level of interest misalignment that could induce Putin to withdraw his support. Such a turn of events would render these horizontal and vertical cracks in the foundation of Kadyrov's rule more noticeable and would likely to cause the frozen conflict in Chechnya to thaw, leading to a new civil war.

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## Introduction

In February 2008, President Vladimir Putin addressed the State Council and claimed that the Russian Government has succeeded in ending the war in the North Caucasus. According to Putin, Russia made “a decisive and crushing blow” against separatism and terrorism, making “Chechnya now a full-fledged region within the Russian Federation” (Putin 2008). Others quickly echoed this pronouncement. One commentator proclaimed, “Russia has won the war” (Steele 2008), while Russian media went further by stating that the region had been “pacified” (quoted in Russell 2011).

The devil, we shall suggest, lies in the details. Pro-Russian Chechens linked to Kadyrov’s clan now control Chechnya and do Moscow’s bidding. This method of ruling by native proxy is often called “indirect rule,” an age-old institution used in ruling multinational and colonial empires (e.g., Hechter 2000; Gerring et al. 2011). Putin’s Chechenization policy is a modern instantiation of this institution. It devolves power to pro-Russian Chechens in Chechnya to fight against other Chechen insurgents, thereby “indigenizing” the conflict (Meakins 2017; Ratelle and Souleimanov 2016). Some are convinced that this has served to end the Chechen conflict (Steele 2008; Markov 2007). The Russian government’s decision to end its “counter-terrorism campaign” in Chechnya in April 2009, shortly after Ramzan Kadyrov’s ascent to the “Chechen presidency,” was certainly a signal that the Chechen conflict officially ended. After visiting Chechnya, Jonathan Steele, a Guardian correspondent, articulated that “in Grozny they [planes] glide in over woods and villages, apparently confident there are no resistance fighters lurking in wait ... security is in the hands of Kadyrov’s Chechen forces ... highways, which used to be dotted with Russian checkpoints, are open and unpatrolled” (Steele 2008). Chechnya even entered a period of relative economic growth as a result of massive construction in the region in preparation for the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (Fayutkin 2009; Steele 2008; Basnukaev 2014; Cairo 2014; Carly 2014). In short, Russia’s man in Grozny seems have made all quiet on the southern front.

Putin’s approach in Chechnya is likely to work, according to theory, only insofar as the interests of the local agents and the principal in the center are closely aligned. Even then, monitoring and sanctioning are necessary to ensure that the local agent (Kadyrov) behaves according to the wishes of the central principal (Putin). Monitoring and sanctioning are essential to any form of indirect rule but are costlier the farther apart the interests of the principal and the agent. When the interests of the local and center are aligned, the monitoring becomes easier and sanctioning becomes unnecessary. When interests are fully misaligned, no amount of monitoring and sanctioning will enable efficient indirect rule at a reasonable cost.

There is also a risk that delegating power to unloyal agents will backfire by enabling the region to acquire *de facto* independence. The central ruler gains temporary stability in the region, in this case by outsourcing repression to natives, but creates longer-term problems, particularly separatism. Secessionism is likely to be exacerbated the longer the center ceases to control the periphery and increasingly depends upon its good will for peace and stability. In short, this is the problem of Frankenstein. Putin has created a monster in Grozny, whom he has empowered to use whatever means necessary to keep the peace. There are signs that Putin cannot restrain his own creation, and the only way to bring it back under the center’s control is to destroy it (Dannreuther and March 2008).

This paper examines the “frozen conflict” in Chechnya and assesses the extent to which there is evidence for two types of cracks in the foundation of the Kadyrov-Putin relationship. “Vertical” refers to the indirect rule relationship between Moscow and Grozny, whereas “horizontal” refers to the relationship between Kadyrov’s clan and other Chechens. The first type of crack in the foundation is vertical—between Chechnya and Moscow. The vertical crack in the foundation has been deepened by the resentment that Russian law enforcement agencies feel against the Chechen leadership. In particular, Russian *siloviki*, the military and security services, stalwartly resent the Chechen strongman’s growing influence in both Chechnya and in the rest of Russia. It is Kadyrov’s personal ties with Putin that have helped him to counterbalance these pressures from Russian security and military circles. As his reputation in Russia grows, so too does Kadyrov’s thirst for much more influence, specially economic influence over Chechnya’s oil resources. Naturally, Moscow resists ceding further power to the Chechen strongman and has attempted to constrain his growing clout and keep him under control. Although indirect rule has been effective in containing a new jihadist insurgency in Chechnya, the paper provides evidence that Putin faces increasing pressure from other power centers in Russia to pull the plug on Kadyrov who is perceived as having become too independent.

The second type of crack is horizontal—between different internal actors within Chechnya who are in a state of deferred blood feud. Many local Chechens deeply resent Kadyrov’s rule in Chechnya, and recent attacks indicate that the insurgency has not been fully contained. Backed by President Putin’s personalistic support, the Chechen leader has established a brutal regime in Chechnya, even by Russian standards, harshly persecuting those against his regime and his clan. President Putin’s personal support has enabled the Chechen leader to set up a personal persecution machine to suppress the insurgency in Chechnya. While older Chechens view the Russian federal forces as their primary enemy (for themselves and Chechnya), many younger Chechens who have not personally experienced the Chechen wars perceive the pro-Russian *Chechens* as their focal foe. Many younger people are angered by Kadyrov and his clan and are ready to fight him. There is also evidence of growing antagonism between Kadyrov and some parts of his personal army due to his ill treatment of subordinates (Souleimanov 2017).

This paper argues that there are growing grievances in Chechnya at the vertical and horizontal levels. The relationship between Grozny and Russian law enforcement services is strained. Kadyrov and *kadyrovtsy* enforce a brutal regime, which has angered local people. Some parts of his personal army, *kadyrovtsy*, resented his ill treatment of them. Should support for Kadyrov wane in Moscow, either because *siloviki* say enough is enough, or for another exogenous reason, we predict that the locals will retaliate against Grozny and Russian troops stationed in the republic *en masse*. The local insurgency would almost certainly grow to fill the vacuum and civil war would likely ensue.

Whereas many studies treat post-Soviet conflicts (such as Chechnya, Transnistria, Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia) as “frozen,” Lynch (2005), Perry (2009), and Morar (2010) argue that this should not imply that they are static or stuck in time. As we show, this frozen conflict is full of dynamism between the former warring sides. Stable peace is not in the offing because the core issues are not settled. The recurrence of full-scale violence is more likely—the question is not whether but when. Frozen

conflict can move into peaceful thawing, violent thawing, or withering. We argue that this conflict is moving into violent thawing period, due to growing vertical and horizontal grievances. The trigger might be some vague indication that President Putin's personal support for Chechen leader is dying out.

The paper attempts to make an empirical contribution to the special issue by analyzing the system of indirect rule that undergirds the current "peace" in Chechnya and exploring the vertical and horizontal pressures that threaten to destabilize it. The rest of the article proceeds as follows. First, we provide our framework for understanding the Chechen conflict within the broader context of the frozen conflict concept. Next, we examine vertical grievances between Moscow and Grozny, and then concentrate on horizontal grievances among internal groups within Chechnya and the growing antagonism between the Chechen leader and some parts of his personal army, *kadyrovtsy*. In the last section, we conclude by summarizing our argument and discussing how it fits into the special issue.

## Gauging the temperature

The Chechen conflict started as a separatist struggle in which Chechen nationalists demanded independence from Russia along the lines of the establishment of independent Baltic States. The Second Chechen war changed the direction and nature of the conflict in Chechnya, involving new jihadi insurgent groups. Chechnya is thus a frozen secessionist conflict at its core in which an indigenous group is fighting against (ethnically and religiously) foreigner colonizers. Frozen conflicts are only frozen in the sense of being unresolved, but not in the sense that they are static or lacking in violence. Recent attacks against pro-Russian Chechen forces indicate that lower levels of rebel violence are still present in the region. In this sense, we concur with Lynch (2005) that the term frozen is misleading because developments on the ground are dynamic. Our conceptualization in this article resembles Perry's (2009), who considers conflicts frozen when most of the violence has stopped, but the core interests of the warring parties have not been addressed or moderated. This is consistent with Morar's (2010, p. 11) conclusion that the metaphor "frozen" is deceiving because it suggests that "a conflict could be put on hold" [indefinitely]. Although Putin and Kadyrov claim that the conflict in Chechnya has been resolved, the deeper issues have not been addressed, which we can observe within Chechnya itself and in the relationship between Grozny and Moscow as "horizontal and vertical cracks" in the foundation.

Rather than studying the Chechen conflict as an idiosyncratic case, or as just another case of separatism, we explain it through a "frozen violent conflict" prism. As the special issue's authors observe, frozen conflicts can move in three directions: peaceful thawing, violent thawing, and withering.<sup>1</sup> Growing grievances that could lead to a violent thaw can be divided for analytical purposes into "vertical grievances" (Moscow–Grozny) and "horizontal grievances" (between Kadyrov and local people in Chechnya). At the vertical level, the Russian *siloviki* feel increasing resentment and express growing antagonism toward Kadyrov's clout and idiosyncratic rule. At the

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these cyclical understanding of conflict, please see the introduction article of this journal issue.

horizontal level, the local people in Chechnya increasingly resent Kadyrov, his clan, and his personal army. These two sources of tension raise the specter of a new civil war in Chechnya.

President Putin's support for Kadyrov allows the Chechen leader to counterbalance the pressures from Russian *siloviki* and perpetuate his persecution machine in Chechnya, which has thus far prevented a return to previous levels of violence. Once Putin's personal support for the Chechen strongman fades away, however, both local people in Chechnya and Russian *siloviki* are likely to launch armed action against Kadyrov and his personal army, turning the conflict into a new civil war by "unfreezing" the glue that has thus far held this momentary peace in Chechnya together. In the next parts, we are looking at specific vertical and horizontal grievances, in that order, which could transform the frozen conflict in Chechnya toward violent thawing and threaten regional stability.

## Vertical grievances

Vertical grievances between Grozny and Moscow have been growing since Kadyrov came to power in Chechnya and his influence started to grow. Kadyrov was the head of presidential security service during his father's presidency and then appointed as a president when he turned thirty years old. He has gained a reputation for his idiosyncratic rule and for the persecution of separatists and insurgents. His own militia, consisting of around seven thousand *kadyrovtsy*, has become the primary guarantor of security and safety in Chechnya since Russian forces retreated from the region. Kadyrov's reputation has been growing not only in Chechnya, but also within the wider Russian political field, due to his bold interventions. For instance, he directly participated in the release of detained Russian journalists in Ukraine,<sup>2</sup> helped rescue of Russian navy personnel kept in Libya, and has helped many mothers to reunite their beloved children that had joined ISIS. One child, Bilal, four-year-old boy, who joined ISIS after his father abducted him, was found in Mosul and then delivered to his mother under the direct command of the Chechen strongman. These sorts of actions have increased his political clout and approval rating among ordinary Russians, which has enabled him to rule Chechnya "with its own laws, security services, taxation system and even foreign policy" (Sokirianskaia 2017). The Chechen leader's growing clout is also evident in forced marriages and gay purges in Chechnya. When an underage girl was pressured to marry one of Kadyrov's chief police officers, three times her age, Moscow did not intervene to enforce federal laws against underage marriages. This reinforced the notion that the "celebration of Chechen tradition [is] standing above Russian law" (Arutunyan 2017). Similarly, Kadyrov has been accused of persecuting gays. Kadyrov's men are also thought to have been secretly involved in assassinating Boris Nemtsov, a Russian opposition leader (Souleimanov 2015). Kadyrov even went further in calling the suspected murderer of Boris Nemtsov a "true patriot of Russia" (Mikhail Fishman, 2017). The assassination of Boris Nemtsov has led some to argue that Russia has lost control over Chechnya (Walker 2015). The assassination of Boris Nemtsov is not a *sui generis* case—Kadyrov's men have also been suspected for the

<sup>2</sup> Ethnic-Chechen Vostok forces also fought against the Georgians in the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and have volunteered to fight in Ukraine.

murder of Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist from the *Novaya Gazeta*, a newspaper critical of Russian Government, who was reported dead after being shot in the entrance of her apartment in Moscow (Washington Post 2017). She was killed two days after she called Chechen strongman a “coward armed to the teeth and surrounded by security guards” during her interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, her “last interview” (Politkovskaya 2016). When Russian servicemen attempted to carry out security operations in southern part of Chechnya without Kadyrov’s consent, the Chechen leader told his security forces to shoot “anyone appearing on [Chechen] territory without [their]... knowledge, ... whether they’re from Moscow or Stavropol” (Sonne 2015). Later on, Kadyrov called on Chechens to protest the “genocide of the Rohingya Muslims” in front of the embassy of Myanmar in Moscow and stated that he would go against the Russian federal government, if Russia opposed the UN resolution against Myanmar’s massacre of Rohingya Muslims (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2017). These and previous bold statements by Chechen strongman on Russian federal and foreign policy caused controversy between Moscow and Grozny (Russell 2008). The Chechen strongman’s bold statements interfering in Russian foreign policy further underscore his growing autonomy and the center’s decreasing control.

Putin’s Chechenization policy has calmed insurgent violence, but simultaneously created new problems as a result of some important issues over which Moscow and Grozny have divergent preferences. For example, Grozny is pushing for more economic autonomy in terms of controlling Chechnya’s oil resources. Principal-agent theory posits that the principal needs to develop control mechanisms to prevent moral hazard challenges and the clash of interests with the agent (Corbin 2011). Kadyrov’s brazen use of power, ordering his soldiers to shoot Russian security forces that enter Chechnya without Chechen permission could certainly be interpreted as evidence that the Russian government has ceded too much control by delegating power to Kadyrov.<sup>3</sup> Putin’s “Chechenization” policy helped the Russian government quell the insurgency and achieve stability in the North Caucasus, but it did so by empowering Ramazan Kadyrov (Sakwa 2010). Pointing to this precarious peace, some have called Putin’s Chechenization policy a “victory in a mine field” (Klußmann 2009). Since becoming the “president” of Chechnya, the strongman’s clout has been growing both in Chechnya and the rest of Russia, while the perception that Russia still controls Chechnya is diminishing.

Kadyrov and Putin have a strategic partnership, which ensures Putin’s personal support for the Chechen strongman (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016, p. 1). During his meeting with Kadyrov in April 2017, Putin remarked: “some issues are still unresolved, but they’ll be settled soon - I see it happening now - and that’s a good thing.” Despite repeated violations of Russian laws in Chechnya, and internal opposition to Kadyrov’s growing clout, the Chechen strongman will likely continue to enjoy Putin’s personal support insofar as Kadyrov is able to “get things done” (i.e., quell the insurgency) in Chechnya. Putin has no interest in fighting the insurgency again in Chechnya, when he has more pressing concerns such as worsening relations with the West and Russian

<sup>3</sup> The principal-agent problem occurs when a principal (actor, individual etc.) is not able to monitor and control perfectly the behavior of the agent who has been hired, as it were, to accomplish set goals, but is not acting exactly the way the principal wants (Mitnick 1992).

involvement in international conflicts (Ukraine and Syria where Kadyrov's forces are fighting on behalf of Russia, but Chechen rebels are fighting on the opposite side).

Putin's Chechenization policy and personal support of Kadyrov is an example of a more general phenomenon of delegation that central authorities have long employed in hopes of defusing communal conflict and civil war in larger, multicultural societies (Hechter 2000).<sup>4</sup> Ramzan Kadyrov is aware of the importance of Putin's support to his rule in Chechnya and fosters his personal ties with President Putin. As the personal "combat infantry of Vladimir Putin" (Yaffa 2016), Kadyrov has attempted to demonstrate strong loyalty (Walker 2015). The Russians, proclaimed Kadyrov, "have rallied around their leader Vladimir Putin" (Walker 2015). Kadyrov's personal ties with President Putin have helped him to secure substantial amount of federal subsidies for the reconstruction of Chechnya, and have allowed him to remain immune from federal controls. His personal ties have also enabled Kadyrov to compel and direct the security agencies of Russia operating in Chechnya (Isachenkov 2016). While some have predicted that the Chechen strongman would be soon removed from power because he had "gotten out of control" (Galeotti 2015; Nechepurenko and Dolgov 2015), we argue that his personal ties with President Putin have not only immunized him from being removed from power but have even helped him to increase his power so far in Chechnya. Alexeyeva (2010) has also argued that "[t]he impunity and omnipotence of Ramzan Kadyrov depends on the support of...Putin. As long as Putin supports him nobody will touch a hair on Kadyrov's head...."

However, the Russian security services are deeply concerned about the Chechen strongman's increasing power and fear the center is losing too much control. These security services are angered and frustrated by the Chechen leader's disrespect of federal laws and are keen to see him go. There is growing concern in the federal government on the rising clout of the Chechen strongman not only in Chechnya, but also in the rest of Russia. Kadyrov's disrespect of Russian federal laws and his independent leadership style in Chechnya have led to increasing discontent among Russian law enforcement agencies. The rift between the Chechen strongman and Russian security services grew especially after the assassination of Russian opposition leader, Nemtsov, whose death in Moscow is linked to several Chechens close to Kadyrov. The fissure between Russian powerful law enforcement circles and the Chechen strongman deepened when these law enforcement agencies arrested several Chechen suspects linked to Boris Nemtsov's assassination on 27 February 2015. Among the detained, Dadayev was the primary suspect, whom Kadyrov had rewarded a medal and whom he defended as "patriot of Russia" after his detention. The Russian

<sup>4</sup> This is often called "indirect rule" because the center rules by proxy through an ethnic native and has arguably served to defuse the insurgency and contain nationalistic conflict in the North Caucasus (Siroky et al. 2013, p. 268). Indirect rule allows the central leaders to establish a distinctive administration in multicultural societies where co-ethnic indirect rulers control their ethnic groups, which is generally perceived as more legitimate (Hechter 2013). In exchange for appointing them, these indirect rulers provide some benefits to the central authorities. These benefits may include taxes, military support in form of manpower during wartime, and containing nationalism. Although indirect rule allows the central authorities to develop special agency relationships with the local rulers (indirect rulers) and contain rising nationalistic conflict, it is not without challenges. A major challenge with indirect rule is the emergence of principal-agent problems, a dilemma that is widely cited in political science (Eisenhardt 1989) and economics (Grossman and Hart 1983), which stems in this case from appointing Ramzan Kadyrov as the "president" of Chechnya, and devolving power to pro-Russian Chechens rather than controlling Chechnya directly from Moscow.

siloviki has many times attempted to remove the Chechen strongman from power by linking the assassination of Boris Nemtsov to his men. Although Russian siloviki failed in attempting to remove Kadyrov from the Chechen leadership by using the Nemtsov tragedy, the security services now feel even greater antagonism toward Kadyrov, which has endangered the Chechen leader's position. "Kadyrov's inroads into areas they consider their own preserve", in particular, continue to feed the resentment of the security services (Nemtsova 2015).

The Guardian reports that "nobody in Moscow has ever liked Kadyrov" (Walker 2015). This is due, according to some, to abnormal functioning of local institutions in Chechnya, such as the police, courts, and prosecution offices. In particular, it is reported that top authorities are appointed from pro-Russian Chechens, except some from Russian Federal Security Service (Walker 2015). While analyzing the political processes in Chechnya, Gennady Gudkov, a former KGB agent, argued that "the price for Russia of 'peace' in the Caucasus ... [was] the de facto semi-independence of Chechnya" (Walker 2015). Although Putin's Chechenization is widely viewed successful in pacifying the restive region, Russian law enforcement agencies interpreted the 2014 early December insurgent attacks as an indication of the Chechen strongman's failure to stem the insurgency in Chechnya (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016, p. 2). In response to the Chechen strongman's bold statement regarding killing Russian security forces that enter to Chechnya without his consent, Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs made an immediate announcement, calling his statement "unacceptable," and declaring that the police from Stavropol notified Chechen police forces about the operations in Grozny (Reuters 2015). Russia's law enforcement agencies are closely observing Kadyrov's growing clout and are very concerned about the Kremlin's diminished power in Chechnya (Falkowski and Żochowski 2015).

Putin's support for the Chechen leader has produced a divide within the Russian ruling elite, which questions his loyalty. Many Chechen leaders from the Yamadayevs and the elder Kadyrov fought against Russian troops, so the latest Kadyrov would not be an outlier (De Waal 2015). The biggest threat to Kadyrov's position in Russia is likely to come from Russian siloviki, which have consistently argued for sacking Kadyrov (Lipman 2015). Kadyrov's disrespect of federal laws and his unconventional rule in Chechnya threaten the stability of region and his hold on power. Meanwhile, not only are Russia's top federal law enforcement agencies resentful and angered, but so too is the Russian opposition whom the Moscow-backed strongman recently threatened. Alexei Navalny, a major Russian opposition leader, for example, stated that interrogating Ramzan Kadyrov would be his top priority task if he wins the incoming presidential election (Fishman and Litvinova 2017). Hence, the opposition against the Chechen strongman's growing clout is on rise.

The strong resentment of Russian security circles has presented Putin with a serious dilemma. The fissure between the two pillars of Putin's power (Russian siloviki and Kadyrov) has pushed him "run into a really serious problem" (quoted in Bleiweis 2015). While Kadyrov has been an important figure for Putin to make North Caucasus stable, the Russian security services play a central role in sustaining the Russian leader's power and personal security. Indeed, Putin is not interested at sacking Kadyrov from the Chechen leadership as long as Kadyrov plays that role by preventing the emergence of new insurgency movement in Chechnya and by containing Chechen nationalism. However, these benefits are weighed against the costs Putin faces if



Kadyrov challenges the Russian security services, which are central to Putin's hold on power.

To mitigate these costs, President Putin may allow the Russian law enforcement agencies to restrain use measures against the Chechen strongman's growing power (Goble 2015; Jobe 2015). This could shake the power structure in Chechnya. A poll conducted by the Echo radio station indicated that 58% of people in Moscow would support the FSB, while only 6% of these people would back the Chechen leader, if an open public hostility breaks out between Kadyrov and FSB (Ramani 2015). Once the cost of keeping Kadyrov in power in Chechnya rises for President Putin, he is likely to cease his support for the Chechen strongman. Hence, Putin's personal support for the Chechen leader is critical, not indefinite, and may diminish as pressures grow from both Russian *siloviki*. Thus, whereas Putin's support for Kadyrov is still his best option, it is not unconditional.

In sum, vertical grievances in Kadyrov-Moscow relationships are growing. Russian *siloviki* antagonized by the Chechen strongman and his clout in regional and federal politics are currently counterbalanced by Putin's personal support for Kadyrov, but the scales could tip against Kadyrov if Putin feels he has gone too far (e.g., kills Russian soldiers in Chechnya, interferes in foreign policy), asks for too much (more control over oil revenues), or becomes redundant (cannot contain the insurgency). Consequently, the end of President Putin's support for Kadyrov's leadership is likely to bring up with the ultimate collapse of the fragile indirect rule established between Moscow and Grozny. Once indirect rule shows cracks, the already present horizontal cracks in Kadyrov's rule will be activated. These developments could quickly transform the frozen conflict into a violent thaw and then into a new civil war in the North Caucasus.

## Horizontal grievances

Although today's Chechnya is entirely different than it was in the 1990s, horizontal grievances remain persistent, especially among the youth. Many groups and actors within Chechnya are waiting for a propitious time to commence violence Chechnya, if he proves unable to contain insurgent violence (e.g., due to internecine fighting), or if he demands too much (e.g., more economic influence over Chechnya's oil sector). Putin's patronage, and Kadyrov's repression against insurgents and their families, has often required that locals delay revenge (Souleimanov and Siroky 2016), but the embedded antagonism between Kadyrov and local population in Chechnya has only gone underground—not disappeared. From time to time, violence erupts in the republic, with local youth, usually unrelated to jihadists, carrying out de facto suicidal attacks in order to retaliate against the wrongs inflicted on them or their families (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015b). The Crisis Group's two reports during 2012 stated that militant attacks in Chechnya targeting police or other governmental forces are still widespread. Meanwhile, many small jihadist groups in mountainous regions would readily appear in the urban places once Kadyrov's rule shows signs of shaking, for the Chechen and Russian government's "harsh measures do little to convince radicalized parts of the population to give their allegiance to the Russian state, ... [which] stimulate a new generation of disillusioned youth to "go to the forest" in search of revenge or a different political order" (International Crisis Group 2012, p. 1).

Repression in Chechnya is strongly tied to the tradition of blood feud and revenge embedded in societies across North Caucasus. While anthropologists have explored the phenomenon of blood feud and revenge, it remains underappreciated in political science and conflict studies, and is undervalued as a cause of rebellion, violence, and irregular warfare particularly in tribal societies (Chagnon 1988, p. 985). Whereas “ethnic or religious hatred, political oppression, political exclusion, and economic inequality” have been cited as primary “grievance” reasons that cause irregular wars (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), blood revenge is typically missing from this list of grievances that motivate individuals to join rebellions and engage in violent conflict (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015a).

Blood feuds could turn this frozen conflict quickly toward violent thawing, however. Blood feud, known as “the practice of seeking blood retribution for a grave offense committed against an individual or his or her relatives,” is particularly persistent in Chechen society (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015a, p. 158). The Vaynakh people, who are comprised not only of Chechens, but also the Ingush and the Kists in northern Georgia, synthesized their *adat* (local customary rules) with their Islamic faith,<sup>5</sup> even though the two are incompatible in some aspects, particularly blood feud and revenge. Where *adat* law clashed with *sharia*, the former has largely prevailed (Hughes 2001, p. 19; Lazarev, 2017). This divergence from “pure faith” (*murtaddun*) has often caused a rift between the local Chechens and incoming jihadists. Whereas some scholars have studied the Chechen conflict as a part of jihadist ideological war, rather than Chechen fighting for independence and freedom, and then describe it as a battlefield where jihadist groups are fighting to create an Islamic Caliphate (see Toft and Zhukov 2015), blood feud within the North Caucasus has gained less scholarly attention as a source of mobilization (Souleimanov and Ditych 2008; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015a).

Chechnya’s fight is more strongly connected to cultural values than religious ones. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chechnya became Russia’s primary source of organized crime, which the Chechen brotherhood (*bratva*) ran. Three of the six major organized gangs in Russia are Chechen: the Tsentralnaya, the Ostakinskaya, and the Aytomobilnaya (Williams 2014). These Chechen gangs have spread across Russia and developed financial ties abroad. They compete with other Russian gangs in Moscow and are known to have successfully bribed Russian officials to acquire intelligence information. Some of these organize crime gangs came back to their native land to protect it from Russian troops and have contributed arms and ammunition in defense of Chechnya. However, these gangs view themselves as Chechen patriots, rather than religiously motivated Chechens, and thus have generally refrained from contributing to Islamic groups and causes in Chechnya (Laqueur 2000).

Although customary law and blood feud have faded among major Caucasian ethnic groups, they still persist in many places as a form of collective responsibility (Souleimanov 2007, pp. 26–30). Dishonoring one member of the clan implies dishonoring the entire clan, and refusal to take revenge could be interpreted as sign of weakness. The emergence of the insurgency in Chechnya is closely tied to the *adat* rule of blood feud (Souleimanov and Ditych 2008). When the clans use blood feud, “conflict is sure to spread like wildfire; since: ‘if you insult my brother [relatives]... I will avenge myself on you and your relatives and comrades at any cost’” (Souleimanov

<sup>5</sup> The Vaynakh people embraced Islam in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

and Dityrch 2008, p. 1220). While local jihadism has been a driving force for ideological resistance, blood feud has also mobilized local people to carry out attacks against local pro-Moscow forces that have indirectly or directly have insulted them. Blood feuds are trans-generational: younger Chechens have been involved in blood feud and have committed violence in response to offenses carried out in the past, since they see themselves as having responsibility for taking revenge against those who killed or raped their family members and bombed their homes. Therefore, revenge “remains the domain of younger men” (Souleimanov and Dityrch 2008, p. 1220).<sup>6</sup> As a result, blood feud and revenge form an essential part of horizontal grievances in the Chechen conflict and could readily serve as the basis for renewed mobilization.

At a minimum, the persistence of blood feud in Chechnya indicates that there is a ready pool of Chechen youth ready to take revenge against his clan and rule in Chechnya. Particularly the younger generation of Chechens sees Kadyrov’s forces and his clan, rather than federal forces, as the main enemy. Recent attacks against pro-Moscow Chechen police symbolize that some of these horizontal grievances are coming to the surface, e.g., the armed intrusion into the homes of pro-Russia Chechen police officers, opening fire on the police in different places in Grozny in December 2016 (Aliyev 2017), and attacks against police officers in Geldagan village and Shali town in January 2017 that killed at least two *kadyrovtsy* and two police officers (Hauer 2017). Nine attackers and over one hundred people from different regions of Chechnya were arrested. The relatives of the gunmen were arrested, and many relatives were fired from their working places and faced collective punishment. Some were forced to leave Chechnya fearing that their homes would be burned down. Kadyrov’s practice of collective punishment has angered many Chechens (Bigg, 2016). In fear of putting their family members in jeopardy, many Chechens have attempted to keep a low profile, even though they are deeply “antagonized by the brazen-fadedness and impunity of the *kadyrovtsy* and local police” (Souleimanov 2017).

The police reports suggest that the attackers are mainly young Chechens who have grown up during Kadyrov’s tenure and did not directly experience the violence during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Fuller 2017). Police reports also suggest that the majority of these gunmen are the sons of combatants who lost their lives during the first and second Chechen wars. The characteristics of their attacks also hint at inexperienced revenge seekers. While older generations of the fighters see Russia as their central enemy and have concentrated on attacking Russian security and military forces, the new generation of Chechens perceives Kadyrov and the *kadyrovtsy* as the primary adversary (Fuller 2017).

Violence across towns and villages in Chechnya during 2016 (Souleimanov 2017) suggests that the conflict is far from over and could easily reignite and escalate. The attacks provided a small taste of the pool of resentful Chechens that are waiting to challenge Kadyrov’s power once the first signs that support from Moscow are slipping. While the Chechen authorities have blamed these attacks on masterminds from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), there is little concrete evidence of a direct link between Chechen attackers and ISIS. Chechen law enforcement closely monitors all

<sup>6</sup> An interesting fact about the gunmen is their inexperience, which is visible in their attacks and suggests that they do not have links to existing insurgency-based training.

communication channels in Chechnya, and would likely have had some evidence, if the allegations were true.

Although organized violence in Chechnya is largely over, many adult Chechens have a strong sense of insecurity, due to the long-lasting destruction, torture, devastation, and persistent exposure to violence. Whereas Chechenization has brought stability and security to the streets, Chechens still have fresh memories of being wronged and harbor these historical grievances, awaiting the opportunity to seek revenge and restore their family honor. One qualitative study about the mental health and psychological problems among the Chechen adults affected by the conflict finds that “Chechens reported mental health and psychosocial problems similar to those experienced in other post-conflict settings” (Nguyen et al. 2016, p. 1). The authors of the study conclude that “the description of ‘emotional blowing’ ... in Chechen asylum seekers ... fits within a cluster of cultural concepts of distress featuring anger that has been identified in other conflict-affected populations” (Nguyen et al. 2016, p. 1). In sum, thousands of locals appear to be in the state of postponed blood feud toward Kadyrov, his clan, and his personal army, *kadyrovtsy*.

The rule-by-fear machine that the Chechen leader has set up in Chechnya has generated many horizontal grievances while discouraging locals from retaliating against his regime. Fear of extermination at the hands of the Kadyrov and his personal army keeps most prospective avengers at a bay. He uses information on the ground to impede coordinated violence against him and his forces. He has also used violence against the relatives of Chechens that protest against him in European capitals. As a result, many Chechens remain silent in order to protect themselves as well as their relatives (Souleimanov 2016), so it is difficult to estimate the degree of discontent. Human rights organizations and observers have been alarmed by killings, tortures, and the use of massive indiscriminate violence in Chechnya where mass graves have been discovered. Practices based on collective punishment and kin killing have deepened the grievances among local Chechens (Uzzell 2005), while rendering retaliation unreasonable in view of repercussions.

The *kadyrovtsy* have been “much more dangerous for local residents in terms of persecuting entire families [than Russian federal troops,] ... [since] the federal troops simply don’t have such complete information about the local residents” (Jamestown North Caucasus Weekly 2005). *Kadyrovtsy* “terrorize the population, kidnap and ... torture people” (Yaffa 2016). This has generated new groups of young people who are ready to retaliate at any cost and have kept the conflict alive through sporadic uses of violence, which led to the death of several members of *kadyrovtsy* and police during 2016 (Souleimanov 2017).

Kadyrov’s ability to suppress insurgent groups and the many Chechen youth that opposed his rule in Chechnya with impunity hinges on Putin’s patronage. Putin’s pre-electoral promise was to eliminate the insurgency in the North Caucasus, which he achieved through his Chechenization policy. This form of indirect rule through Kadyrov has created new grievances, but these have not yet led to a new civil war because Kadyrov has been able to “get the job done” for the most part, but there are unresolved issues that lie unresolved beneath the apparent stability in the restive region. The tradition of blood revenge means that retaliation is just a matter of time.

In addition to the aforementioned horizontal and vertical grievances, there are also signs of an internal fissure between Kadyrov and the *kadyrovtsy*. Some

insiders suggest that certain factions within the *kadyrovtsy* are angered by his ill-mannered behavior and feel disrespected. *Kadyrovtsy* have been the primary force in Chechnya ensuring security and stability. Although the *kadyrovtsy* were established mainly (70%) from “boeviki” (rebel groups against Russia during Chechen wars) long before Ramzan Kadyrov became the Chechen presidency, it became a primary tool for his persecution machine, preserving his brutal regime and keeping control in Chechnya. The Kadyrov clan helped Russia “Chechenise” the conflict and put a lid on the insurgency in the North Caucasus (Šmíd and Mareš 2015, p. 656). Became influential only after the Second Chechen War, following his father, Akhmat Kadyrov’s defected to the Russian side. While *kadyrovtsy* initially referred to the armed men who formed Ramzan Kadyrov’s personal army, it later came to mean all representatives from Kadyrov’s regime. Although *kadyrovtsy* did not have any legal status when it was established, it slowly came to be the “main COIN force” in Chechnya and became very hierarchical (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015b). In particular, family and clan ties determined the structure of the *kadyrovtsy* with members from the *teip* and *nek’e* around the Chechen leader as security forces.

It is important to recall that it initially was not only *kadyrovtsy* that aligned with Russian federal forces, but also other secessionist militias and private armed groups established by different Chechen warlords. These groups included *yamadayeivtsy*, *baysarovtsy*, and *kakiyevtsy*. While the *kadyrovtsy* and the *kakiyevtsy* both were linked to the Ministry of the Interior, the *baysarovtsy* was connected to the Ministry of Defense and the *yamadayeivtsy* with the FSB.<sup>7</sup> The establishment of these military groups enabled Putin to “Chechenise” the conflict and to devolve power to pro-Russian forces (Souleimanov 2007). Out of this power competition, only two groups, *kadyrovtsy* and *yamadayeivtsy*, survived by 2008. The clash between these groups in April 2008 in Gudermes signaled the end of *yamadayeivtsy*. Kadyrov discharged Sulim Yamadayev from Vostok battalion commandership. Ruslan Yamadayev, the eldest brother, was killed in Moscow. Sulim Yamadayev was injured and forced to leave for Dubai where he was shot dead (Parfitt 2009; Barry 2009). This gave the *kadyrovtsy* a monopoly as the most powerful paramilitary unit in Chechnya.

Nonetheless, there appear to be some cracks in Kadyrov’s inner circle. In particular, some part of *kadyrovtsy* resent his harsh and idiosyncratic ruling not only in Chechnya, but also within his own clan and *kadyrovtsy*. For instance, those *kamadayeivtsy* that have turned into “*kadyrovtsy*” continue to hold a grudge against Kadyrov and his clan (Souleimanov 2017). Some *kadyrovtsy* are ready to support the steps taken by Alikhan Muzayev, who was Kadyrov’s personal bodyguard and who was killed because of a plot against the Chechen authorities (Fuller 2017).<sup>8</sup> From whichever angle we examine this current regime, its stability seems at best tenuous and a violent thaw appears imminent that pushes the region back into civil war.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of private armies, and secessionist militias the Chechen warlords established based clan structure, and defected to Russian federal forces, please see Šmíd and Mareš (2015).

<sup>8</sup> Along with growing vertical and horizontal grievances, there is an emerging resentment between Kadyrov and his personal army, *kadyrovtsy*.

## Conclusion

Grievances are growing in Chechnya and the foundation of Kadyrov's rule has multiple cracks. It should not surprise us therefore when the violent thawing of the Chechen conflict becomes all but obvious, even though it may continue to be referred to as a "frozen conflict." First, the antagonism between Russian law enforcement agencies and the Chechen strongman Kadyrov is increasing. The Russian *siloviki* are deeply angered by Kadyrov's idiosyncratic ruling and his interference in federal politics. These pressures from the Russian *siloviki* are counterbalanced by Putin's personal support for Kadyrov. This is the only reason Russian officials have been silent over the Chechen leader's bold statement regarding federal politics and Russian foreign policy. Meanwhile, Kadyrov pushes for more power and more economic influence, particularly over Chechnya's oil sector. The financial crisis in Russia after the fall of oil prices and US sanctions led to the reduction of federal transfers to North Caucasus Republics, which has also strained relations between Moscow and Grozny (Souleimanov and Aliyev 2018).

Second, the horizontal grievances between Kadyrov and the local population have become more pronounced. Thousands of locals appear to be in the state of postponed blood feud toward Kadyrov, his clan, and his personal army, and along with growing vertical and horizontal grievances, there is an emerging resentment between Kadyrov and his personal army, *kadyrovtsy*. Fear of extermination at the hands of the Kadyrov and his personal army is the only thing keeping prospective avengers at a bay. Kadyrov has put in motion a brutal machine of persecution aimed at the guilty and their family members, based on access to information on the ground that has allowed him to impede coordinated violence against him and his forces. For these reasons, the local insurgency has been weakened, but it is not defeated. From time to time, violence erupts in the republic, with local youth, usually unrelated to jihadists, carrying out de facto suicidal attacks in order to retaliate against the wrongs inflicted on them and their families. Should support for Kadyrov wane in Moscow, locals will retaliate against Grozny and Russian troops stationed in the republic *en masse* and with a vengeance. This would likely strengthen the local insurgency, which has a comparative advantage and specialization in violence (Bates et al. 2002).<sup>9</sup>

This analysis reveals cracks in the foundation of the frozen conflict in Chechnya, which render it dynamic and trending toward renewed violence. Putin has claimed a small victory in exchange for ceding control by installing Kadyrov as his indirect ruler in Chechnya. The presence of both vertical and horizontal cracks, the Russian law enforcement services' resentment of Kadyrov's rule, and the anger of repressed local population toward him and his personal army represents threats to the Chechen leader's power. The glue that holds it all together is Putin's support, which is not unconditional but depends on Kadyrov's ability "to get the job done." It is hard to predict how rapidly the conflict might escalate, but one thing seems certain—the status quo is untenable in the *longue durée*.

<sup>9</sup> In addition, there is some evidence of emerging tensions between Kadyrov and his personal army, the *kadyrovtsy*. According to some insiders, many feel antagonized and resentful because of his ill-treatment of his subordinates.

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