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Chechnya's Internal Oppression and External Military Actions in Ukraine

Abstract

This paper examines the dual dynamics of domestic repression and external military involvement under Ramzan Kadyrov's authoritarian regime in the Chechen Republic. It delves into systemic human rights violations, including the persecution of activists, LGBTQ+ individuals, independent journalists, and religious minorities, while highlighting Kadyrov's strategic use of state-controlled Islam to enforce sociopolitical control. In parallel, the paper explores the deployment of Chechen forces in the Russia-Ukraine war, analyzing how Kadyrov leverages the conflict to consolidate his authority and stifle dissent. Drawing on international reports, case studies, and expert analyses, the study reveals how Chechnya's internal authoritarian practices intersect with and inform its external geopolitical strategies, illustrating the broader implications for regional stability and human rights.

Keywords: Chechnya, human rights violations, LGBTQ+ persecution, media suppression, religious repression, Ukraine war, international accountability.

Chechnya: A Focal Point of Systemic Human Rights Violations

The Chechen Republic, a federal subject of the Russian Federation, has become a symbol of severe and systematic human rights abuses over the past two decades. Under the authoritarian rule of Ramzan Kadyrov, the region is marked by state-sponsored violence, the suppression of dissent, and the targeting of marginalized groups. This paper explores the human rights landscape in Chechnya by focusing on four key areas: the persecution of human rights defenders, the oppression of LGBTQ+

individuals, the suppression of dissent and media, and religious repression. Through this exploration, the study aims to shed light on the systemic abuses embedded in the region and the structural mechanisms that sustain them.

Persecution of Human Rights Defenders. Human rights defenders in Chechnya operate in a highly dangerous and hostile environment. The assassination of Natalia Estemirova in 2009 serves as a stark example of the threats faced by activists. Estemirova, a leading member of Memorial, tirelessly documented human rights violations, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances during the Second Chechen War. Her abduction and murder highlighted the extreme risks involved in advocating for human rights in Chechnya (Amnesty International, 2019).

Similarly, the case of Oyub Titiev, another Memorial activist, underscores the systemic targeting of defenders. In 2018, Titiev was arrested on fabricated drug possession charges as retaliation for his efforts to document abuses by Chechen authorities. Despite widespread international condemnation from organizations such as Amnesty International and the OSCE, his imprisonment reflected the impunity with which such acts of repression occur (OSCE Report, 2018). These high-profile cases are part of a broader pattern of intimidation and violence, amplified by state propaganda branding human rights defenders as "traitors" and "enemies of the people."

The persecution of activists extends beyond prominent figures to grassroots human rights advocates, who face similar threats for documenting abuses or aiding victims. The relentless crackdown has led to the closure of numerous human rights organizations in Chechnya, further

weakening civil society. Propaganda efforts by the Chechen government fuel this repression by vilifying dissent and normalizing violence against activists (Amnesty International, 2018).

The persecution of human rights defenders in Chechnya reflects a calculated effort by the ruling regime to eliminate any opposition to its authoritarian rule. By targeting activists with fabricated charges, propaganda, and violence, the government ensures that dissenting voices are silenced not only through fear but also by eroding trust in civil society. This creates a vacuum in which victims of human rights abuses are left without support or advocacy (Amnesty International 2018). The closure of human rights organizations further dismantles the infrastructure needed to document abuses and seek justice, making it clear that Chechnya's human rights crisis is both systemic and deeply entrenched.

Persecution of LGBTQ+ Individuals. The LGBTQ+ community in Chechnya faces widespread, systematic persecution, including arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Investigations by international organizations such as the UN and the OSCE have exposed organized purges targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Victims have reported being detained in secret facilities where they are subjected to physical and sexual violence, including beatings, electric shocks, and other forms of torture, aimed at extracting confessions or coercing them to renounce their sexual orientation (OHCHR, 2019).

A particularly heinous case is that of Aminat Lorsanova, who was forcibly institutionalized in 2018. During her confinement, she endured repeated beatings and so-called "corrective" measures intended to change her sexual orientation. Compounding this violence, Chechen authorities

isolated victims by confiscating their identification documents and threatening their families with legal repercussions if they attempted to intervene (UN News, 2019). Ramzan Kadyrov's public denial of the existence of LGBTQ+ individuals in Chechnya perpetuates violence against them, fostering an environment of fear and silence.

Despite international advocacy efforts, such as campaigns by Amnesty International and the Russian LGBT Network, structural obstacles remain. Victims attempting to flee face significant barriers, including surveillance, abductions, and threats from Chechen security forces. The normalization of "honor killings" further exacerbates their plight, as families are pressured into committing violence under the guise of preserving societal norms (OHCHR, 2019).

Entrenched patriarchal and conservative cultural norms contribute to the systemic persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals. Although international organizations have called for increased awareness and protective measures, these efforts are often hindered by deeply rooted societal attitudes. Addressing these injustices requires comprehensive legal reforms and sustained educational campaigns.

The persecution of LGBTQ+ individuals in Chechnya reveals the extent to which authoritarian regimes can exploit societal prejudices to legitimize human rights abuses. By framing their actions as the preservation of "traditional values" and moral order, Chechen authorities manipulate cultural norms to justify violence and repression, particularly targeting already vulnerable communities. The state's active role in isolating victims and coercing families into complicity demonstrates the comprehensive nature of this persecution, which extends beyond the individual to erode the foundations of familial and societal trust.

Suppression of Dissent and Media. The Chechen regime's repression of dissent extends to journalists and lawyers, who face severe risks for challenging the government. A chilling incident occurred in 2023, when journalist Elena Milashina and human rights lawyer Alexander Nemov were attacked while traveling to Grozny to cover a politically motivated trial. The attackers, reportedly linked to Chechen security forces, subjected them to brutal beatings, threats, and public humiliation. The assailants destroyed their electronic devices, and Milashina was symbolically shamed by being doused with a green antiseptic solution, a common intimidation tactic in Russia (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

This attack reflects a broader campaign to silence dissenting voices in Chechnya. State propaganda routinely brands independent journalists and activists as "enemies of the state." In addition to physical violence, dissenters face constant harassment, surveillance, and smear campaigns, leading many journalists and lawyers to flee the region. These actions have significantly weakened civil society over the past decade (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Beyond physical repression, the Chechen government employs advanced digital surveillance tools to monitor and intimidate critics. Social media platforms are exploited to track dissenters, while state-sponsored trolling campaigns spread disinformation and target independent voices. These digital tactics complement traditional forms of media suppression, creating an environment where free expression is nearly impossible (Civil Rights Defenders, 2018).

Despite the risks, international media and investigative journalism have been instrumental in exposing human rights abuses in Chechnya and

advocating for accountability. However, journalists covering Chechnya remain vulnerable, even in exile, as evidenced by the targeting of reporters abroad. These challenges underscore the urgent need to strengthen international protections for journalists and develop mechanisms to safeguard freedom of expression in the region (France24, 2023).

The suppression of dissent and media in Chechnya demonstrates the regime's systematic efforts to silence opposition through intimidation, violence, and surveillance. Public attacks on critics serve as deliberate warnings, while state propaganda labels dissenters as enemies to justify repression. Digital surveillance and online disinformation campaigns further stifle free expression, complementing traditional methods of censorship. Although international media plays a crucial role in highlighting abuses, persistent threats against journalists underscore the urgent need for stronger global protections and accountability measures to safeguard freedom of expression and support civil society in the region.

Religious repression in Chechnya manifests through the state-sanctioned imposition of Sufi Islam, specifically the Kunta-Hadji order, which is closely aligned with Ramzan Kadyrov's political agenda. This form of state-controlled Islam is used to suppress dissent, enforce social control, and justify human rights abuses. Individuals practicing alternative forms of Islam, such as Salafism, are often labeled as extremists, leading to arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings (USCIRF, 2021).

Chechen authorities have also targeted religious minorities, including Christians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Minority religious groups face significant obstacles, such as denied permits for places of worship and disrupted gatherings (USCIRF, 2021). Clerics who oppose Kadyrov's interpretation of Islam are coerced into compliance or subjected to severe

consequences, including public humiliation and accusations of "sorcery" or "witchcraft" (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Kadyrov's promotion of "traditional" Islamic values includes strict dress codes for women and suppression of behaviors deemed non-conforming. These measures are justified as preserving Chechen identity and morality but often serve as pretexts for broader social control. The overlap between religious and political authority has eroded the region's pluralistic traditions, violating international human rights norms and exacerbating societal tensions (USCIRF, 2021).

The religious repression in Chechnya extends to cultural expressions and practices. Local traditions that do not align with Kadyrov's interpretation of Islam are often suppressed or co-opted by the state. This cultural homogenization further marginalizes minority communities and stifles diversity within Chechnya's social fabric (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Advocacy for religious freedom in Chechnya has focused on documenting abuses and pressuring international bodies to hold perpetrators accountable. Religious organizations and interfaith coalitions have called for increased protections for minority groups and the preservation of cultural and religious diversity (USCIRF, 2021).

However, these efforts are often met with resistance from the Chechen and Russian governments, which frame such advocacy as foreign interference aimed at destabilizing the region. This rhetoric not only undermines international advocacy but also emboldens Kadyrov's regime to further entrench its repressive policies.

The challenges faced by advocacy groups are compounded by the broader geopolitical dynamics between Russia and the international community. With Russia providing Kadyrov with political and financial support, efforts to hold his regime accountable are often stymied by Moscow’s diplomatic and economic influence.

Table 1: Main Human Rights Problems in Chechnya

Category	Key Issues
Persecution of Activists	Harassment, intimidation, extrajudicial killings.
LGBTQ+ Persecution	Arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, denial of existence, and promotion of 'honor killings.'
Suppression of Media	Attacks on journalists, destruction of devices, smear campaigns.
Religious Repression	Imposition of state-sanctioned Islam, persecution of minorities, and forced disappearances.

Chechen Involvement in the Ukraine War

Chechnya’s role in Russia’s war against Ukraine highlights a complex interplay of loyalty, historical grievances, and political strategy. Ramzan Kadyrov’s forces, known as the *Kadyrovtsy*, have become a controversial component of Russia’s military operations. Kadyrov has leveraged the war to consolidate his authority, while Chechen fighters opposing him have aligned with Ukraine, viewing the conflict as a chance to challenge Russian domination.

Since the start of Russia’s invasion, Kadyrov has significantly expanded his paramilitary forces. Reports indicate that the number of *Kadyrovtsy* units tripled during the conflict, with many integrated into

Russia's National Guard or Ministry of Defense (Proekt, 2024). While Kadyrov has boasted about commanding over 70,000 well-equipped troops, his forces have been criticized for staging combat footage and failing to deliver on the battlefield (The Moscow Times, 2024).

Kadyrov has used the war to bolster his image as a loyal ally to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Through platforms like Telegram, he has amplified his forces' reputation as elite troops, often overshadowing their operational shortcomings (Busvine, 2022).

Conversely, anti-Kadyrov Chechen fighters, including the Sheikh Mansur and Dzhokhar Dudayev battalions, view the war as an extension of their independence struggle. These groups, composed of Chechen fighters and international volunteers, have participated in significant battles in Bakhmut and Kharkiv, as well as cross-border operations targeting Russian forces (Williams, 2023).

The war has intensified existing tensions within Chechnya and raised questions about Kadyrov's long-term stability. While he has used the conflict to suppress rivals and eliminate dissent, his reliance on Putin's patronage ties his political survival to the Kremlin's fortunes in Ukraine. A Russian defeat or a destabilization of Putin's regime could reignite separatist movements and lead to significant upheaval in Chechnya (Romanovsky, 2024). This precarious balance highlights Kadyrov's vulnerability as a regional leader who derives power not only from internal mechanisms of control but also from his alignment with the Kremlin's broader geopolitical strategies. The dependency on Putin's support underscores the fragility of Chechnya's political framework, where local governance is deeply intertwined with the federal center's stability. Should

Putin's regime falter, the resulting power vacuum would likely destabilize Chechnya, offering both an opportunity and a challenge for opposition forces to reassert influence and for separatist movements to regain momentum. This scenario underscores the potential for far-reaching consequences not only for Chechnya but also for the broader North Caucasus region, where unresolved historical grievances and ethnic tensions could reignite.

For anti-Kadyrov fighters, the Ukraine conflict represents a strategic opportunity to challenge Moscow and Kadyrov's regime. Framing it as the "Third Chechen War," these fighters see the war as pivotal in their broader struggle for autonomy and justice (Politico, 2023). However, the devastating toll of previous Chechen wars serves as a sobering reminder of the potential consequences for the region.

Overall, systemic human rights abuses in Chechnya have profound implications for the region's future. Kadyrov's reliance on authoritarian tactics and patronage from the Kremlin ties his political survival to Russia's broader geopolitical dynamics. A destabilized Chechnya could reignite separatist movements, exacerbating regional instability. Conversely, anti-Kadyrov forces see the Ukraine conflict as an opportunity to challenge both Kadyrov and Moscow, framing it as the "Third Chechen War" (Politico, 2024). This precarious balance underscores how deeply regional stability and human rights are interconnected, with the potential fallout resonating far beyond Chechnya's borders.

Based on the analysis, the following findings provide a deeper understanding of the systemic abuses in Chechnya:

- **Religious Identity as Control:** Kadyrov uses Sufi Islam to legitimize his rule, erasing Chechnya's diverse religious traditions

and silencing dissent through religious repression. The imposition of state-sanctioned religious practices marginalizes alternative beliefs and enforces loyalty to the regime.

- **Digital Repression:** Modern surveillance and online propaganda complement traditional tools of control, enabling Chechen authorities to suppress dissent globally. These technologies are used to monitor activists, spread disinformation, and intimidate critics both within and outside Chechnya.
- **Gender-Based Oppression:** Strict gender norms and "honor killings" reflect systemic patriarchal control, disproportionately targeting women and LGBTQ+ individuals. These practices enforce rigid societal roles and perpetuate violence, further marginalizing vulnerable groups.
- **International Advocacy Gaps:** Fragmented global responses and limited enforcement mechanisms allow ongoing abuses, signaling weaknesses in international human rights protections. While some sanctions and asylum programs exist, they fall short of addressing the systemic nature of the crisis.
- **Destabilization Risks:** Chechnya's dependency on Moscow's patronage ties its stability to Kremlin control. A weakened Kremlin could reignite separatist movements, leading to regional instability and potential conflict.
- **Conflict Dynamics:** Kadyrov uses the Ukraine war to project loyalty to Putin, while anti-Kadyrov fighters use the conflict to challenge both Russian domination and local oppression. This

dichotomy underscores the complex interplay of local and geopolitical factors.

- **Erosion of Civil Society:** Systematic targeting of activists and organizations dismantles Chechnya's capacity for resistance, fostering a climate of fear and complicity. The closure of independent organizations weakens societal resilience and entrenches authoritarian control.

The broader geopolitical implications of Chechnya's human rights crisis cannot be overlooked. As global attention shifts towards conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, there is a risk that the plight of Chechen victims will be sidelined. It is imperative that international actors maintain a focus on Chechnya, ensuring that the principles of human rights and justice are upheld universally.

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