

Imperium in Imperio: Why Chechnya's Internal Empire Makes Russia Fragile

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Introduction

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, relations between Russia and the north Caucasus region have been a source of severe tensions. Twice, the Russian military was called upon to fight wars to stop secessionism and pacify Chechnya. These conflicts left at least tens of thousands of combatants and civilians dead.¹

Since the conclusion of major hostilities in the Second Chechen War, an uneasy peace has held. To be sure, violence has not wholly ended. Within Chechnya, the most obvious “postwar” violence was the assassination of President of the Chechen Republic Akhmad Kadyrov in 2004.² There have also been sporadic episodes of Islamist violence.³ Violence involving the Chechen struggles was never limited to Chechnya or its neighboring regions, either. The 2002 seizure of the Dubrovka Theater, leading to dozens of deaths; the bombing of a train running between Moscow and St. Petersburg; and multiple bombing attacks on public transportation, including on Domodedovo Airport in Moscow, represent only some of the mass-casualty attacks linked to various Chechen networks.⁴ Yet next to the scale of the earlier Russo-Chechen wars, these events--although severe--represent a major reduction in violence.

A pressing questions for policymakers and citizens in the Russian Federation, as well as for analysts of Russian security more generally, therefore concerns the prospects for continued

¹ World Peace Foundation, “Russia: Chechen War,” *Mass Atrocity Endings* (blog), August 7, 2015, <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/russia-1st-chechen-war/>.

² Julius Strauss and Daniel McLaughlin, “Rebels Kill Chechen President in Bomb Attack on Stadium,” May 9, 2004, sec. World, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/1461427/Rebels-kill-Chechen-president-in-bomb-attack-on-stadium.html>.

³ for example, Voice of America, “Islamic Militants Launch Attacks in Chechnya, 5 Killed | Voice of America - English,” Voice of America, August 20, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/islamic-militants-launch-attacks-chechnya-5-killed>.

⁴ Preeti Bhattacharji, “Chechen Terrorism,” Council on Foreign Relations, April 8, 2010, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chechen-terrorism-russia-chechnya-separatist>; Adam Taylor, “Analysis | The Recent History of Terrorist Attacks in Russia,” *Washington Post*, April 3, 2017, sec. WorldViews Analysis Analysis Interpretation of the news based on evidence, including data, as well as anticipating how events might unfold based on past events, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/04/03/the-recent-history-of-terrorist-attacks-in-russia/>.

Chechen peace. Is Chechnya's future likely to be increasingly pacific, or is a renewed cycle of violence--potentially even matching the 1990s--likely enough that it must be taken seriously?

Evaluations of the situation in Chechnya often revolve around the idiosyncrasies of the region's colorful leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.⁵ The young, Instagram-loving leader, who came to power after his father's assassination and who has pacified the region using a combination of Moscow's backing and paramilitary forces, cuts a bold figure in Russian and world news articles. From his lavish supercars, friendship with Mike Tyson, international visits with Arab leaders like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and reality-TV show, Kadyrov stands out for both his personal dynamism and his close relationship with Vladimir Putin.⁶ His outré behavior, however, also includes unusual policies, such as promoting highly conservative policies associated with Islam, creating a security training academy, and even annexing part of neighboring territories.⁷

This policy note argues that the structure of political relations between Chechnya and the broader Russian Federation should cause policymakers and other stakeholders a great deal of concern. We argue that the strategy of rule employed by both the Putin administration and by current Chechen President Ramzan Kayrov is one that provides a great deal of stability in the short-term for relatively low cost.

The same features that make it successful in the short-term, however, make it likely to contribute to instability in the longer term. In particular, the fact that both the relationship between Grozny and Moscow is imperial *and* that internal Chechen relations also display imperial characteristics make those relations vulnerable to disruption. These relations require the constant and careful fulfilment of a series of bargains linking Moscow to Chechnya and preserving stability within Chechnya. Should either side fail to fulfill those bargains, then the lack of other institutions and ties to build credibility and maintain the status quo may lead to a sudden and sharp reprise of earlier tensions. Furthermore, these structures are difficult to reform, given how well they meet the short-term needs of the actors involved and how any attempt at reform could threaten their interests.

⁵ Joshua Yaffa, "The Putin of Chechnya," February 1, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>.

⁶ "Saudi Crown Prince Meets With Visiting Chechen Leader Kadyrov," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/saudi-crown-prince-meets-with-visiting-chechen-leader-kadyrov/29447299.html>; "Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Meets Chechen President and Interfaith Alliance Delegates - in Pictures - The National," The National, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/sheikh-mohamed-bin-zayed-meets-chechen-president-and-interfaith-alliance-delegates-in-pictures-1.793602>; Peter Orosz, "The Chechen President's Guns, Supercars, and \$3,000,000 Motorcade," Jalopnik, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://jalopnik.com/the-chechen-president-s-guns-supercars-and-3-000-000-5704390>; Robbie Gramer, "The Wait Is Finally Over: Chechen Leader Picks New Protege in 'The Apprentice'-Style Reality TV Show Finale," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed July 9, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/23/the-wait-is-finally-over-protege-in-the-apprentice-chechnya-kadyrov-komanda-putin-trump/>.

⁷ Neil Hauer, "Send Chechens, Guns, and Money," *Foreign Affairs*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/chechnya/2019-02-04/send-chechens-guns-and-money>.

Strategies of Rule

This policy note draws on recent theoretical advances in the study of relations among political units.⁸ In particular, we argue that governance structures can be compared not only between instances of the same kind of political formation but also across different scales of governance. We base our analysis on comparing how imperial structures operate in general *and* how imperial structures relate to each other. Our principal assumption is that both Russia and Chechnya's strategies of rule continue to display imperial features.

The terms "empire" and "imperial" carry a lot of baggage. We use "imperial" not in reference to colloquial empires of the past, but to refer precisely to a system of rule in which the center governs through intermediaries that in at least some sense owe the center their position, and that the center strikes different bargains with each intermediary to maximize the benefit to the center. In other words, for us "imperial" refers to the structure of politics between Russia and many of its federal subjects as well as to structures of rule *within* some of those subjects.

The benefit of using a structural term like this is that it allows us to make generalizations about how different structures behave by drawing on and applying insights across levels of aggregation. Empires--like other strategies of rule, including federation, confederation, and unitary rule--can be found in many different scales, from globe-spanning polities like the Spanish Empire to more modest circumstances. To put it another way, many of us are familiar with the idea that some co-workers may be "empire-builders" who seek to benefit themselves by artificially raising divisions and routing information and decision flows through themselves.⁹ Even if the term is meant as an analogy, thinking about "imperial" as describing a set of strategies of rule that produce similar structures consistently means that it's not *just* an analogy: a workplace may really feature imperial structures of rule. Similarly, not only countries but provinces and cities can approximate federal, confederal, and even imperial hierarchical formations.

Many factors contribute to the emergence of a particular strategy of rule in a given context, including the influence of history. We argue that one driving factor is a cost-benefit analysis under which actors at any given moment either welcome, accept, or seek to revise the governance hierarchies they find themselves within based upon the costs of establishing or changing the hierarchy and the likely consequences they would reap by making a change.

Imperial systems of rule often prove attractive to rulers because they can be relatively cheap to establish compared with alternatives like subjugation. Moreover, they maximize the center's benefits since it arrives at different bargains (whether written in ink or blood) with peripheries that should be maximally favorable to the center. As long as peripheries can be isolated from

⁸ Meghan McConaughy, Paul Musgrave, and Daniel H. Nexon, "Beyond Anarchy: Logics of Political Organization, Hierarchy, and International Structure," *International Theory* 10, no. 2 (July 2018): 181–218, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971918000040>.

⁹ Tom Rieger, "Your Organization's Empire Builders," Gallup.com, July 22, 2011, <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/147779/Organization-Empire-Builders.aspx>.

each other and kept largely unaware of the bargains being struck, centers can sustain this arrangement. By the same token, such imperial structures may prove attractive to intermediaries--viceroys, satraps, regional governors, and the like--who can profit from these bargains, while also proving unattractive to populations subjected to imperial rule who may literally be forced to pay for their own subjugation.¹⁰

As long as a combination of force and patronage can maintain the divisions and extraction that mark an imperial structure, an imperial structure can persist despite dissatisfaction. Compared to other forms of rule, however, imperial structures prove fragile because they rest on links between centers and intermediaries to govern peripheries. Whereas other systems, such as federal or confederal arrangements, promote multiple vectors of integration, imperial strategies require the center to attempt to keep peripheries as disconnected from each other as possible to maximize the center's bargaining position vis-a-vis each periphery. Consequently, a severing or revision of the imperial relationship can come from the dissemination of information about other peripheries' bargains; the demise of key, trusted intermediaries; or combinations among peripheries that make concerted action against the center more feasible.¹¹

Russia and Chechnya's Nested Empires

Discussions of imperial structures and the costs and benefits of imperial strategies of rule, however, do not just help in understanding empire generally, but specifically help in understanding the strategy behind and the fragility of Russia's efforts in Chechnya. If Russia uses imperial structures of rule and Chechnya itself is ruled using imperial strategies, then Ramzan Kadyrov sits at the nexus of two imperial structures, with all of the advantages and weaknesses that implies.

It is uncontroversial to argue that Russia has historically employed imperial strategies to rule its vast and varied territories. From its earliest beginnings in Muscovy, this agglomeration of previously independent principality worked from a system whereby taxes and policing were the purview of regional *namestniki* (viceregents) who each related to the center through individual sets of privileges and responsibilities. By less remote times, the system had become more institutionalized, but no less imperial. Although Peter the Great made great strides in regularizing state institutions, the empire nevertheless used a patchwork of central emissaries and local elites, with varying privileges and separate deals to rule the peoples within the empire. These variations included the retention of noble estate, freedom from taxation, exemption from conscription, variations in law and social life, and even privileged military status. Even in the Soviet Union, with its egalitarian ideals, imperial repertoires remained as party networks

¹⁰ Elise Huillery, "The Black Man's Burden: The Cost of Colonization of French West Africa," *The Journal of Economic History* 74, no. 1 (2014): 1-38.

¹¹ Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, "The Empire Will Compensate You": The Structural Dynamics of the U.S. Overseas Basing Network," *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (December 2013): 1034-50.

intersected and empowered local networks and the personal ties of local intermediaries had profound implications for life within the regions and union republics.¹²

However, it is more controversial to suggest that Russia today employs imperial structures. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the departure of the union republics, many observers assume that imperial forms of rule gave way to democracy and federalism. In fact, the very name of the Russian Federation denies an imperial approach. However, we argue that Russia never fully gave up its imperial approach to rule. Yeltsin himself invited regional leaders to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow,” so regional authorities took the opportunity to negotiate bilateral agreements that institutionalized varying privileges and exclusions, in some cases including broad control over natural resources. By the end of Yeltsin’s presidency, forty-two power-sharing treaties had been signed granting particularized rights and privileges to different local authorities.

While Putin’s centralizing reforms have reined in the excesses of the Yeltsin era, the use of differentiated rule through intermediaries remains. The official trappings of regional authorities have become regularized—in 2020, the President of Tatarstan will become the Head of the Republic, ending the history of sub national presidents within the Russian Federation—but intergovernmental transfers remain hopelessly politicized, leaving regional budgets at the mercy of the governor’s negotiating skills, and official differences remain. For example, while the rest of Russia has returned to the direct election of governors, all of the North Caucasian republics except Chechnya continue to have appointed governors. This echoes a long history of specifically singling out the Caucasus and other peripheral areas for differentiated and imperial forms of rule. While the first *zemstvos* were created in 1861, it wasn’t until 1905 that elected governance was even contemplated for the Caucasian republics, and it never came to fruition.

This regional oddity may be related to our other, more contentious claim: that Chechnya itself employs imperial strategies of rule internally. While we acknowledge that Chechnya appears even less traditionally imperial than contemporary Russia, we argue that the key elements of rule through intermediaries using differentiated bargains are at the heart of rule and order in Kadyrov’s Chechnya. The Chechen wars featured a fractious coalition of secularists, extremists, and foreign fighters that were largely united by their commitment to the idea of an independent Chechnya and their opposition to the Russian forces. When Akhmad Kadyrov offered his allegiance to the Russian Federation, the patchwork of factions and interests only became more complicated. As the separatist factions fled to become the official Chechen government in exile, Chechen leadership fell to a number of “warlords,” loyal to the Kremlin but with independent power bases and paramilitaries, of which Ramzan Kadyrov was simply first among equals. While it seems that Moscow originally hoped to maintain rival power centers in Chechnya, since 2006 Kadyrov has managed to systematically reconcile all of his internal rivals, through violence or other means. By 2010, the last of the battalions independent of Kadyrov were disbanded, amid reports of a blood feud that Kadyrov had become embroiled in that he had managed to defuse,

¹² Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia’s Empires* (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Terry Dean Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2001).

somehow placating the rival clan. Kadyrov's consolidation of power and elimination of rivals have earned him the descriptor of despot, but that is not incompatible with imperial forms of rule. Kadyrov's power flows not from regularized and institutionalized rule over Chechnya's villages and people but from alliances and patronage relationships with regional leaders and heads of prominent clans. Particularly when layered on top of Chechnya's traditional *taip* (clan) structure, Kadyrov's use of intermediaries and differentiated bargains strongly resembles imperial forms of rule that are more often seen at larger scales of governance.

Imperial Structures: Stable Until Ruptured

If we are right, and Chechnya and Russia can both be viewed as displaying substantially imperial logics of rule, then a few points become clear. First, Chechnya becomes an example of a literal *imperium in imperio*--an empire within an empire. This nested form of rule should provide relatively clear benefits to core players within both the overarching and the local imperial hierarchy. For the Russian government as a whole, it implies a substantial amount of devolution of the management of day-to-day affairs to local authorities who have more flexibility and local knowledge about how best to maintain the Chechen security situation within acceptable limits. The 1990s taught Moscow that imposing direct rule would be too costly. Providing ample subsidies to a local agent who can reach an acceptable (if not perfect) solution is a far better alternative, even if it requires turning a blind eye to excesses. For the Chechen government, of course, the benefits are that it gets to receive ample subsidies from the center while also enjoying the same degree of local autonomy so long as it does not transgress on the center's red lines.

However, this nested imperial structure also places Kadyrov in the position of personal guarantor to Moscow of the imperial bargains he makes within Chechnya. This saves the center from having to directly placate or control the different groups within Chechnya, but his structural position gives Kadyrov a surprising amount of leverage, as long as he can accurately assess the regime's hard boundaries. Moscow cannot easily cultivate an alternative or successor to Kadyrov, because he would (correctly) assess that as a threat to his position, with dire consequences for the would-be heir. Thus, Kadyrov contrives to ensure the regime has only one option for keeping the peace in Chechnya without using force.

As a result, Kadyrov has a wide scope of action within Chechnya, in relation to Moscow, and even abroad. His repressive tendencies within Chechnya have occasionally caused problems on the international scene for Russia, but have not been curtailed. Within Russia, even actions that seem to cut against the wishes of the regime or interests of stability, including annexing part of neighboring Ingushetia and (allegedly) orchestrating the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov have been met with mild disapproval at worst. And, unusually for the head of a subnational unit within a federation, Kadyrov conducts a lively foreign policy, largely focused on the Muslim world and the former Soviet Union.

These freedoms derive from Kadyrov's status as broker between two imperial structures. As long as he remains loyal to the center, and specifically to Putin, his excesses must be tolerated. Yet

this in turn raises larger questions. Kadyrov's personal loyalty *to Putin* almost certainly provides him with additional leeway, but also suggests that the favors might be two-way--that Putin may in some ways enjoy having an intermediary who can undertake quiet or dirty assignments elsewhere. Would a future, non-Putin president be willing or able to maintain such a bargain? It is worth considering whether the empire to which Kadyrov has linked himself is the Russian Federation or, instead, Putin's *sistema*.

Even more obviously, given that Kadyrov has personalized both relations with Russia and his rule in Chechnya, he may have made himself too much of an indispensable man. Should some misfortune befall him, the consequences for all parties should be dire. One dilemma of authoritarian rule, after all, is ensuring a smooth succession, given that naming a successor carries risks for both the incumbent (who is now replaceable) and the heir apparent (who is now impatient). Kadyrov has apparently not yet carried out that step, which might make any succession battle in the near term especially fraught.

Finally, the question remains whether Kadyrov can continue his record of calculating exactly how to remain within the Kremlin's red lines. At times, he has likely brushed up against them, and periodic exuberant declarations of loyalty--or even a recent threat to resign--may hint at a strategy of balancing private ambitions with public fealty.¹³ The annexation of Ingush territory and border conflicts with Dagestan, however, may lead Kadyrov to push too far.¹⁴ Acquiring territory at the expense of his neighbors may benefit Kadyrov in Chechnya, but it also poses risks to the center, which must either acquiesce in its nominal subordinate's unilateral actions (as it has done so far), thereby upsetting the residents of two other federal subjects, or take actions to police its subordinate that might harm Kadyrov at home.

Thus, policymakers and others should be aware of three categories of risks that could reheat Chechen tensions:

1. The risks that either Putin or Kadyrov might no longer be around to carry out the complicated bargain they have struck
2. The risk that an attempt to formalize succession could lead to internal fighting within Chechnya
3. The possibility that Kadyrov could miscalculate in ways that force the Kremlin into a no-win position

Conclusion

Popular attention to Chechen issues tends to the moralistic, the sensational, and the overly personalized. In this essay, we have argued that enduring, structural issues and tensions deserve more attention. In particular, we have demonstrated that current arrangements between

¹³ Reuters, "Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov 'Ready to Step Down,'" *The Guardian*, November 27, 2017, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/27/chechen-leader-ramzan-kadyrov-ready-to-step-down>.

¹⁴ "Border Conflict Shakes City between Chechnya and Dagestan," Meduza, accessed July 9, 2019, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/06/12/border-conflict-shakes-city-between-chechnya-and-dagestan>.

Moscow and Chechnya, and within the Chechen republic itself, serve the interests of key power brokers. However, we have also shown that, although these structures may be stable in the short term, they are vulnerable to sharp and sudden ruptures that could pose major risks to regional and Russian security. Moreover, the very structures that make these arrangements stable in the short term will make it harder to adjust or reform them incrementally in order to avoid such a rupture at some point.