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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Religious Freedom Violations in the Republic of Chechnya

By [Jason Morton](#), Senior Policy Analyst

Introduction

On May 25, 2021, Gennady Askaldovich, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Ambassador-at-Large, [criticized](#) the United States and other countries for “weaponizing” religious freedom and using the issue to undermine the political and cultural sovereignty of states. This is the latest manifestation of a longstanding Russian effort to promote a particular version of multipolar geopolitics that prioritizes regional relativism over international norms of human rights, including religious freedom.

Such accusations about the supposed cynicism of foreign advocacy for international religious freedom are best understood alongside Russia's own use of religion as a tool of authoritarian control. Russian religious policy claims to protect “traditional” values and faiths from the destructive influence of religious “extremists,” or “foreign ideologies.” While Russia does face a real threat from violent extremism, its expansive application of the term to peaceful religious minorities like the Jehovah's Witnesses reveals the extent to which the concept has become a pretext for the maintenance of regime control. The Russia government, in other words, has adopted the promotion of its interpretation of traditional values and religion as a mask for authoritarianism and to violate international human rights standards.

This Issue Update focuses on Chechnya as an example of the egregious religious repression in Russia. This tiny ethnic republic, located in the Caucasus mountains near the Caspian Sea in southwest Russia, has been [referred](#) to as a “totalitarian enclave in an authoritarian country” that combines repressive elements of the Soviet past with 21st century realities of religious revival, violent conflict, and profound technological change. Whereas Russian President Vladimir Putin's regime places strict limits on belief and expression, in Chechnya under the rule of republic President Ramzan Kadyrov, authorities more actively and exclusively define, shape, and enforce a particular interpretation of belief. Nevertheless, Kadyrov's regime is an integral part of the Russian Federation, which bears ultimate responsibility for all conditions there.

Background: The Chechens under Russian Rule

Modern Chechen identity, culture, and religion has been inevitably shaped by the long and brutal history of Russian domination. The Chechen people are indigenous to the Caucasus mountains, where they have lived for thousands of years. They speak a distinct language that is completely unrelated to anything spoken outside the region, including Russian. Like other mountain peoples of the Caucasus, they are fiercely independent and have suffered enormously under Russian rule since the Empire began to assert control over the region in the 18th century.

Although parts of the Caucasus have been Muslim since the dawn of the religion, the Chechen adoption of the faith largely coincided with the initial period of Russian encroachment. In the early 19th century, Chechens formed an integral component of the armed rebellion of North Caucasus peoples, who united under the banner of Islam and resisted Russian rule for more than four decades—only to fall victim to Russia’s brutal tactics that included ethnic cleansing, the widespread burning of villages, and the near eradication of regional forests.

Conditions did not improve under Stalin, who forcibly deported the entire Chechen population to Kazakhstan in 1944, in a brutal ethnic cleansing that killed 20–50 percent of Chechens in the process. Although they were eventually allowed to return to their homeland in 1957, when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the suppressed anxieties and aspirations of the Chechen people brought them into conflict once again with the centralizing imperatives of Moscow. For more than a decade prior to Ramzan Kadyrov’s ascension in 2007, Chechnya was embroiled in two devastating wars with the Russian Federation.

Although the first Chechen conflict (1994–1996) was primarily motivated by nationalist aspirations, many Chechen combatants came under the influence of international jihadist ideology. The brutal conditions of war helped to foster such radicalization, and Islamist militants from abroad offered moral and material support. After successfully driving out the Russian forces, the new Chechen government struggled to establish order; organized criminal elements and Islamist militants came to increasingly dominate the region. Then Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin launched the second conflict (1999–2009), following his rise to power on promises that he would be tough on Chechen terrorists. By 2003, the improved Russian army had reduced the capitol city of Grozny into what United Nations observers called “the most devastated city on earth.”

Religious Control in Chechnya

In more recent years, Chechnya has modestly grown to include a [population](#) of just under 1.5 million. It nevertheless plays an outsized role, both within the Russian Federation and on the international stage. Its president, Ramzan Kadyrov, appears to represent a sort of anomaly—a politically autonomous leader under the rule of one of the world’s most recognizable authoritarians. While other regional governors are weak and frequently replaced, Kadyrov maintains virtually unlimited control over his tiny corner of Putin’s Russia, most recently winning reelection to a fourth term on September 19, 2021, in a widely criticized process in which he claimed [99.7 percent of the vote](#). Although he has twice been [sanctioned](#) by the United States under the Global Magnitsky Act, most recently on December 10, 2020, Kadyrov characteristically responded with defiance and even [mockery](#).

Yet, far from an outlier, Kadyrov’s Chechnya is perhaps the quintessential product of Putin’s political system. His virtual monopoly on religious belief, expression, and private life in Chechnya represents an extreme version of the current Russian trajectory. Despite its many violations of religious freedom and related human rights, the Russian Federation still maintains a limited degree of religious pluralism when compared to the tiny ethnic republic in the southeast. The Kadyrov regime is nevertheless a direct product of Putin’s policy in Chechnya, reflecting his own prioritization of power and centralized control above human rights.

Chechnya’s emphasis on protecting a particular interpretation of “traditional values,” and on promoting a regime-sponsored version of local Islam that leadership deems synonymous with Chechen ethnicity, fits comfortably within the official Russian approach to religion. In Russia, “traditional” religions like Orthodox Christianity and Hanafi Islam are privileged by the state and identified with particular ethnic groups, like ethnic Slavs or Volga Tatars. In contrast, “non-traditional” religions are often treated with suspicion and characterized as dangerous foreign influences. Chechen religious policy therefore reflects that broader Russian system, which is itself heavily influenced by [Soviet precedents](#).

Chechnya’s religious policy also has implications beyond the Russian Federation. Ramzan Kadyrov has been [called](#) Russia’s “cultural ambassador to the Islamic world,” where he is a respected and popular figure who has helped to

“rebrand” Russia as a place “where Muslims are protected from repression and where Islam flourishes.” Many Muslim leaders, particularly in the Middle East, perceive Chechnya as a success story after it emerged from the brutal separatist conflicts with Russia with its faith intact, and Kadyrov has become an influential proponent of a “[regime Islam](#)” that appeals to anxious governments in Muslim-majority countries beset by violent extremism and popular unrest. More than just “state Islam,” which refers to the diverse and complex ways religious authorities interact with officials across the Muslim world, Kadyrov promotes a form of religion that is synonymous with his rule and legitimizes his personal control over social and private life.

The Chechen Regime’s Interpretation of Islam

Sufism, a widely diverse movement of Islamic mysticism, has flourished in Chechnya since the late 18th century, with a relatively decentralized nature that is well suited to the social conditions of tribal life in the mountains—and uniquely able to survive underground during the harsh religious repression of the Soviet period. Today, most Chechen Muslims identify as Sufi, and while there are several prominent variants, the order of Kunta-Hadji Kishiev has particular relevance as a local phenomenon.

Kunta-Hadji (d. 1867) founded a movement called *zikrism*, whose rituals center on an ecstatic mystical dance called the *zika*; it rose to prominence in the aftermath of the decades-long conflict with the Russian Empire during the 19th century. Unlike other Sufi orders that had supported the conflict, *zikrism* emphasized non-violence, disengagement from worldly affairs, and the cultivation of a personal connection to the divine. In the 1990s, Ramzan Kadyrov’s father Akhmad was the most prominent leader of the Kunta-Hadji order, claiming a [family connection](#) to the sheik and working to defend his holy sites from jihadist elements who considered the Sufi veneration of saints to be a form of paganism. By the time of the Second Chechen War, Akhmad Kadyrov had become a vocal supporter of the Russians he once opposed, and he considered “*Wahhabis*” and “*Salafis*” (which he considered synonymous with internationalist jihadis) the real enemy as they increasingly dominated the armed resistance.

The elder Kadyrov brought the Russians more than just religious and ideological legitimacy; he also contributed a loyal network of tribal alliances and seasoned fighters known as the *Kadyrovtsy*. His support, in conjunction with Putin’s ruthless military tactics, turned the tide definitively in Russia’s favor. He became the de facto

leader of Chechnya from 2000 before becoming president on October 7, 2003, after elections that were [marred](#) by allegations of voter intimidation and the withdrawal or removal of alternative candidates. His official tenure in office was cut short on May 9, 2004, when he was killed by a bomb while attending a parade in celebration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany.

Ramzan Kadyrov took on his father’s mantle three years later in 2007, once he had reached the presidency’s mandatory minimum age of 30. Since that time, the younger Kadyrov has prioritized the top-down imposition of an interpretation of Chechen Islam that draws on the symbolic legacy of Kunta-Hadji while also conferring saintly status on his late father and the Kadyrov family. Yet while the *zikrism* of Kunta-Hadji was historically apolitical, decentralized, and non-violent, Kadyrov’s interpretation is a highly centralized state religion that advocates and facilitates violence against religious minorities, and critics of the Kadyrov regime—all with the support of its sponsors in Moscow.

The devastated landscape of postwar Chechnya provided a unique template for Kadyrov to inscribe the legacy of his family and regime. In 2008, he opened the Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque in Grozny, also known as “The Heart of Chechnya,” which dominates the skyline of the rebuilt capital. In 2014, he dedicated a colossal mosque in the town of Argun to his [mother](#). In 2019, he unveiled in the modest town of Shali what was alleged to be the “[largest mosque in Europe](#),” able to hold more than 30,000 worshippers. Other shrines to the family, such as the Akhmad Kadyrov [museum](#) in Grozny, reinforce the dynastic symbolism of these prestige mosques by connecting the Kadyrovs to monuments of national and religious revival.

Ramzan Kadyrov has also become a collector of [relics](#) related to the Prophet Muhammad, which further cement his legitimacy as a religious authority. In 2015, Kadyrov received a [blood transfusion](#) from Habib Ali Al-Jifri, a popular Sufi cleric who claims to be a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad.

Since coming to power, Kadyrov has largely banned the sale of alcohol and energy drinks, and [mandated headscarves](#) and modest clothing for women. In 2010, there were multiple reports of unknown assailants using paintball guns to shoot women in the capital for not wearing headscarves. Although he claimed not to know the identity of the perpetrators, Kadyrov publicly [approved](#) of their methods against these so-called “naked women.”

In other [statements](#) he has justified “honor killings” of unmarried or divorced females by their relatives as in accordance with Chechen customary law (*adat*).

Additionally, according to the Russian LGBT Network, law enforcement regularly threatens families of LGBTI individuals encouraging them to carry out [honor killings](#) of their relatives. Chechen authorities [regularly condone](#) such violent practices, which belies the regime’s claim that it promotes a pacifist interpretation of Islam. In February 2021, Salekh Magamadov and Ismail Isayev, two LGBTI brothers who had fled to the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod, were kidnapped and forcibly returned to Chechnya where they face questionable [terrorism](#) charges. On March 23, 2021, Chechen authorities [detained 20](#) of their relatives without cause and demanded that they help to find the men’s parents, who had fled Chechnya to escape official harassment and pressure to kill their sons.

Ramzan Kadyrov’s imposition of a supposedly “traditional” Islam violates the secular constitution of the Russian Federation and international standards of freedom of religion or belief. His policy as such is not truly intended to defend local belief and culture or to combat violent extremism; its purpose is to perpetuate and legitimize regime control. Chechen authorities have persecuted peaceful Muslim clerics who refuse to cooperate with regime interference in their religious communities. Meanwhile, these same authorities allowed Abdullakh Anzurov, the Chechen émigré who [decapitated](#) a French school teacher for insulting Islam, to receive a hero’s burial in Chechnya.

Claims of Religious Authority

Kadyrov’s pretensions to religious authority extend far beyond the borders of Chechnya. At a conference in 2016, he [scolded](#) theologians from neighboring Ingushetia, calling them demons (*shaitany*) and threatening them with decapitation if they tried to preach in Chechnya. He scolded Ingush authorities for tolerating the theologians, accused authorities in neighboring Dagestan of being slow to punish Salafis in their republic, and forbade Chechens from engaging in religious dialogue with Salafis.

Kadyrov’s suspicion of the international jihadi movement is understandable in light of [Chechnya’s recent history](#). Chechnya faces a real threat of violent extremism, although this has diminished in recent years as Chechen militants have migrated to other conflict zones like Syria. In reality, Kadyrov is hostile to any form of Islam that does not conform to his Sufi model. USCIRF has spoken

with sources who affirm that Chechen authorities even target clerics with a reputation for deradicalizing at-risk individuals, but nevertheless refuse to use their popularity to bolster the Kadyrov regime.

Kadyrov has also garnered criticism from prominent Muslim leaders in both Russia and the wider Islamic world for his divisive stances on the religion. In August 2016, he hosted a World Congress of Muslim Scholars in Grozny, after which some of the participants released a [fatwa](#) claiming that only followers of Sufism were true adherents of Islam and singling out “Salafis” and “Wahhabis” as especially misguided. The *fatwa* was accompanied by an appeal to the Russian government, asking it to ban Salafism.

The Grozny *fatwa* immediately angered Saudi Arabia, where the teachings of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab are foundational to state ideology. Many prominent Muslim scholars quickly [renounced](#) the proclamation, including several who had attended the conference. These scholars included Ali al-Jifri, a close ally and blood brother of Kadyrov. Despite the Russian government’s general aversion to Salafism, the head of the [Spiritual Assembly of Muslims](#) in Moscow also disavowed the *fatwa*, as he feared that it would sow division among Russian Muslims. Kadyrov eventually apologized to the Saudi royal family, who later allowed him the [rare honor](#) of performing Sufi prayers in the Prophet Muhammad’s room in Medina. However, this rapprochement has not stopped Chechen law enforcement from broadly targeting alleged Salafists and Wahhabis on unsubstantiated claims of terrorism, which authorities bolster with [fabricated evidence](#) and confessions obtained under torture according to observers. It has also not prevented prominent Chechen officials from publicly comparing “Wahhabism” with [‘witchcraft,’](#) [which](#) law enforcement has also targeted prominently in recent years.

Witch Hunts

Allegations of witchcraft are increasingly common in contemporary Chechen political discourse. Since 2019, Chechen authorities have been conducting literal witch hunts, detaining citizens whom it accuses of “witchcraft” and “sorcery” on an almost weekly basis. These individuals, usually elderly women, are regularly forced to confess their crimes on state television while they face shame and reprimand from Adam El’zhurkayev, a Muslim theologian and director of the state-financed Islamic Medical Center.

This center, opened in 2009, is another initiative of Ramzan Kadyrov and provides free religious healing services, often involving the *exorcism* of “*jinn*”—a form of spirit in Islamic tradition that is often, but not always, malevolent and commonly blamed for a wide array of physical and psychological illnesses. Belief in *jinn* is widespread in the *North Caucasus*.

Public shaming *ceremonies* on state television is one of many forms of repression, with targets subjected to official reprimand and financial penalties but usually not physical harm or serious prison time. Instead, family and society at large are expected to regulate women and ensure their compliance. In a typical episode of these ceremonies, El'zhurkayev might wield a large cane symbolizing his authority as an Islamic elder. He interrogates an old woman who wrings her hands or sobs nervously while he catalogues the evidence of amulets, spells, and chicken bones strewn on a table in front of them. He tells her that Islam forbids fortune telling and that those who practice it will go to hell, while the state TV correspondent *echoes* that magic is “confirmed to be harmful under Islamic law.”



Photo: Chechen TV channel/Instagram, January 22, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKUIYufJ0IC/>On

The accused “witch” may then be *interviewed* by the correspondent and given the opportunity to publicly recant her sinful practices. For instance, in a broadcast aired on January 29, 2021, the accused affirmed that her conversation with the theologian had been a revelation, causing her to understand that she was a liar and a deceiver who did not even respect herself, let alone her customers. On the wall behind her hung a portrait of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police; during other such interviews, portraits of Putin and Kadyrov are a common background presence.

These televised segments often include a significant social media dimension. On January 30, 2021, a Grozny ChGTRK Instagram post featuring the *public shaming*

of accused witch Shaima Makhmuyeva received 142,118 views and 1,923 comments. Some commenters mocked those who believed in or practiced “witchcraft,” while others called for legislative action or claimed that “only the death penalty will stop these witches!” *Programs* routinely feature pictures of the “victims of these witches and sorcerers” among the displayed evidence; such “victims” are likely customers, or in some cases the intended targets of an alleged love spell or curse, and the display of their photos is intended to shame them as well.

The conspicuous placement of Felix Dzerzhinsky’s photograph on the wall behind the alleged witch in the above image is not accidental. These televised rituals are supposed to remind people of the Soviet precedent of “self-criticism” (*samokritika*), symbolically blended with Chechen *adat*, which emphasizes group identity and allocates responsibility for individual conduct to the relevant group (village, tribe, family). Public shaming of an individual is simultaneously the shaming of their relatives, friends, and neighbors, who are encouraged to defend their honor by actively policing the accused. This fusion of Soviet purge, Chechen *adat*, and Sufi religious authority is a stark representation of Kadyrov’s interpretation of “traditional” Chechen values, which facilitates the political, cultural, and social hegemony of his regime.

Purging and Disciplining Chechen Society

Supposed witches are not the only ones singled out for public humiliation, but the targets do tend to be women who are perceived to violate the strict patriarchal power structure that the regime justifies through its interpretation of Islam, which is heavily influenced by Chechen *adat*. There is a clear gendered dimension to witchcraft allegations or claims of possession. Men suspected of similar alleged “crimes” tend to fall under the jurisdiction of the security services, but also tend to be characterized as spiritually deviant. Thus, while a gay woman like *Khalimat Tamarova* was forced to undergo an exorcism by her family, a gay man like *Salekh Magamadov* was kidnapped, arrested, and charged with Islamist terrorism.

Beginning in 2019, juveniles began to appear in televised shamings as part of what Chechen Minister of Information and Press, Akhmed Dudaev, *described* as the “moral and spiritual education of the younger generation.” Such education involves teenage boys, like 16-year-old Magomed Akhmatov, tearfully begging for forgiveness from the Chief Mufti of Chechnya on state television for

ill-advised comments on social media sympathizing with those who want to flee Chechnya for Europe or Syria. Dudaev claimed this traumatic humiliation was actually a wonderful opportunity for the young man to meet the Mufti in person and receive his instruction.

The unofficial versions of this education campaign are significantly more [humiliating](#). On September 5, 2020, a 19-year-old Chechen named Salman Tepsurkayev was kidnapped and, according to his cell phone data, held at a facility run by the security services. Two days later, Tepsurkayev appeared in an online video in which he apologized for his online criticism of the *Kadyrovtsy* and “punished himself” by sitting naked on a glass bottle.

The most systematic and horrible expression of Kadyrov’s “traditional values” program is the violent [purge](#) of the LGBTI community. A large, but ultimately unknown, number of gay Chechens have been kidnapped, tortured, and executed in a sweeping campaign of violence that has been condemned by the [United Nations](#) and detailed in reports by the Russian newspaper [Novaya Gazeta](#) and the documentary film “[Welcome to Chechnya](#).” Despite international outcry, these abuses have not stopped and only become more cynical and brazen.

Kadyrov regularly claims that there are no homosexuals in Chechnya and, since at least 2017, his security services have worked to make this claim a reality. Most recently in response to a critical [statement](#) by U.S. President Biden on September 21, 2021, Kadyrov [reacted](#) with denials and even insults, arguing that “there are no roosters in the Chechen Republic.” In Russian, ‘rooster’ (*petukh*) is prison slang for men that have been sexually abused in prison and is used as a derogatory term for gay men. Kadyrov went on to claim that Biden’s remarks were merely part of broader U.S. hostility to Islam.

Conclusion

The Russian and Chechen governments claim to champion traditional values and cultural relativism, but in fact use those concepts to violate international standards of human rights. Chechnya is just one example of the flaws inherent in the Russian paradigm. Other examples abound: from the persecution of Crimean Tatar Muslims in occupied Crimea and the effective banning of Protestant groups in war-torn Donbass, to the ongoing purge of peaceful Jehovah’s Witnesses across its vast territory and recent de facto [ban](#) of the Church of Scientology.

Since 2017, USCIRF has recommended that the U.S. State Department designate the Russian Federation as a “Country of Particular Concern,” or CPC, for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Since that time, the case for such a designation has only grown more compelling, as detailed each year in the USCIRF [Annual Report](#). As of 2020 the Department continues to place Russia on its Special Watch List, a lesser category that does not carry the threat of punitive consequences. Kadyrov’s regime in Chechnya is one of the world’s worst violators of religious freedom and the Russian government is ultimately responsible for what happens there. When considered alongside the Russian government’s many other abuses, including the illegal extension of its repressive religious policies to neighboring Ukraine, Ramzan Kadyrov’s brutal authoritarian policies clearly demonstrate that Russia is a Country of Particular Concern. The U.S. Department of State should designate it as such.



Professional Staff

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Supervisory Public Affairs Officer

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Director of Outreach and Policy

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Zack Udin
Researcher

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