

THE KADYROV QUESTION: Who rules Chechnya next?

Marat Ilyasov



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INTRODUCTION

➤ **C**hechnya occupies a unique place within the Russian Federation. Formally, it is a fully integrated republic; in practice, it is a semi-independent state, with Moscow exerting little control over local affairs. The republic's authoritarian (often called **sultanistic**) regime has been built over the past two decades through a highly personalized arrangement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov. This arrangement granted Kadyrov exceptional autonomy in domestic governance in exchange for what the federal center has prioritized above all else in the North Caucasus: loyalty to Moscow and the absence of a large-scale insurgency or pro-independence movement.

In place since the mid-2000s, the symbiotic relationship made Kadyrov an indispensable intermediary for the Kremlin. Over the years, he built a **powerful military machine** and security apparatus that allows him to maintain internal control and suppress existing political and armed opposition.

Yet the apparent stability of the region, as it is increasingly tied to one person, has proved fragile due to the Chechen ruler's unexpectedly deteriorating health. This year, Kadyrov marked his fiftieth birthday and could, under normal circumstances, remain in office for decades. However, his health problems appear too serious and persistent to allow such continuity in political leadership. Public speculation in Chechnya, reports from **Ukrainian intelligence**, and Russian independent media such as *Novaya Gazeta* suggest that he suffers from a **terminal illness**. Although repeated claims that his end is imminent have proven premature, the broader issue remains: The durability of Chechnya's current model of rule is widely questioned, and succession (whether imminent or not) has become a central political issue.

The stakes are heightened by Chechnya's historical trajectory. Few regions have displayed such a consistent pattern of resistance to Russian statehood across its successive forms: the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation. The wars of the 1990s and early 2000s left deep scars in the population's collective memory. This traumatic experience has been exacerbated by the postwar "pacification," which relied heavily on **coercion rather than reconciliation**. Grievances accumulated under imperial conquest and rule, as well as Soviet repressions that culminated in **the deportation** of the entire nation to Central Asia in 1944, have not disappeared. The population's collective memory remains vivid, even if contained or silenced. For this reason, any sudden disruption of the current power structure could reopen questions that Moscow has sought to keep closed: Who rules Chechnya? By what legitimacy? And on what terms does it remain within Russia?

This report addresses that uncertainty by examining four broad pathways for Chechnya's future. The first is continuity: Kadyrov's health stabilizes, and he remains in office for an extended period—as long as Putin stays in power. Putin's

succession within the Russian system, however, is itself **an open question**. The second pathway is an abrupt transition: Kadyrov dies or is removed, prompting the Kremlin to install a loyal replacement. This could occur smoothly or amid elite competition and a scramble for control over the republic. The third pathway is dynastic succession: Kadyrov succeeds in transferring authority to one of his children, preserving the regime through a family-based handover endorsed (or tolerated) by Moscow. The fourth, and most disruptive, pathway is systemic rupture: Kadyrov's departure triggers broader unrest, elite fragmentation, or renewed rebellion, potentially reviving an independence agenda.

By assessing the drivers, constraints, and likely trajectories of each pathway, this report aims to clarify what may await Chechnya after Kadyrov is no longer in power. This question matters because of the outsized role this small republic plays in Russia's internal cohesion and regional security.

DETERMINING FACTORS

➤ **W**hich of the four pathways outlined prior becomes most plausible will depend on a small number of major drivers, alongside many secondary variables and their shifting combinations. Because “minor” factors can rapidly grow in importance as circumstances change, forecasting Chechnya’s political trajectory with high confidence is impossible. This project therefore focuses on the principal determinants most likely to shape Chechnya’s future: Russia’s political framework and the probability of change in Moscow; Chechen collective memory and the persistence of an anti-colonial political identity; and dynamics within the Chechen elite, including succession and intraregime conflict.

RUSSIA’S POLITICAL FRAMEWORK AND LEADERSHIP CHANGE

Chechnya functions within the legal and political architecture of the Russian Federation. These institutional constraints formally anchor the republic to Russia and are generally accepted not only by the current federal and regional elites but also by much of Russia’s systemic opposition. In practice, however, Chechnya’s governance is also shaped by an informal yet crucial factor: the **personal relationship** between Putin and Kadyrov. This relationship underpins the current distribution of autonomy, coercion, and federal support.

While the likelihood of a constitutional redesign in Russia that would enable major structural transformations (including legal pathways to secession) remains low, a **change of leadership** in Moscow is realistic, and it could serve as a trigger for political change in Grozny. Such a change could be prompted by the **outcome of Russia’s war** in Ukraine, elite conflict culminating in a coup attempt, or a leadership transition due to Putin’s illness or death. More extreme, though less probable, pathways include revolution or broader civil conflict within Russia. In all cases, the key mechanism is the same: If the Kremlin’s priorities, capabilities, or patronage networks shift, Chechnya’s leadership arrangement may be renegotiated or disrupted.

CHECHEN COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR REBELLION

A second factor concerns the possibility of renewed rebellion or mass political mobilization. Centuries of repression and perceived injustice began with Russia’s imperial conquest of Chechnya in the nineteenth century. Soviet-era repressions and the deportation of the entire nation to Central Asia continued the cycle of injustice and trauma. The recent wars with the Russian Federation, in turn, sug-

gested to many that a regime change in Moscow does not necessarily change Russia's attitude toward Chechens. All these experiences have left a durable imprint on Chechen collective memory. This legacy, combined with a long **tradition of resistance** to Russian rule in all its historical forms, has contributed to a collective political identity that is highly sensitive to external control—a reality that many Chechens reject (even if not openly) as illegitimate.

Although previous bids for independence ultimately failed, the aspiration for sovereignty persists among parts of the population and within segments of the diaspora. This aspiration is periodically reinforced by episodes of temporary success in resistance, perceptions of Russia's long-term demographic and economic constraints, and the expectation that systemic change in Moscow—accelerated by the war in Ukraine—could open a **window of opportunity** for another attempt to create an independent state in Chechnya. The longer and more costly the war becomes, the greater the strain on Russia's finances, coercive capacity, and elite cohesion, potentially encouraging either revolutionary pressures or forced concessions at the center. Either pathway could reverberate in Chechnya.

Limited social mobility and **career prospects**, especially for youth, can intensify frustration and rebelliousness. Further sources of grievance include the suppression of nonmainstream religious groups, the declining credibility of officially aligned clerics under constant pro-state messaging, and the regime's pervasive **cult of personality**. Another key variable is the loyalty and cohesion of the security forces on which the system depends. Finally, a sizable anti-Kadyrov diaspora plays an outsized informational and political role: It challenges official propaganda, documents abuses, and in some cases seeks to influence outcomes inside the republic.

At the republic level, one must also consider political ambition and rivalry. Even under an authoritarian system that appears stable, competitors may exist within the security services, the administrative apparatus, or among sidelined networks. A leadership vacuum, or even a perceived weakening of the incumbent, can activate these dormant ambitions.

ELITE DYNAMICS INSIDE CHECHNYA

Third, changes within Chechnya's political elite could prove decisive. During Kadyrov's rule, there have been recurrent reports of **disloyalty**, internal purges, and **alleged assassination attempts** involving figures from his closer and wider circles. His governing style, which is highly personalized, punitive, and often humiliating toward subordinates, creates incentives for quiet resentment and opportunistic defection. Even if a **"palace coup"** remains unlikely under normal conditions, it becomes more plausible during moments of transition, especially if Moscow's backing appears uncertain.

Importantly, the loyalty of key actors may be conditional rather than personal. Many elites may remain loyal to Kadyrov so long as he controls resources, provides protection from potential **avengers**, and mediates access to federal patronage; their commitment to his family's dynastic continuity is likely weaker. In a favorable moment, some may attempt to seize power themselves rather than accept a hereditary transfer.

These core factors interact with the regime's capacity to meet basic expectations of security and welfare. For years, security issues in the republic dominated public priorities and the regime, in the eyes of the Kremlin, met them. Increasingly, economic considerations are now coming to the fore. Chechnya remains heavily **dependent on federal subsidies**, while Russia's budgetary flexibility is constrained by wartime expenditure and sanctions. This situation could prompt a fraction of Kadyrov's elite to propose a deal that would reduce some of Moscow's burden.

The following sections assess how these factors shape the probability of each of the paper's pathways. They also discuss which developments would signal movement toward one trajectory or another.

PATHWAY 1: STABLE AND CONTINUOUS RULE



➤ **A**lthough this pathway does not directly answer the question of what comes after Kadyrov, it provides essential context for understanding how Chechnya is governed today and why succession is so sensitive. The current order in the republic is inseparable from the political bargain between Putin and Kadyrov. As long as that bargain holds, significant change in Grozny remains unlikely. And the bargain is highly likely to hold while Putin remains in power.

Contemporary Russia increasingly resembles the late Soviet period, often described as *zastoi* (stagnation): a system that appears politically frozen, with limited institutional evolution and weakening economic dynamism. Such periods can persist for years, but they can also end abruptly under the pressure of external shocks or internal elite conflict.

Putin is the key to the current period. He has been effectively in power since 1999. He turns seventy-four in October 2026, marking nearly three decades at the top of the Russian state. Given his access to **elite medical care**, and the high degree of regime control, it is plausible that he could remain in office for many more years. This means that Kadyrov's position, despite periodic controversies, also remains relatively secure.

Kadyrov is widely seen as **Putin's personal project**, a leader installed and sustained through a relationship that is notably more direct and privileged than that of most regional heads. Unlike governors who typically communicate with the Kremlin through federal-district envoys and bureaucratic channels, Kadyrov has long maintained a **direct connection** to the president. This exceptional access translates into a level of political protection that few others in Russia enjoy. It has been visible since 2004, when **Akhmat Kadyrov**, Ramzan's father and the founder of the current pro-Kremlin regime in Chechnya, was killed in an explosion at a Victory Day ceremony in Grozny. Since then, Moscow's support for the Kadyrovs has been consistent and unusually personal. Kadyrov's public rhetoric and actions, which are often provocative even by Russian political standards, would likely be intolerable from any other regional leader, contributing to resentment among parts of the **Russian elite**, including in the power ministries.

From the Kremlin's perspective, this support has a strategic logic: Kadyrov has delivered a degree of internal control that Moscow struggled to achieve through other means. The **Putin-Kadyrov tandem** emerged from necessity, mutual dependence, and a carefully cultivated image of loyalty. In the early 2000s, Russia

had few credible local partners who combined authority within Chechnya with reliability for Moscow. Business figures with potential political ambitions, such as Malik Saidullaev or Khussein Dzhabrailov, were often viewed by Moscow as either untrustworthy or lacked social roots in Chechnya. Earlier attempts to govern through members of the Soviet-era *nomenklatura*, such as Doku Zavgaev or Bislan Gantamirov, proved ineffective, echoing Moscow's failures during the First Chechen War (1994–1996) to establish a “legitimate” alternative leadership.

Akhmat Kadyrov, by contrast, could draw on two key assets: religious authority and ties to a major clan network. He built an armed formation initially based on relatives, friends, and neighbors, then expanded it through co-optation—negotiating surrender arrangements for fighters willing to abandon the independence project or dissatisfied with the pro-independence movement leadership. By assuming responsibility for “restoring order,” he laid the groundwork for a durable exchange: coercive control and political loyalty in return for Kremlin backing and resources. After Akhmat's death in 2004, his son consolidated this arrangement and neutralized or eliminated major rivals who possessed necessary military power in the republic and political connections in Moscow, such as the brothers Yamadayev. In doing so, he effectively ensured that stability in Chechnya became closely associated with his personal rule—thereby narrowing Moscow's options for replacement.

While Kadyrov has proved critical to Moscow in managing his hard-to-control region, Kremlin influence could extend after he departs the scene. Two decades since the beginning of his rule, the Kremlin's dependence on Kadyrov is not absolute anymore. A new generation of officials, such as Muslim Khuchiev, and *siloviki* (those with state security/military backgrounds or positions), such as Magomed Daudov, has emerged, largely shaped by Kadyrov's system, and some could theoretically be promoted as alternatives. Still, another stabilizing element persists: Putin's emphasis on loyalty as a political virtue. Kadyrov has continuously, and in a self-humiliating way, emphasized his own loyalty to Putin publicly and demonstratively, which carries particular value in the Kremlin leader's personalized authoritarian regime. Finally, replacing Kadyrov would force the Kremlin to acknowledge that its long-standing Chechen strategy was flawed. This would be an admission that Putin is politically disinclined to make, especially in a region where Russia paid an enormous price in lives and legitimacy to reassert control.

In sum, absent major shocks, the Putin–Kadyrov tandem can plausibly continue in much the same way it has over the past two decades. The most credible triggers for change under this pathway are acute political violence, an elite rupture in Moscow, or serious deterioration in the health of either Putin or Kadyrov. The next section evaluates how such triggers could alter the balance and what consequences would follow.

PATHWAY 2: CHANGE OF THE RULER AND/OR REGIME



➤ **A** leadership change in Moscow is the most plausible external trigger for a leadership change in Grozny. As is well known, authoritarian systems often face pressure for renewal after a long reign, particularly when an entire generation has lived under a single ruler with no credible mechanism for rotation. Putin is such a leader. His legitimacy has long rested on the claim that he “ended the chaos of the 1990s,” but younger cohorts do not necessarily share this memory or the gratitude attached to it. They are a new generation that is technologically savvy and has greater access to information and transnational social networks. Under certain conditions, this could help generate new protest dynamics. Yet this is not necessarily the case in Russia. So far, the state has effectively countered this possibility. It has built an extensive apparatus of censorship, surveillance, and repression—factors that reduce the probability of mass mobilization and protest.

A second determinant of potential change is the biological and political aging of the elite. Even with elite healthcare, Putin is not immune to deteriorating health, nor is he immune to bargaining among younger segments of the elite, which typically intensifies around succession. A managed transfer of power to a chosen successor, similar to Yeltsin’s handover to Putin in 1999, could preserve regime continuity, but it could also provoke elite conflict or public protest, depending on the context.

External shocks may further accelerate these dynamics. Russia’s war against Ukraine and its economic, demographic, and political consequences could either prolong Putin’s rule (through militarized consolidation) or shorten it (through elite fragmentation and resource depletion). The brief 2023 mutiny by Yevgeny Prigozhin, despite its rapid collapse, illustrated the regime’s potential fragility. Under any of these pathways, the removal or weakening of Putin would likely alter the Kremlin’s approach to Chechnya and reopen the question of whether Kadyrov remains the optimal instrument of control.

Kadyrov understands that his authority depends directly on Putin’s patronage. He therefore invests heavily in signaling loyalty and indispensability. However, his demonstrative zeal, lack of restraint in public rhetoric, highly personalistic rule, and the impunity he appears to enjoy have also generated deep irritation within parts of the Russian political class. Regional governors often resent his privileged access to the president; segments of the federal elite, including the security services, view him as politically toxic and would prefer to curtail his autonomy if circumstances allow. This background makes it plausible that a post-Putin

leadership, regardless of its ideological profile, would at least consider replacing Kadyrov in order to rebalance center–region relations and reduce reputational costs.

Who could replace him would largely depend on the nature of Russia’s transition. Three main possibilities are foreseeable in this regard. The first is regime continuity through an insider successor. If Putin is succeeded by a loyalist who seeks stability and continuity, Moscow would likely look for a replacement from within Kadyrov’s immediate **siloviki circle**, choosing among figures able to guarantee coercive control and manage the existing security architecture. Names often cited in this context include Daudov (also known by nom de guerre Lord), Abuzaid Vismuradov (nom de guerre Patriot), and Adam Delimkhanov. All are closely associated with Kadyrov, implicated in the system’s coercive practices, and possess key attributes valued by Moscow in Chechnya: operational ruthlessness, embeddedness in the security apparatus, and demonstrated loyalty to the federal center (often framed as loyalty to Putin personally rather than to institutions).

The second possibility involves a more contested or transformative change in Moscow. In other words, if Putin is removed through an elite rupture or if a new leadership seeks to distance itself from the Putin–Kadyrov relationship model, the Kremlin might prefer a less militarized administrator. Most likely, Russia’s new leaders would still look for a replacement among members of Kadyrov’s broader team, but they would choose those perceived as more “bureaucratic” and manageable. Figures such as Odes Baysultanov, Khuchiev, or Ruslan Edelgeriev are sometimes discussed in this category. They participated neither in a military process of creating the pro-Russian regime nor were they part of the pro-independence one. Hence, they are neither associated with atrocities of the former nor with the anti-Russian stance of the latter. Their comparative advantage lies in technocratic experience and administrative competence that they gained while the siloviki were establishing the new rule by force. They have an advantage if Moscow’s priority shifts from brute control to reputational normalization and tighter fiscal oversight.

The third possibility envisages the unlikely event that Russia’s liberal opposition comes to power. This would not necessarily imply structural changes in the country or support for Chechen independence. Prominent opposition figures have repeatedly emphasized Russia’s territorial integrity, including statements by **Mikhail Khodorkovsky** (2013) and **Vladimir Kara-Murza** (2025), who has argued against any disintegration of the Russian Federation. Yet they are also known for an openly hostile view of Kadyrov. Under such a government, Kadyrov and his siloviki entourage would be unacceptable due to their association with repression, extrajudicial violence, and a quasi-sultanistic model of governance. However, liberals would also be reluctant to cooperate with Chechen pro-independence political actors. This creates an unresolved tension: Liberal Moscow would want change in Chechnya but would not want to empower separatism. Finding an acceptable figure who could ensure Chechnya’s stability and loyalty without being associated with repression would be challenging. For now, parts of the Russian opposition in exile have treated Ruslan Kutayev, a **civic activist**, as an acceptable option. He moved to the West shortly after he was released from prison in 2017; he had been **arrested** in February 2014 on drug charges and said **he was “brutally beaten”** after criticizing and defying Kadyrov’s ban on an annual commemoration of the 1944 deportation of Chechens. Russian liberals,

who formed the **PACE Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces**, invited Kutayev to join them as a representative of the native people. However, this representation is largely symbolic, as Kutayev is neither an influential figure nor a potentially popular politician in Chechnya. Even if liberals were to prevail in Russia and endorse him, it is hard to imagine that Kutayev could win elections in the republic. This possibility was nullified after Kutayev was **suspended** from working at the Platform for Dialogue with Russian Democratic Forces by President of PACE Petra Bayr for inappropriate comments.

In short, the most important variable in Chechnya's succession question is not only Kadyrov's health, but who succeeds Putin and by what mechanism. If the Russian regime persists in an insider form, Moscow is likely to search for "Kadyrovism without Kadyrov," drawing from his siloviki circle. If Moscow undergoes a sharper political shift, the pool of candidates and the rules of the game become far less predictable—and the question of Chechnya's governance may reopen in ways the Kremlin has tried to prevent.

PATHWAY 3: KADYROV'S DEATH



➤ **K**adyrov has repeatedly said that he would like Putin to remain **president indefinitely**, an outcome that would, by extension, preserve his own rule in Chechnya. Yet the first serious shock to the republic's political "stability" did not come from Moscow, war, or opposition activity, but from questions surrounding Kadyrov's personal health.

After years of cultivating an image of vigor and physical strength, in a style similar to Putin's, Kadyrov **began to disappear** from public view for noticeable periods. In **the summer of 2022**, his absence for several weeks triggered a wave of speculation. Official outlets attempted to dispel the rumors with staged videos and curated appearances, but these efforts often had the opposite effect, intensifying doubts rather than easing them. In 2023, an investigation by Novaya Gazeta, an outlet with a long, openly hostile relationship with Kadyrov's regime, **alleged that he suffers from a terminal illness**. The outlet has repeated variations of this claim since then, mentioning **necrotizing pancreatitis**, kidney failure, and fluid buildup in his lungs. While the most dramatic predictions have not materialized, the broader point remains: Kadyrov's health has become a political variable.

The ruler's own behavior suggests that he takes the issue seriously. This is most visible in the speed and scale with which Kadyrov began promoting his children into senior political positions, despite their apparent lack of qualifications. His eldest daughter, Aishat Kadyrova, was appointed **deputy prime minister** in 2023 at the age of twenty-five. Although her portfolio reportedly focused on social policy and culture—areas that do not control the coercive apparatus—the symbolism was significant. It suggested that Kadyrov was testing the boundaries of Chechnya's patriarchal political culture and exploring whether a daughter could serve, at minimum, as a transitional figurehead under the protection of stronger male guardians. This mirrors a mechanism seen in other systems: a formally appointed successor with limited independent power, shielded by loyal siloviki until a more "acceptable" heir matures.

At the same time, Kadyrov has invested heavily in elevating one of his sons, Adam, who is often described as his favored child. Adam's rise has been unusually rapid. Around the period when speculation about Kadyrov's health intensified, Adam was reportedly appointed head of his father's security—an echo of Ramzan Kadyrov's own early-career trajectory in the late 1990s. Such a position is designed to generate personal dependency among security personnel and to cultivate the image of a leader-in-waiting. In 2025, at the age of seventeen, Adam's appointment as secretary of the **Security Council** further strengthened this signal, placing him close to one of the republic's most consequential nodes of decision-making.

Kadyrov's attempt to secure his family's future by appointing his relatively uneducated and inexperienced children to senior political positions suggests that even with access to advanced medical care, he cannot assume that he will have time to manage a slow and controlled transition. In personalist Islamic and machismo-exuding autocracies, an unplanned succession typically threatens not only the ruler's political legacy but also the safety, wealth, and status of his family. Post-Soviet examples illustrate the pattern: After Islam Karimov's death in Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev consolidated power and sidelined parts of the old network; in Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev steadily reduced his predecessor Nursultan Nazarbayev's residual influence. By contrast, where leaders prepared the ground for the hereditary succession, it has sometimes been successful, as in Turkmenistan (from Gurbanguly to Serdar Berdymukhamedov) or Azerbaijan (from Heydar to Ilham Aliyev). More often than not, especially when the leaders do not have sons to succeed them, the default outcome is not continuity for the ruler's family, but elite reconfiguration, in which successors secure power by dismantling competing centers of influence.

Kadyrov has little reason to believe that Chechnya would be an exception, unless, as in Turkmenistan or Azerbaijan, he can ensure it. This is difficult to do: His children are too young and inexperienced, while his associates are too potentially self-interested to be fully trusted. His closest allies (powerful security figures and potential candidates for replacement) may appear loyal while he is alive and controls resources, but their commitment to his family is far less certain.

The strategy of placing his children in control of key ministries can have only limited success. It does not automatically make them independent political actors: Beyond their lack of experience, they also lack personal authority, coercive backing, and the networks required to survive a succession struggle. In a crisis, they could be rapidly displaced by more seasoned siloviki or by a different Kremlin-backed replacement. Kadyrov has therefore supplemented this strategy with another move. To neutralize potential threats from his own associates, he has paired these appointments with family ties. He has married his sons and daughters to **the offspring of key figures** within his administration. This approach may strengthen short-term protection by raising the costs of betrayal and creating shared interests among elite households. However, it is better suited to ensuring personal security than guaranteeing dynastic rule. If Moscow decides to replace the leadership, or if internal elites see an opening, family ties alone are unlikely to prevent a redistribution of power.

Kadyrov's moves support two significant conclusions. First, they confirm that the regime views succession as an urgent, not abstract, problem. Second, they demonstrate the distrust that exists within the Chechen elite and between Kadyrov and the Kremlin. Kadyrov's attempts to neutralize potential threats to his family through the strategies discussed above increase the likelihood of elite friction. As often happens in dictatorships, attempts to ensure family rule can create long-lasting grievances that may trigger a **scramble for power among insiders**. Such competition could be further complicated by popular grievances accumulated over years of repression and fear. These grievances may remain latent while Kadyrov is alive, but they could surface during a transition, when the coercive apparatus is distracted, divided, or uncertain about its chain of command.

PATHWAY 4: REVOLT AGAINST THE REGIME



➤ **T**he final pathway considers the possibility of a renewed revolt against Russian rule, which could be driven either by local authorities or by a mobilized population. Though unlikely in the near term, this pathway cannot be dismissed. Chechnya has a long and well-documented **record of resistance** to external domination, and political order in the republic has historically been most vulnerable during moments of imperial weakness or systemic crisis in Russia. The key constraint today is not the absence of grievance, but the absence of a perceived opportunity.

WHAT MAKES REVOLT POSSIBLE

Since the Russian empire's conquest of Chechnya in the nineteenth century, the aspiration to regain freedom or, more precisely, to restore self-rule has remained persistent in the Chechen political imagination. Russia has since changed its state form four times under three names, moving from the empire to the Soviet Union and then to the post-Soviet Russian Federation, with the latter evolving after a brief pluralist experiment into an openly authoritarian system. For many Chechens, each of these iterations has been experienced not as legitimate governance, but as an externally imposed order that disregards local norms and inflicts collective punishment.

Two structural sources of alienation have recurred throughout this history. The first is legal and moral. Russian **legal institutions** were widely perceived as incompatible with local customary law (adat) and Islamic legal tradition (sharia), and therefore as inherently unjust. The second is historical trauma. Successive Russian regimes committed **mass violence** against the Chechen population. Imperial conquest and pacification, Soviet-era repression, culminating **in the 1944 deportation**, and the post-Soviet wars all inflicted enormous demographic loss and psychological trauma. While precise casualty estimates are contested, the collective memory of catastrophic loss is central to Chechen identity and helps explain the durability of **anti-colonial sentiment**.

Chechen resistance has also been shaped by a recurring political pattern: Revolts often emerge less as carefully planned projects of state building than as reactions to accumulated injustice and humiliation, when life under an imposed order becomes intolerable. One major exception was the early 1990s, when Chechen leaders attempted to pursue independence through legal and **political openings** created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, rather than through revolt. From the Chechen perspective, secession was asserted through the mechanisms available at the time; from Moscow's perspective, it was illegitimate, which provided a rationale for military intervention. The sense of betrayal—fed by traumatic expe-

periences such as deportation, as well as broken promises, legal manipulation, and the use of overwhelming force—remains a powerful mobilizing narrative and continues to fuel hostility toward Russian rule and toward Chechen elites who collaborate with it.

Finally, revolt remains possible because grievances have not disappeared under Kadyrov; they have been suppressed. The regime's coercive stability rests on fear, surveillance, and collective responsibility rather than on political consent. This creates latent volatility: If coercive capacity weakens during a succession crisis or a rupture in Moscow, suppressed grievances may surface rapidly.

WHAT MAKES REVOLT IMPROBABLE

Despite widespread resentment, most of the population is not currently prepared to risk another armed confrontation. Chechnya has not fully recovered from the wars of the 1990s and 2000s. The **mood inside the republic** is shaped by memories of demographic loss, physical exhaustion, psychological trauma, and the belief that Moscow still enjoys overwhelming coercive superiority. In other words, the limiting factor is not motivation but perceived feasibility.

Historically, the most decisive episodes of Chechen mobilization coincided with moments when Russia appeared weakened or distracted. The uprisings that followed imperial conquest in the 1860s, the revolutionary chaos of 1917 and the subsequent civil war, the upheavals triggered by early Soviet consolidation and collectivization, the insurgent activity during World War II, and, finally, the secession bid of 1991 all reflect Chechen efforts to exploit openings created by systemic instability. In each case, however, Moscow ultimately reasserted control, often through exemplary violence and mass repression, deepening long-term resentment but discouraging premature rebellion.

The deportation of the entire Chechen nation to Central Asia in 1944 remains a **foundational trauma**, one that continues to structure political memory alongside the more recent destruction of the post-Soviet wars. The wars of 1994–1996 and 1999–2009 were rooted in the same underlying demand: to live outside Russian sovereignty and within a political order perceived as just. In Chechen understanding, this aspiration is tied to the hope of preventing another trauma comparable to deportation. The brutality of the second post-Soviet war (1999–2009) **reinforced the lesson** that Russia is willing to violate agreements and escalate force to prevent Chechen secession. This experience intensified hatred toward Russia and Russians, but it also reinforced caution.

In the current environment, Kadyrov's system maintains a tight grip on society, and the Kremlin remains committed to preventing any renewed separatist project. Without a clear opening, which could potentially be created by a major Russian defeat in the war with Ukraine, a severe internal economic or political crisis in Moscow, or fragmentation of federal coercive institutions, a revolt is unlikely to be initiated from within Chechnya.

A further constraint is leadership. At present, there is neither an obvious organizer of resistance inside the republic nor a widely acceptable political figure outside it who could unite Chechens. This does not mean leadership cannot emerge.

Historically, leaders have sometimes appeared quickly when political conditions become favorable. Potential figures could come from three sources: defectors from the current elite who change course during a transition; long-standing opponents in exile with organizational capacity and media reach; or new actors inside Chechnya who rise during a crisis. But until a “ripe moment” is visible and a credible leadership coalition forms, rebellion remains a contingency rather than a near-term expectation.

Overall, the probability of revolt is best understood as conditional: low under continued Kremlin coherence and Kadyrov’s coercive control but potentially rising sharply if Moscow weakens and succession in Grozny produces fragmentation of the security apparatus or competing claims to legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

➤ **T**he analysis above suggests three overarching conclusions about Chechnya's near- to mid-term political future. First, the changes in Chechnya must be attached to the potential changes in Russia's leadership or regime structure. The former is more probable. Even if the current Russian system resembles a prolonged period of political stagnation, leadership turnover can still occur through biological factors, elite bargaining, or crisis-driven succession without necessarily producing democratization or institutional transformation. In the short term, the likelihood of both a full regime change and a smooth, managed transition remain uncertain; however, either pathway could produce the same immediate implication for Chechnya: renewed scrutiny of Grozny's governing arrangement and, potentially, a replacement of its leader.

Second, the current Chechen order is anchored less in institutions than in the personal and political "contract" between Putin and Kadyrov. Kremlin support for the Kadyrov family, both in its scale and durability, has been exceptional and uninterrupted for more than twenty years, especially since the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov in 2004. No other Russian regional head enjoys comparable latitude in rhetoric, coercive governance, and informal autonomy. This privileged status, combined with Kadyrov's public demonstration of loyalty, has helped sustain the tandem. Yet it has also produced resentment among parts of the Russian political class and makes Kadyrov a convenient symbol of the excesses of Putinism. For that reason, a post-Putin leadership—of any ideological color—may view the removal of Kadyrov as both politically useful and administratively necessary, even if Moscow continues to prioritize control over genuine normalization.

Third, the framework that keeps Chechnya inside the Russian Federation is likely to remain intact under most plausible scenarios. Russian elites (whether siloviki conservatives, technocratic successors, or even much of the liberal opposition) have consistently treated territorial integrity as non-negotiable. The barriers to secession are therefore not only legal but also political, coercive, and symbolic. The exceptions entail systemic breakdown: large-scale political violence, state fragmentation, or economic collapse severe enough to trigger a restructuring comparable to the late Soviet period. Historical precedents, such as the Russian Civil War (1918–1921) or the disintegration of the USSR, demonstrate that only profound crises at the center can create genuine openings for the peripheral exit of Chechnya. In the contemporary context, the war in Ukraine and its long-term consequences represent the most significant external shock that could weaken Moscow's capacity and cohesion; the direction and magnitude of that weakening remain uncertain, as are any opportunities for the Chechens.

Putting these points together yields a conditional forecast. Under continued Kremlin coherence, the most likely “post-Kadyrov” outcome is not independence or democratization but an attempt to preserve the current model of control in the republic by replacing the person at the top. This could be either a figure from Kadyrov’s siloviki circle or a more administratively palatable loyalist of Moscow. Kadyrov’s deteriorating health and his accelerated promotion of his children increase the probability of an unstable succession. Dynastic continuity remains difficult without firm Kremlin sponsorship and without elite unity inside Chechnya.

At the same time, the long-term structural contradiction remains unresolved: Russia simultaneously treats Chechnya as “its land” and views Chechens through entrenched xenophobia and securitized suspicion. Chechens, for their part, continue to resist assimilation, preserve distinct traditions, and carry a historical memory of violence that fuels resentment toward Russian rule and toward local collaborators. This mutual impasse, which is determined by the formal inclusion paired with social alienation and historical trauma, means that even if the current leadership arrangement survives in the near term, the underlying conflict remains unsettled. When Moscow weakens or Grozny’s coercive system fractures, latent grievances can quickly become political action. The critical question, therefore, is not whether Chechnya will remain quiet indefinitely, but what combination of crisis, succession, and opportunity could transform suppressed dissent into open confrontation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marat Iliysov is a Chechen scholar specializing in authoritarianism in Chechnya, Russia, and the wider Eurasia region. His research encompasses questions related to post-Soviet migrants, religious radicalization, and political, cultural, and demographic changes related to armed conflicts. He holds the position of visiting assistant professor at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. He joined the college after completing a year of research at the Global Academy at The George Washington University. Earlier, he served as a visiting assistant professor at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and worked as a researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before commencing his academic career, Iliysov was working in the nongovernmental sector promoting civil society, peace, and democracy in the Caucasus.

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