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Chechnya's Paradiplomacy 2000–2020: The Emergence and Evolution of External Relations of a Reincorporated Territory

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Abstract

From the year 2000 on, Chechen official international relations – called “paradiplomacy” – have centered around legitimacy-building, security cooperation and investment attraction, priorities set by the republic’s first official, pro-Russian president, Akhmat Kadyrov (in office 2000–2004). Kadyrov’s successors, Alu Alkhanov (2004–2007) and Ramzan Kadyrov (2007–to date) developed Grozny’s international engagements further, introducing new partners – such as China – and new dimensions to the external action – such as militarization. At each step, Grozny operated between full autonomy and collaboration with Moscow, involving itself in high-level diplomacy and furthering Moscow’s agenda abroad, primarily in the Middle East. In this article, I argue that Chechen paradiplomacy is an instrument for the inclusion of Chechnya into the governance structures of Russia’s federal order. The argument rests on two premises: Chechnya’s paradiplomacy is framed by the Kremlin’s proactive support and coordination, and Chechnya’s paradiplomacy is closely connected to the Kremlin’s security priorities. Since reincorporation, Chechen paradiplomacy has not been an addition to Russian federal relations but an intrinsic part of the post-2000 political arrangement between Grozny and Moscow. To empirically ground this argument, I trace the evolution of Chechen paradiplomacy across the three post-incorporation presidencies, ending in 2020.

Keywords: Chechnya; Russia; post-communist; ethnic federalism; foreign policy

Introduction

From 2015 on, the international relations of the Chechen Republic, a federal subject of the Russian Federation, have been brought to attention by their scope and influence in the Middle East. Today, Grozny is known to have deployed special forces in Syria, hold close contact with the leadership of the Gulf monarchies, and have a highly autonomous perspective on international affairs that occasionally clashes with Moscow. Indeed, Chechnya stands out as a region that has remained highly autonomous in spite of the centralizing trends in the Russian Federation. Because of this, Chechnya’s sub-state diplomacy (also called “paradiplomacy”; for a discussion of the concept, see Aguirre 1999) has been scrutinized by literature in the past (e.g., Cornago 1999). Yet, a comprehensive analysis of the transformations of Chechen paradiplomacy is missing from the literature, and, as I argue below, the Chechen case is potentially revealing of certain central dynamics of paradiplomacy in general.

How to understand the agency that Chechnya has had at the international stage following its de facto reincorporation into Russia? What has driven and enabled Grozny to have the international

role it currently has? The existing paradiplomacy literature has suggested a few different ways to understand the underlying political dynamics behind Grozny's external action. First, Chechen paradiplomacy may be seen as a way of conflict management. In this account, Moscow gave Chechnya paradiplomacy competencies to deactivate the local conflict, making Chechnya's case fall into the pattern of paradiplomacy as problem-solving (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014; Tavares 2016, 44). Second, Chechen paradiplomacy may be seen as part of the political bargain between the Kadyrov family and Putin to ensure Chechnya's loyalty to the Russian Federation. According to this version, Moscow gave the Kadyrov clan the opportunity to entrench their autocratic rule over Chechnya in exchange for their services as intermediaries with the Muslim world (Luzin 2018). Third, Chechen paradiplomacy can be seen as an outcome of center-region relations, bargaining, and the competition for federal funding. In this version, Grozny exploits Chechnya's unique culture and connections to the Middle East to demonstrate the republic's value to Moscow and, in turn, is rewarded with stability in federal funding (Makarychev and Yatsyk 2018, 917).

All these accounts overlap in their underlying assumption of paradiplomacy as the outcome of a win-win arrangement between Moscow and the pro-Russian Chechen leadership. Building on these interpretations, I trace the evolution of Chechen paradiplomacy and the ways it operationalizes Russian foreign policy. I proceed on the argument that Grozny's international engagements were enabled and encouraged by Moscow since the territorial reincorporation of Chechnya in 2000. In an attempt to answer the questions regarding the facilitating conditions for Chechen paradiplomacy, this article pursues two objectives, an empirical one and a conceptual one. First, I trace the evolution of Chechen paradiplomacy to evince the interaction between opportunity structures and Grozny's international agency in the 2000–2020 period. Second, on the basis of the preceding, I argue for the relevance of imposition in the creation of paradiplomacy institutions in newly incorporated regions. On the basis of established understandings of the role of leadership in paradiplomacy, I propose a periodization focused on the changing heads of the Chechen republic, namely Akhmat Kadyrov, Alu Alkhanov, and Ramzan Kadyrov. Because of my lack of access to Chechen officials, I rely on press reports and the existing literature to empirically ground my argument.

The article has two contributions to the literature. The reconstruction of Chechnya's paradiplomacy 2000–2020 adds value to our understanding of its transformations by drawing attention to the long-term trends in Chechnya's international relations. Then, by suggesting that Chechen paradiplomacy is a component of Russia's sovereign reassertion over Chechnya, I draw attention to paradiplomacy institutions and their role in keeping newly incorporated regions governable. This interpretation adds to our broader understanding of paradiplomacy as it further elaborates on the political dynamics of the normalization of paradiplomacy in general (Cornago 2010) and on the dynamics of territorial change in particular. In addition, as a secondary aim, this article adds to the challenge to the established notion that paradiplomacy is structurally bound to service provision ("low" politics) by exploring a case of militarized paradiplomacy.

Paradiplomacy and the Chechen Case

Paradiplomacy is the label given to the broad phenomenon of the official relations between sub-state territorial governments ("regions" for short) and international partners, such as foreign companies, governments, non-governmental organizations, and other institutions based abroad. Whilst in the past it was considered to be an atypical phenomenon limited to Western, federal democracies, today it is considered to be a "normal" phenomenon (Cornago 2010). This "normality" implies both expectations and prevalence in the world. Today, constituents and regional governments expect to have a right to carry out some form of international engagement, at a minimum for investment attraction. At most, sub-state regions can carry out a complex, rich, ambitious external action that includes cultural events, scientific exchange programs, trade and investment promotion, policy coordination, international events, among other activities, with foreign partners (Tavares 2016, 117–150). Regarding prevalence, there has been growing attention

to the phenomenon of paradiplomacy beyond Europe and North America, where this scholarship began. Indeed, from 2000 on, there has been a proliferation of studies bringing in evidence of paradiplomacy in Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East, among other parts of the world (Kuznetsov 2015, 41–42).

This literature has proceeded on the basis of case studies as analyzed through a well-established conceptual grid (Lecours 2002, 93). The scholarship offers a wealth of typologies and a growing number of explanatory frameworks (Kuznetsov 2015). A thorough analysis of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, yet a few contributions are important to highlight, as they offer the conceptual toolkit of the present study. Two pathbreaking works laid the conceptual basis for most of the literature on paradiplomacy. First, Ivo Duchacek's work of paradiplomacy sheds light on the ways to analyze the international activities of sub-state governments as they respond to internal and external pressures and opportunities (Duchacek 1991). New approaches would specify that paradiplomacy can be a form of problem-solving and capacity-building (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014) or pursue primarily political, economic, cultural, or border-oriented agendas (Kuznetsov 2015, 116). Second, Panayotis Soldatos's (1991) work on center-region relations offers a typology to conceptualize harmonious and disharmonious relations between center and region regarding international matters. In addition, Lecours (2002) adds a historical institutional outlook assessing the evolution of paradiplomacy; this perspective places the focus of analysis on the evolution of concrete institutions that govern, regulate, and articulate a region's international relations (2002, 97; see also Bursens and Deforche 2010). Moreover, the institutional framework compels the incorporation of a broader understanding of the context in which paradiplomacy is embedded, namely to include the transformations of the country's international relations and of the region's own institutions. Finally, I focus here on the leadership changes as a key driver in change in paradiplomacy. Paradiplomacy is important for governors and regional elites as they frequently use it to promote their own leadership and invest in an international image. Then, many sub-state governments are set up in a way that foreign relations are concentrated in the executive – meaning that paradiplomacy tends to be structurally “executive driven” (Thurer and MacLaren 2009; Tavares 2016, 41–42b; see Stremoukhov 2021). A focus on the executive power, pressures, and center-region relations are the main features of the conceptual grid used here to address the case of Chechnya.

The case of *official* (the one led by the pro-Russian leadership, as opposed to rebel leadership) Chechen paradiplomacy is revealing and worthwhile as a case study. First, the Chechen case challenges the established understandings of the relationship between paradiplomacy and what are considered the exclusive tools of statecraft. The idea of the exclusive realm of the state vis-à-vis paradiplomacy and regional governments was further elaborated upon by Bartmann (2006, 544). According to Bartmann, the state, as the legitimate participant of the international system, decides whether its constituent regional governments may act abroad and to what extent. Typically, this conditions paradiplomacy to act only at the level of “low politics,” as these international interactions primarily focus on service provision and do not interfere in the exclusive purview of the state (see Tavares 2016, 6–7). Yet a growing literature has demonstrated the existence of instances where paradiplomacy impacts the “high politics” of diplomacy, security, and defense (Cornago 1999; Morin and Poliquin 2016). For instance, Paquin presents (2004, 147–163) several ways in which paradiplomacy contributes to the security policy of states, listing regional bloc cohesion, participation in peace missions, and conflict management.

Paradiplomacy has been consistently present in the Russian Federation since 1991. During the 1990s, the decentralization of national politics and the relative power of regions over the federal center meant that regional governors had a large scope to act abroad autonomously. In turn, these regions were able to contribute to Russia's globalization (Makarychev 2000). The tide turned in 2000 with the beginning of Vladimir Putin's first term as president, and Russian regional politics began to gradually trend towards centralization and a diminution in the space for paradiplomacy. Some regions would remain especially active abroad, adapting to the changes in the distribution of

power in center-region relations, yet the overall trend in federal politics has been towards a concentration of power in Moscow (Renaldi 2019; Stremoukhov 2021; Arteev and Kentros Klyszcz 2021).

Chechnya's international relations have been described and scrutinized in the past from a variety of perspectives. To start, after the fall of Grozny in 2000, the non-official, rebel diplomacy has received attention from the literature (Akhmadov and Daniloff 2013). As Chechnya was reincorporated into Russia following the capture of Grozny in 2000, the topic of Chechnya's international relations became less pressing as a constitutive issue for regional security and Russia's state integrity. Another strand of scholarship on Chechnya's international relations focuses on the paradiplomacy of Grozny under Ramzan Kadyrov's leadership (2007–to date). This official, “pro-Russian” paradiplomacy has been analyzed primarily through its special role in Russia's overall international relations – namely as a bridge to the Middle East, with whom Chechnya has developed close relations (Hallbach 2018; Pietrasiak and Słowikowski 2018; Kosach 2019). Then, some studies analyze the international dimension of the Chechen conflict, focusing on the relevant, overarching geopolitical factors (Avioutskii 2005). Finally, Chechnya's connections to other countries have been considered within studies of North Caucasus broader international relations, such as with China (Babayan 2016).

This diverse scholarship approaches Chechnya's international relations from several perspectives, involving various conceptual frameworks and sources of empirical evidence. Yet Grozny's official paradiplomacy has been understudied in general, with change and continuity remaining unexplained. The presidencies of Akhmat Kadyrov and Alu Alkhanov are typically not contemplated at all or addressed only insofar as they connect to Ramzan Kadyrov's own activities abroad. A gap is thus left in our understanding of the transformations of Chechnya's official paradiplomacy and its post-2000 trajectory, which is the empirical contribution of this article.

Paradiplomacy, Governance, Territorial Acquisition, and the Creation of Chechnya's Institutions

In this article, I maintain the scope of “paradiplomacy” widely, incorporating the persistent, institutional elements of a region's international activities (*pace* Duran 2015, 21). Functionally, many external relations initiatives of sub-state entities can amount to Track Two diplomacy, such as when the region helps to maintain channels of communication between the parent state and another government (Jones 2015, 24). Much of Chechen paradiplomacy, especially during Ramzan Kadyrov's tenure, revolved around such functions. Yet, this overlap with Track Two diplomacy leaves out the fact that paradiplomacy takes place at the “antechamber” of sovereignty (Bartmann 2006). Namely, essential to the concept of paradiplomacy is the affirmation of political subjectivity of an entity that has many of the core features of a state – in the Weberian sense, territory, population, and law. Consequently, whilst both paradiplomacy and Track Two diplomacy contemplate *ad hoc* and permanent initiatives, paradiplomacy is based on the capacities that the region's governing institutions have. For instance, regions frequently have an executive-level institution with legal competencies for carrying out their external engagements. In the Chechen case, the creation of the (pro-Russian) Chechen Republic in 2000 involved not only Russia gaining control of the region's territory but also building governing institutions that would facilitate the governance of the region *as a Russian federal subject*. This has been a critical challenge for Moscow, one approached through the creation of governing institutions for Chechnya that differed from those of other federal subjects (Avioutskii 2005, 134; Mac-Glandières 2017, 206). That some of these institutions have competencies for external engagements is significant and places my analytical focus on both Chechen paradiplomatic initiatives and the Chechen institutions involved.

This conceptual arrangement could be applied to any case where the creation of paradiplomacy institutions happened in a top-down process involving territorial conquest or reunification. To deploy this concept on Chechen paradiplomacy, I start from the fact that Chechnya's institutions

were created in the context of the re-incorporation of Chechnya into the Russian state. In particular, Cornago's Foucauldian explanation for the normalization of paradiplomacy sheds light on the transformations of Chechen paradiplomacy. According to Cornago, top-down processes of globalization and regionalization – as well as bottom-up processes of center-region negotiation and local government mobilization – have led to paradiplomacy becoming prevalent throughout the planet (Cornago 2010). Chechnya's case is revealing of the underlying power dynamics involved in the process of normalization of paradiplomacy – namely, as a process meant to facilitate governance.

Chechnya's case is revealing as it is a case where political institutions were imposed by force on a region, including the institutions for paradiplomacy (Cornago 2010, 30). The authority for Grozny to carry out its own external affairs was given from the Russian state as part of Moscow's conflict management strategy in Chechnya. The close connection between Grozny's international activities, Russia's reassertion of sovereignty over Chechen territory, and the synergy between Grozny and Moscow on international affairs suggest that Chechen paradiplomacy is inherently connected to the emerging power structures in post-Communist Russia. This widened scope of Chechen official authority would persist beyond the immediate years after 2000 (see Mac-Glandières 2017, 209).

Regarding paradiplomacy specifically, its inclusion in the government structures imposed by Russia in Chechnya is revealing of the micro-dynamics of the normalization of paradiplomacy. Especially relevant to Cornago's framework of normalization is Moscow's encouragement and involvement of the pro-Russian Chechen leadership in international relations. Then, the international agenda of Chechnya was, from the start in 2000, connected to central elements of Russia's sovereign power and national security. As the description below points to, Chechen paradiplomacy was meant to tackle perceived threats to the Russian state – from within (radicalization caused by lack of investment) and from without (government-in-exile and the perceived threat of foreign intervention). Later on, as Chechen paradiplomacy expanded into high-level diplomacy with Middle Eastern governments, the focus went from direct threats to Russia to capacity building, with the notable development of a Chechen expeditionary force. Yet, this military paradiplomacy has been regarded by Moscow as an integral part of its strategic reassertion over the Middle East. This perception has kept Grozny's international agenda in close connection to Moscow's power politics. In sum, it is possible to make the hypothesis that, from 2000 on, Moscow set out broad parameters for Grozny's self-led diplomatic action, with said parameters designed to enhance the governance of Chechnya.

To ground this argument empirically, in the following, I describe the emergence of Chechen paradiplomacy and its evolution from 2000 on. I proceed by reconstructing the paradiplomacy of Akhmat Kadyrov and Alu Alkhanov in detail, to then offer a broader portrait of Ramzan Kadyrov's expansive external activities. This way, the article tackles its conceptual aim of arguing for the relevance of institutions for paradiplomacy and its empirical aim of offering an account of change and continuity in Chechen paradiplomacy. To maintain a focused analysis, I center my attention on analyzing official visits abroad, leaving other forms of external engagement to a secondary place. As the analysis shows further below, the emergence and evolution of Chechen paradiplomacy have been closely connected to the evolution of Moscow's statecraft in the Vladimir Putin era.

Chechnya's Paradiplomacy 2000–2020

Emergence and Early Trends: The Akhmat Kadyrov Period 2000–2004

The emergence of the official, pro-Russian Chechen paradiplomacy is embedded in the security juncture that surrounded the aftermath of the second Chechen war. In 1999, responding to a Chechen incursion into neighboring Dagestan, Moscow launched a military campaign known as the second Chechen war that ended with the effective control of Chechnya by the year 2000 (Seely 2005; Galeotti 2014). Upon recapturing Chechnya, the Russian government faced several challenges: the remaining insurgent forces, the Chechen “government in exile” that claimed to be the

legitimate government of Chechnya (Akhmadov and Daniloff 2013), and international condemnation from the war (Russell 2007, 162). To a great extent, these challenges were tackled within Chechnya. First, part of the secessionist leadership was co-opted; notably, Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov became the head of the pro-Russia Chechen administration in 2000. Akhmat Kadyrov was a significant figure among Chechnya's rebel leadership. In 1995, he was appointed by the Chechen rebel leadership Chief Mufti of Grozny and developed a large following within Chechnya. Russia's move to co-opt Akhmat Kadyrov is an instance of what Malejacq calls outsourcing security to a local warlord by Moscow (2020, 22). The Kremlin presented Akhmat Kadyrov as a "reformed separatist," a message that bolstered the claim that the war in Chechnya was not a war on Chechens but on terrorism (Souleimanov 2015, 102–104). Second, the enduring insurgency was countered by a heavy-handed security apparatus that drew its strength from effective incorporation of indigenous forces from co-opted Chechen political factions. These, the literature argues, are among the essential pillars for the endurance of the Kadyrov regime and the relative stability of Chechnya itself (Taylor 2007; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2016).

The international dimension was just as complex, necessitating proactive diplomacy to remedy the fallout from the war. Crucially, the Kremlin saw the presence of Arab fighters and international channels of funds and arms for the rebels as a threat (Polyakov 2001, 62–94; Avioutsikii 2005, 252; 261). Even worse, the Kremlin saw Russia's diminished reputation in the Muslim world as connected to emerging terrorist threats as many international terrorist organizations claimed the Chechen cause (Esposito 2003, 22). The threat was becoming tangible already next to Chechnya, as the risk that Dagestan would follow its neighbor and become another trouble spot was present at the time (Ware and Kisriev 1998). Russian diplomacy was deployed extensively to meet these challenges. First, the Kremlin rhetorically aligned with Washington on the "war on terror" by painting the Chechen rebels as part of the same international "jihadi" terrorist network to which Al Qaeda and the Taliban belong. This move was meant to place Russia's use of force within the accepted international norms on the use of force, and it had enough success to gain the implicit acquiescence of the West regarding its war on Chechnya (Russell 2007; Kentros Klyszcz 2019). This diplomatic move, whilst relatively successful, did not address the lack of legitimacy of the imposed authorities in Grozny in international eyes, especially among the Chechen diaspora and in the Middle East.

Akhmat Kadyrov's role in Moscow's diplomacy would become clear soon after the Russian capture of Grozny and his appointment as acting head of the administration of Chechnya in June 2000. Between Akhmat Kadyrov's appointment and his assassination in May 2004, Akhmat Kadyrov went on official visits abroad a number of times, among others to Egypt, Germany, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Switzerland, and the United States. In these visits, he met with government officials, international organizations, NGOs, religious authorities, and representatives of diaspora organizations. In the following, I recount these visits in light of their significance to Moscow's security and diplomacy as described above. Akhmat Kadyrov's visits abroad generally pursued two objectives: (1) advocating for the legitimacy of his administration against the claims of the rebel government-in-exile and (2) attracting funding for Chechnya's post-war reconstruction. Regarding the former, we can find that purpose in all his visits abroad: in September 2001, Kadyrov visited Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria to advocate against the Chechen rebel government-in-exile. In particular, he asked the governments of these countries to close down the existing channels of material support for the Chechen rebels present in their countries. In the process, he aimed at building good relations with some of the Middle East states that were previously critical of Moscow's Chechnya military campaign (Kommersant 2001). Kadyrov would go on to advocate for his government and against the rebel claims to legitimacy in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in November 2001 (Izvestia 2001), in Berlin in February 2002, at the United Nations in September 2003 (Kommersant 2003), at the UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva in October 2003 (UNHR 2003), at the 10th meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Malaysia in October 2003, and in Saudi Arabia in January 2004. The OIC meeting stands out as an example of the coordination between Kadyrov and the Kremlin; it was in

that meeting that Putin announced Russia's intention to join the OIC. The move in general, and the inclusion of Kadyrov in Putin's delegation in particular, was meant to dissuade the accusations of Islamophobia in Russia and as a driver of the second Chechen campaign (Kosach 2019, 5–7). The visit to the US in 2003 was also planned with a degree of cooperation with the Kremlin (RIA 2003a). Some of these visits had a public diplomacy component, as Kadyrov met with NGOs in Berlin in his 2002 visit (DW 2002) and visited the Ground Zero site in New York accompanied by Russian and US journalists (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta* 2003); further, part of the 2004 Saudi Arabia visit involved film screenings to convince the Saudi leadership and public of the illegitimacy of the Chechen rebel forces (Kommersant 2004). The topics of humanitarian aid and reconstruction were part of the discussions and agendas pursued by Kadyrov in most of these visits as well. Even though Russia was experiencing rapid economic growth in the 2000s, its ability and willingness to fully finance Chechnya's reconstruction was limited. Thus, states, NGOs, diaspora communities, and international organizations were all courted by the Kremlin and Kadyrov for aid and reconstruction funds. For instance, part of the purpose of his September 2001 Middle East tour was to gain support among the Chechen diaspora abroad and to mobilize diaspora and governments to send humanitarian help to Chechnya. Illustrative of the challenges Grozny found in these outreach efforts at the time was that Kadyrov failed to meet with the Jordanian Chechen diaspora on that tour (Kommersant 2001). A subsequent tour to the Middle East in 2003 would again aim at improving the image of the North Caucasus in a number of countries of the region. In Jordan, the objective was, in Kadyrov's words, "showing the Jordanians the truth about the situation in Chechnya" (RIA 2003b), as it was in Libya. In that country, Kadyrov even met with President Muammar Gaddafi (Kommersant 2003a). The 2001 visit to Strasbourg and the 2003 visit to the UN also included the topic of humanitarian aid, as Kadyrov advocated for international partners to commit to more aid for Chechnya's reconstruction (Izvestia 2001).

Throughout many of these visits, especially those concerning Muslim-majority states and the OIC, the external engagement discourse adopted by Kadyrov acquired a religious dimension. As mentioned above, the Kremlin saw the discourse of "Russia's war on Islam" as potentially threatening, so the religious credentials of Kadyrov were at the forefront of his paradiplomacy. The January 2004 visit to Saudi Arabia – Kadyrov's first trip abroad after his election as president of Chechnya – is illustrative of how Chechen paradiplomacy at the time combined religious discourse, the pursuit of legitimacy, and the attraction of reconstruction funds. In Kadyrov's words, the purpose of that visit was to tell the "Muslim" public "where is politics and where is banditism" (Kommersant 2004). In a press conference, Kadyrov emphasized that his journey to Saudi Arabia demonstrated that the claims by the *maskhadovtsy*¹ about Kadyrov's supposed lack of faith were false (Kommersant 2004a); to emphasize his devotion, Kadyrov carried out the "small hajj" pilgrimage during his visit. The visit also addressed investment as Kadyrov met with the Saudi business community and the president of the Islamic Development Bank (Kommersant 2004b). This visit stands out as Kadyrov was then the head of the delegation – rather than merely a member as he was in the 2003 US visit. Due to a still adverse security situation, Saudi investments would not be forthcoming in the short term.

Finally, the government of Akhmat Kadyrov also saw the institutionalization of Chechen paradiplomacy. In the spring of 2000, a press and communications committee was created in the provisional (pro-Russian) government, to be upgraded into a ministry in August of that year. It was reorganized in 2001, and in 2003 it was merged with the Ministry of the Chechen Republic for Ethnic Affairs, Regional Policy and Foreign Relations.² The Ministry acknowledges that the context of its creation was the war and counter-insurgency campaign, namely, with the mission to advocate for the legitimacy of the (pro-Russian) Chechen government (Ministerstvo n.d.).

Chechen Paradiplomacy under Alu Alkhanov 2004–2007

Between the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov by the Chechen Islamist rebels in May 2004 and the rise of his son Ramzan Kadyrov as Head of Chechnya in February 2007, Chechnya was governed by acting president Alu Alkhanov, Chechnya's minister of interior. Like Akhmat Kadyrov, Alkhanov's rise to the presidency was possible thanks to Kremlin support, both in the aftermath of Kadyrov's assassination and in the rigged August 2004 election. Alkhanov's presidency was marred by the still intense conflict with the Chechen rebels and the slow pace of reconstruction. Then, the September 2004 Beslan school siege brought renewed federal attention to the North Caucasus and increased the Kremlin's drive to centralize power in the federation. Internal power competition also undermined Alkhanov's position from the very start. Alkhanov's deputy prime minister and Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, would compete with him for the control of Chechnya's government. In fact, some describe Alkhanov's presidency as powerless, given the extent to which Chechnya's institutions were *de facto* under Kadyrov's control, especially the Chechen security forces (Vatchagaev 2006). In February 2007, Alkhanov stepped down in a move widely attributed to Kadyrov's successful maneuvering in intra-Chechen politics and in his relationship with the Kremlin. Particularly important was Putin's personal rapport with Kadyrov father and later with Kadyrov son. Chechnya's paradiplomacy under Alkhanov showed the endurance of his predecessor's agenda but also new innovations in Chechen paradiplomacy.

The changing fortunes of the Chechen insurgency and changes in the international environment would also impact Chechen paradiplomacy during Alkhanov's tenure. In spite of the persistent low-intensity fight and the Beslan attack, the Chechen insurgency entered a period of decline during Alkhanov's tenure. In 2004, the conflict "stagnated" with the parties locked into a confrontational logic (Baev 2004). By 2007, the insurgency reconstituted around Doku Umarov's "Caucasus Emirate" organization, abolishing the separatist project of the past decade and a half. Then, the assassination of rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov in March 2005 and his commander Shamil Basayev in October 2005 marked the beginning of the end for the low-intensity war of the second Chechen war (Galeotti 2014, 79). From then on, the consolidation of pro-Russian rule in Chechnya was seen as inevitable, which was the message that Alkhanov's paradiplomacy was meant to convey abroad (Jamestown 2004). Nevertheless, instability in Chechnya would endure throughout the rest of the 2000 decade, hindering large-scale Russian private investment and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Yet the international dimension of the Chechen conflict would continue to improve in the eyes of the Kremlin. Crucially, foreign state support for the Chechen insurgency was becoming a less acute threat in Russia's eyes. As the OIC granted Russia observer status in 2005 and Western states remained inconsequential in their criticisms about human rights violations in Chechnya, the need for proactive diplomacy diminished. The only exception was the break with Washington that happened in 2004 when the US adopted a perspective on Chechnya that distinguished radical and moderate Chechen rebels. This perspective, coupled with the 2003 Iraq invasion, renewed Moscow's sense of insecurity in the Caucasus. This time, however, the perceived threat was no longer about secessionism but about US influence in the post-Soviet space (Williams 2004, 206–207).

These changing domestic and international circumstances had an impact in the scope and character of Chechen paradiplomacy. Similar to his predecessor, Alkhanov's paradiplomacy was harmonious with Moscow's foreign policy, with many visits abroad being planned in coordination with and with support from Moscow. Also, like Akhmat Kadyrov, Alkhanov's few visits abroad focused on funding Chechnya's reconstruction, consolidating relations with certain Middle Eastern states, and advocating for the legitimacy of his government in front of international audiences. The only trend under Akhmat Kadyrov that Alkhanov paused was the official, public contact with Gaddafi. Then, some ongoing trends would change; for example, Western engagements were becoming less relevant compared with the Middle East. Three tours abroad are particularly revealing of these trends: Alkhanov's Middle East tour in 2004, his visit to PACE in 2004, and his visit to China in 2006. Shortly after the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov, a follow-up Middle

East tour in Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia by Alkhanov in September 2004 reaffirmed Chechnya's Middle East paradiplomacy. The main message, as before, was aimed against the rebels' claims to legitimacy. The tour also aimed at improving the still negative image of the Chechen government in front of the diaspora. Regarding the Jordanian Chechen diaspora, there is no evidence that Alkhanov was substantially more successful than his predecessor in establishing himself as legitimate in their eyes (Jamestown 2004). In October 2004, Alkhanov visited PACE as a member of the Russian delegation. His message there centered on the renewal of the Chechen economy, reconstruction and the return of refugees. This message was meant to convey to the members of the Assembly the determination of Chechen and federal authorities to improve Chechens' lives. Also, he dismissed the possibility of dialogue with the remaining rebels as advocated by some members of the Assembly; as mentioned above, Grozny and Moscow pushed the line that the remaining insurgents numbered in the hundreds. In spite of these attempts at improving the image of Chechnya's official authorities, PACE voted in favor of condemning Russia's human rights violations in Chechnya (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2004). Finally, in October 2006, Alkhanov headed a delegation to Zhejiang province, China, primarily with an economic agenda. During his stay, he extolled the growing stability of the republic, promoted business contacts, invited investment, and signed a bilateral cooperation agreement with the governor of Zhejiang (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2006). The China Development Bank would finance some of the promised investments into Chechnya, making China the first foreign country to invest in Chechnya's economy (*Moscow Times* 2006). From that moment on, China would rise in prominence in Chechnya's trade and investment (Babayan 2016, 6). Finally, the institutionalization of paradiplomacy in Chechnya would plateau under Alkhanov's brief tenure. During his administration, the Ministry of the Chechen Republic for National Policy, Information and External Relations was reorganized once in 2005. The Ministry placed a greater emphasis on internal matters, with the external connections of Chechnya featuring less prominently in its mission (Stolitsa Plyus 2005; Stolitsa Plyus 2005a). Yet, it would be under Alkhanov that the new concept of nationalities' policy – which contemplates external relations – would be created, to be approved by his successor later on (see below).

An important trend outside of Alkhanov's paradiplomacy was the diversification of means for Chechen external relations. Two in particular stand out in hindsight: the militarization of Chechen external relations and the rise in prominence of the Kadyrov Foundation as an arm of Chechen external relations policy. Regarding the former, during Alkhanov's period, Chechen forces would become *officially* involved in Middle Eastern affairs. In October 2006, Russia's Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov mentioned that Chechen forces would join the Russian peacekeeping mission to Lebanon to protect a military engineer battalion operating there (Lenta 2006). The Chechen forces were considered by Moscow to be particularly suitable for deployment in the Middle East, given their experience and Muslim background. In addition, the improving security situation in Chechnya encouraged the Russian military to divert some resources from the Caucasus to other missions (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2006a). As the security forces were under Ramzan Kadyrov's control, it is possible that this decision involved him to at least some extent and that it was meant as a show of loyalty to Moscow (McGregor 2006). The creation of the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation in June 2004 would also have repercussions for Chechnya's international relations, especially during Ramzan Kadyrov's presidency. A lavishly funded and opaque NGO, the Kadyrov Foundation would promote Chechnya abroad through charitable actions, frequently through actions with religious symbolism. Oil wealth and a parallel tax system are credited as the sources of funding for this organization (RFERL 2015; Halbach 2018).

Alkhanov, as weakened as his position was because of Ramzan Kadyrov's *de facto* power and growing influence in Chechnya, was still the legitimate international face of Chechnya's government. Consequently, he represented Chechnya abroad in his few official visits outside of Russia, albeit with an agenda broadly set by his predecessor. Further, this agenda remained harmonious with Moscow's own foreign policy. In this sense, Alkhanov frequently connected Chechnya's paradiplomacy to Russia's foreign policy: "We would like to find common ground on many issues,

especially in the field of business, economy, education, culture, religion, and this, in our opinion, could be facilitated by the simplification of the visa regime between Jordan and Russia,” Alkhanov said of his visit to Jordan (Belgorodskaja pravda 2004). As the economic fortune of Russia improved and Chechen reconstruction slowly went underway, the emphasis of Chechnya’s paradiplomacy shifted from aid to investment attraction, with early investments into Chechnya coming from China. In spite of his influence in the republic, Ramzan Kadyrov made no similar international visits as deputy prime minister. Yet, by October 2006, it was clear that he would succeed Alkhanov and become president of Chechnya (*Courrier International* 2006).

Chechen Paradiplomacy under Ramzan Kadyrov 2007–2020: From the “War on Terror” to Confrontation with the West

Under Kadyrov, Chechnya’s international relations have grown in scope and importance, facilitated by a good disposition of the federal center and the further incorporation of Chechen paradiplomacy in the country’s foreign policy. In spite of the centralizing trends in the Russian Federation, Grozny was able to enhance its autonomy partly thanks to the Russian army withdrawal in 2009 (Souleimanov 2015, 102–104) and the fact that Putin considered Kadyrov to be an essential asset, both in the North Caucasus and abroad. The esteem of the Kremlin persisted even during Medvedev’s presidency (Black 2015, 53; Falkowski 2015, 26–33). Kadyrov depends on Putin too, namely for federal transfers and regime security (Souleimanov and Jasutis 2016). Then, since 2007, Russia’s confrontational stance towards the West made Grozny’s contacts with China and the Middle East more valuable, inducing Moscow to support their development. Simultaneously, the 2008 war with Georgia, the 2014 Sochi Olympics, the conflict in Ukraine, and the 2015 Syria campaign all made Russia’s southern flank even more sensitive for Moscow, bringing more attention to Chechnya’s regional role. Finally, from (at least) 2014 on, Moscow would increase the militarization of its foreign policy, in turn relying more on private military companies for plausible deniability in its power projection. Kadyrov – insisting on his loyalty to Moscow and his ability to quell the Chechen insurgency – also militarized Chechnya’s external relations, with Moscow’s support. In the following, I offer an overview based around the main features of Chechnya’s paradiplomacy under Ramzan Kadyrov, focusing on change and continuity from his predecessors’ times.

By 2007, paradiplomacy in the Russian Federation had changed extensively from the 1990s. Notably, the space for governors to act in disharmonious ways with the federal center had narrowed significantly (Renaldi 2019). From then on, paradiplomacy in Russia would diminish in intensity overall and progressively be driven by federal policy to focus on economic matters, trade, and investment attraction (Stremoukhov 2021). And yet, the importance of external engagements was clear from the start of the Ramzan Kadyrov presidency. The pace of his international activities was intense, meeting investors and making his first official visit abroad in the weeks following his investiture (RIA 2007; *Vesti Respubliki* 2007b). Then, the institutionalization of external relations was clear from early on. The first decree issued by Ramzan Kadyrov as President on April 9, 2007, was “On the Concept of the State National Policy of the Chechen Republic,”³ which tasked the Ministry of the Chechen Republic for National Policy, Press and Information with a new policy on nationalities, including on international connections. Regarding external engagements, the ministry was tasked with handling the external relations of the Chechen Republic on matters of trade, science, culture, sports, and partnerships with governments, investors, and the diaspora (*Vesti Respubliki* 2007).

The geographic scope of official Chechen paradiplomacy has remained consistent in the Ramzan Kadyrov era, carrying its broad contours from his predecessors. Like Alkhanov, Kadyrov focused his official international activities on the Middle East, with Europe being mostly relegated to the target of covert operations. Russia’s own confrontational stance towards the West would set the stage for Kadyrov’s position towards Europe, yet this was not the case at the very start of his

presidency. As evidence of a modicum of good will, the European Union allocated 20 million euros for the North Caucasus region, primarily targeting Chechnya and Ingushetia, under the circumstances of consolidating stability in Chechnya in 2007 (Black 2015, 50). Nevertheless, Kadyrov's brutal rule would quickly erode Western interest in investment in Chechnya. In 2014, Kadyrov was sanctioned by the EU over his support of the Russian annexation of Crimea (Reuters 2014). Relations would sink further in 2017 following reports of widespread persecution against LGBT+ minorities in Chechnya that prompted international outcry as well as condemnation from the UN (*Novaya Gazeta* 2017). In fact, Kadyrov would become the target of further sanctions from the US to a great extent as a response to his LGBT+ persecution campaign (NBC 2017). Since then, Kadyrov has disparaged the West, calling it a threat against Russia (RT 2017). France has also stood out as a target, particularly in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks (RT 2015a). The lull in diplomatic engagements has not prevented some *official* Chechen external activities from continuing in Europe. Evidence of this is the announcement of a diaspora outreach agency that contemplates Europe in its scope. This has been referred to as an instrument to launder the reputation of Kadyrov's covert operations in Europe (Jamestown 2020). While relations with Europe declined, relations with China improved, primarily in trade and investment, continuing the trend initiated under Alkhanov. Until 2010, China played a small role in Chechnya's commerce, to then become one of the most important countries for Chechnya's trade. Then, the Alkhanov-era economic partnership with Zhejiang province was renewed and enhanced further in 2013 (Babayan 2016, 5–6). Finally, in 2017, Chechnya opened its strategic oil extraction sector to foreign investment, specifically from China (Regnum 2017).

The importance of the Middle East for Chechnya's external engagement under Kadyrov has been unparalleled, with engagements growing in intensity at a brisk pace from 2007 on. Illustrative of this turn to the Middle East was the "Eastern Alternative" project. Days after Kadyrov became president, the Chechen government began to plan to systematically court investment from the Middle East as an alternative to Western investors (*Vesti Respubliki* 2007a). Thus, unlike Alkhanov, Ramzan Kadyrov has sustained a highly engaged partnership with the Middle East throughout his tenure. Shortly after becoming president in August 2007, Kadyrov visited Saudi Arabia and met with King Abdullah (RIA 2007); since then, Kadyrov would have a high-level visit or tour to the Middle East at least once every year, if not more (Luzin 2018). There has also been a greater degree of institutionalization, with Kadyrov creating a special representative to the Middle East soon after taking office. He would also have special envoys active in sensitive parts of the region, as was done in Libya (Kommersant 2019; Hauer 2020). These engagements follow the trends set by Akhmat Kadyrov, such as meeting with the same heads of state in the Gulf monarchies and reviving public connections with Muammar Gaddafi (Lenta 2008; Grozny Inform 2010). These diplomatic relations have assisted Moscow in keeping open communication channels with the heads of state of the region (Luzin 2018). At the same time, Kadyrov benefits from these high-level encounters to raise his personal profile inside and outside Russia. Namely, his legitimacy is confirmed from outside and his influence grows among Russia's and Central Asia's Muslims, especially among the Vainakh diaspora (Laruelle 2017; Markedonov 2017). In addition, these contacts reportedly help Chechnya gain foreign investment and establish business connections (BBC 2018; Luzin 2018). While all Gulf monarchies have expressed interest and invested in Chechnya, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands out as an engaged investor. Namely, the UAE sees investment in Chechnya as a way to build rapport with Chechnya, given the latter's involvement in those conflicts seen as strategic by the UAE (Karasik 2017; *National* 2018). The attraction of foreign investment has also required Moscow's initiative; by the mid-2010s Moscow was actively pursuing its Middle Eastern partners to invest in the North Caucasus (Blank 2016). These diplomatic maneuvers have been successful – although not without setbacks, such as the brief 2016 rift in diplomatic relations with Riyadh over Kadyrov's condemnation of Wahhabism (Jamestown 2016).

Kadyrov's Middle East paradiplomacy, like his father's, relies to an extent on a discourse of religious kinship. Kadyrov has promoted a national discourse that portrays Chechnya as "naturally"

Islamic and himself as a pious believer (Avedissian 2016). Externally, this policy has been operationalized in several ways. Chechnya's place in world Islam has been articulated by hosting major international conferences of Islamic scholars, sponsoring the building of mosques abroad, engaging religious authorities in foreign states, and cultivating the image of a defender of Islam against the West and against the Islamic State organization (ISIS). The religious discourse may also be shaping Grozny's choices in developing partnerships abroad; the relationship with the Palestinian Authority stands out as it substantiates and operationalizes Chechnya's religious paradiplomacy discourse. Indeed, trade and diaspora connections are not substantive with the Palestinian territories, yet relations between Mahmoud Abbas and Kadyrov have been close since 2008. Emblematic of their rapport was Kadyrov being awarded the Star of Jerusalem Order to the service of Palestine in 2019 (Caucasian Knot 2008; RIA 2019). Kadyrov often embraces the cause of Palestine in public declarations, most recently speaking against the 2020 US Middle East peace plan for the region (Laruelle 2017, 23; Gazeta 2020). Finally, religious discourse sometimes directly facilitates other external action goals. For instance, in 2008, the Mufti of Chechnya assisted a major Islamic conference in Libya, where he conveyed the official narrative of the state of Chechnya at the time against the competing rebel narratives (Grozny Inform 2008). Then, the Kadyrov Foundation contributes to Chechnya's image abroad frequently with initiatives that feature a religious tone, such as building and restoring mosques abroad. The foundation has also sent aid to Myanmar and Somalia (RFERL 2016; Hauer 2018; RT 2018).

Beyond the discourse on Islam, it is the convergence in security interests between Chechnya, Russia, and certain Middle Eastern countries – the Gulf monarchies above all – that has driven Grozny's diplomacy in that region. Chief among these interests is the fight against international terrorist networks, starting with those connected to the Caucasus Emirate and, later, those to ISIS. Grozny's interest in developing capabilities and partnerships for military paradiplomacy has been partly driven by the enduring threat of Russian-speaking fighters operating outside of or returning to the North Caucasus. To meet this challenge, Chechnya's external action would gradually militarize, gaining diplomatic clout by participating in expeditionary campaigns in Lebanon – during Alkhanov's period – and in Syria. In terms of cooperation, arms sales and international training are the main features of this military paradiplomacy (Hauer 2019). Thanks to lavish federal transfers and the oil wealth of Chechnya, Kadyrov has been able to fund a Chechen military force and a "spetsnaz academy" for Chechen and international teams. This academy would become capable of training foreign specialists from 2019 on, although those ambitions were announced as early as 2016 (RT 2016; Hauer 2018a). Due to the covert nature of many elements of Chechen external action, it is hard to establish a clear timeline of the militarization of Chechnya's paradiplomacy under Kadyrov beyond the Syrian war. The watershed moment was in 2014 when Chechen troops reportedly joined Russian operations in Ukraine, namely to fight the pro-Ukrainian Chechen battalions (Luzin 2018; Galeotti 2019, 55). While Chechen involvement became evident later on, much remains to be known about the scope and timing of the Chechen operation in Syria. In 2014, Kadyrov announced the creation of a Chechen special security unit meant to fight terrorism both in the North Caucasus and beyond. The potential threat of fighters coming to Russia was given as the rationale for the creation of this unit (MEMO 2014). In October 2015, shortly after Russia's air campaign in Syria began, Kadyrov asked Putin to deploy Chechen fighters in Syria to fight ISIS (RT 2015). In October 2015, Kadyrov said that no Chechen forces were operating in Syria and that he would be ready to send special forces were Putin to request it (Reuters 2016). By 2016, it became known that Chechen forces were officially on the ground in Syria. The number of Chechen forces deployed officially as "military police" was reportedly no more than 500, with an additional 300–400 Ingush forces present (Hauer 2017).

Chechnya's expansive external relations have been primarily harmonious with the Kremlin's foreign policy. Kadyrov's cultivated public image has always been that of Putin's loyal "soldier," yet occasionally disagreements arise. The one incident that stands out is the 2017 spat over the Myanmar Rohingya crisis. During a large rally that took place on September 4, 2017, Kadyrov

openly criticized the Kremlin for inaction over the Rohingya plight (France24 2017). For Kadyrov, the move was meant to position him as a world figure in Islam (*Wall Street Journal* 2017). Whilst it did not sour center-regions relations for good, the incident illustrated the wide scope of freedom afforded to Grozny in internal and external matters (Markedonov 2017).

Conclusions

The Chechen case problematizes the distinction between internal and external politics. It also highlights the importance of top-down influence on a region in shaping the emergence and evolution of its paradiplomacy. The creation of Chechnya's paradiplomacy institutions reflects Russia's imperatives in the Chechen conflict, especially since the *de facto* incorporation of the breakaway territory in 2000. The account presented above shows continuity and change in Chechnya's international relations as they developed for two decades. Unlike the often unharmonious paradiplomacy that featured among many constituents of the Russian Federation in the 1990s, Grozny's paradiplomacy since 2000 was mostly in harmony with the Kremlin. Chechen paradiplomacy also featured a rich discursive and thematic scope. Further, unlike the broader trends in the federation post-2006, Chechen paradiplomacy remained intensive and maintained a broad scope of action. Adverse security and diplomatic junctures prompted Moscow to give Grozny extensive external autonomy unlike any other Russian region, in spite of the risk of disharmony in external matters. While frequently proceeding with Moscow's encouragement and direction, Chechnya's external relations have operated in a self-led manner, tightly directed by the head of the republic.

Chechnya's case is revealing because of its extreme conditions (e.g., war, extensive autonomy in a federal framework), yet it is also indicative of a more general implicit condition underlying the normalization of paradiplomacy. Namely, Chechnya shows how sovereign state interests and sub-state diplomatic action meet. Central to this argument is the fact that Chechnya, like other sub-state entities, depends on some measure of state approval for carrying out its international activities. At the same time, however, the Russian state saw in the encouragement of Chechen paradiplomacy a legitimate instrument for its own strategic interests outside and inside the country. Instead of emerging from bottom-up pressures, Chechen paradiplomacy is an institution that was grafted onto the pro-Russian government by Moscow to pursue – however autonomously – an external agenda that facilitates Russia's governance of Chechnya. Thus, paradiplomacy neatly aligns with the state's goals regarding external interactions *and* internal governance.

Regarding the external dimension, Chechnya's paradiplomacy contributes to Russia's relations to the Middle East in numerous and essential ways. The circumstances of the emergence of this agenda (Moscow's assertion of sovereignty over Chechnya and the building of a pro-Moscow arrangement in Chechen politics), the persistence of this agenda beyond those circumstances (the "defeat" of the insurgency and of the "NATO intervention"), and the importance of the agenda (ensuring Russian sovereignty, supporting its Middle East strategy) suggest that Chechen paradiplomacy has had a critical role in the Russian governance of Chechnya. In other words, Chechen paradiplomacy is a persistent institution that supports Moscow's governance of Chechnya itself, both asserting its sovereignty over its territory, bolstering its claims to legitimacy, and even supporting its economic plans. To summarize the argument: Moscow pursued the creation of Chechnya's self-led, highly-personalistic paradiplomacy, which in turn was meant to assist Moscow's security imperatives in the context of the Chechen conflict.

The implications of this case study for the field of paradiplomacy is that it broadens the understanding of paradiplomacy, pointing to a central paradox in this phenomenon. The Chechen case suggests that paradiplomacy can be regarded by central governments as a mechanism for affirming their control of their constituent regions by, in fact, giving up a portion of the expected monopoly of external relations, even in the military sphere. In this light, the case of Chechnya further adds evidence of the blur between paradiplomacy and the exclusive functions of the state in

diplomacy and security matters. This points to the relevance of institutions in cases of top-down creation of paradiplomacy, which is shown by describing the creation of Chechnya's official external relations, their overlap with Russia's foreign and security policy, and their institutionalization. The implications for the understanding of the case of Chechen paradiplomacy are more straightforward: first, Chechen paradiplomacy has remained mostly consistent in spite of changes of leadership; and second, Chechen paradiplomacy is neither a supplement to Russian foreign policy nor an outgrowth of the Kadyrov regime. Chechen paradiplomacy is an integral component of the post-war institutional arrangement that renders Chechnya governable by the Russian Federation.

Acknowledgements. My sincere gratitude to Prof. Andrey Makarychev (University of Tartu), Dr. Sia Spiliopoulou-Åkermark (Ålands Fredsinstitut), Susann Simolin (Ålands Fredsinstitut), and Prof. Maria Ackren (University of Greenland) for their comments on this manuscript. A previous version of this text was presented at the international workshop "Beyond Hybridity: New Concepts for Making Sense of Russia's Regime and International Politics," held on November 15, 2019, at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki (participation funded by the British International Studies Association). The resources offered to me as Associate Researcher of the Virtual Open Research Laboratory of the Russian, East European and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois also helped this research. Finally, a thank you to my wife, Qiaoyun Peng, for her proofreading.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 A way to refer to the Chechen rebels and their organizations, yet one that emphasizes their loyalty to Aslan Maskhadov, leader of the rebel government of Chechnya until his assassination in 2005.
- 2 There is a dearth of information on this ministry. The successive ministries handling the international relations of Chechnya emphasize the legacy of continuity from the communication bodies and not the Ethnic Affairs Ministry (Ministerstvo n.d.).
- 3 О Концепции государственной национальной политики Чеченской Республики.

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