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Outlook: Chechnya and Terrorism, Putin and Kadyrov

A Conversation with Julie Wilhelmsen

Interviewed by Maia Brown-Jackson

Fletcher Security Review: In this political environment, people seem particularly aware of issues regarding terrorism and internal conflict but for many people, the conflict between Russia and Chechnya is more a thing of the past. Your work illustrates that these issues are still alive and well. Can you give a brief overview of the social and political history between Russia and Chechnya?

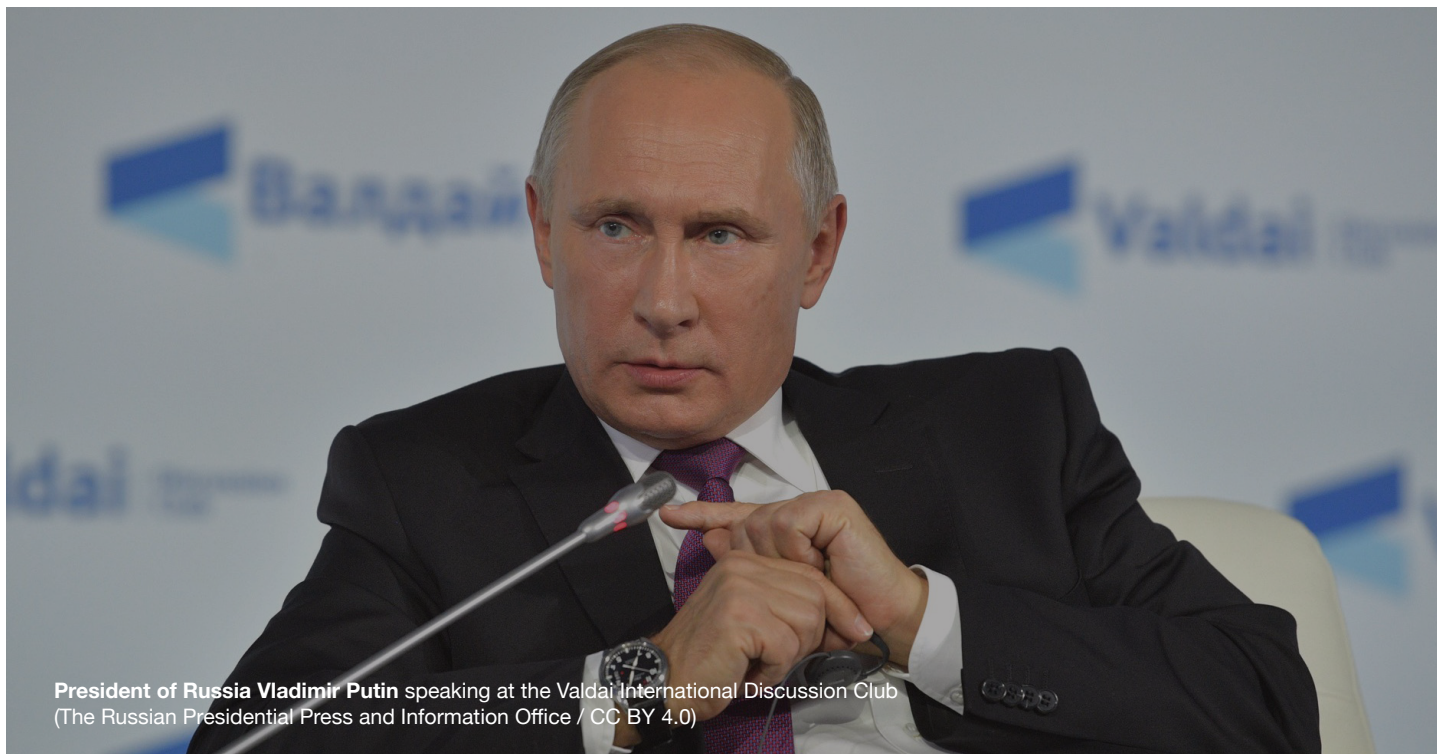
Julie Wilhelmsen: Chechnya was colonized by the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. There was a lot of resistance from the many different peoples of the northern Caucasus, and the Chechen story emphasizes that they have this urge for independence. These are mostly mountain people who adhere to Islam. When these peoples and territories became part of the Soviet Union, their attempts at resisting were subdued. The next tragic memory in the history of Chechen-Russian relations is the deportation of the Chechens and the Ingush. This was a total cleansing, where the people were transported out in wagons usually used for cattle, and Chechen names were eradicated, even from grave stones. This acted as a sort of mobilizing memory for Chechen resistance ever after. This was during Stalin's time. The claim was that the Chechens had collaborated with the Nazis and had to be deported. In the official Soviet rhetoric they were branded as terrorists.

During the glasnost period, when people were able to start writing and remembering, Chechens started to recollect everything that had happened to them and their families. Despite returning, there was no official public process to recognize what the Chechens had been through. During the glasnost period in the late 1980s, all these memories, all these stories, could appear in the press. This was a core point of mobilization inside Chechnya. Claims of independence began to rise at the end of the 80s and of course after 1991, when the Soviet Union Republics got their independence. In 1991 there was no real power in Moscow to stop the process of Chechnya breaking loose. So Chechens declared independence. Only in 1993 did Russia get the new

constitution and power consolidation in the hands of the presidency such that it could launch a war. It did so in 1994, basically to bring Chechnya back into the Russian Federation again.

I could say so much, but that is the short background for the first war. A major point during that first war was that, despite being a tiny people with not much more than 10,000 men versus ten times as many Russian troops, the Chechens actually won. If you look at the map, Chechnya is tiny. They never numbered more than a million. So it says something about the breakdown of Russian forces at the time, how badly managed and weak they were. It also says a lot about motivation. Young Russian conscripts, at 18, were sent in without any motivation to fight that war, whereas on the Chechen side, they were fighting for their independence. It was also a very unpopular war in Russia. There was a free press in Russia at the time, and images from the war, not only of young Russian soldiers but also of the Chechens, showed how bad this war was. It created a pressure on Moscow to end the war. The problem was of course that they decided to postpone the question of Chechnya's status, leaving the question everyone was fighting over, namely should Chechnya be an independent state or part of the Russian Federation, for five years.

Following the end of the war, Chechnya descended into chaos. First of all, if you look at pictures of Grozny after that first war it was leveled to the ground. There was really not much funding to rebuild in Chechnya. Secondly, and very importantly, there were no programs to disarm the Chechen fighters. During the war, jihadist fighters, some of them from Afghanistan, had joined the Chechen separatists. They were allowed to stay in Chechnya. There you have the seed of the merging of the Chechen separatist movement with the more global jihadi movement. The sense of the connection was greatly exaggerated, but it was there. People like Khat-tab, a famous jihadist, were decorated as Chechen war heroes. He was able to stay and later had training camps



inside of Chechnya.

A problem for the new and democratically elected president was that the warlords were not disarmed. They sat in their own villages and became a challenge to central power. One of the key arguments for inducing the second Chechen war in 1999 was that Chechnya was a chaotic, black hole of crime and potential terror. When Putin came to power, he had a very different vision for what needed to be done. He did not want to compromise. He wanted an all out war. There were several happenings during the summer of 1999, making the pro-war argument easy. The first was the invasion of Dagestan by a group of militants, including Khattab, and the famous Chechen warlord, Basayev, to create villages inside Dagestan in which there was Islamic rule. That made it easy for Russia and Putin to say that there was a hotbed of terrorism in Chechnya, and they needed to stop it.

The second event was the explosion at blocks of flats in Moscow and several other Russian cities that summer. To this day, I must admit, I do not know who was responsible for those terrorist attacks. There have been theories that the FSB did it themselves. Of course the official version is that this was Chechen terrorists. The reason why I say “I don’t know” is that I never saw good evidence. Also all the terrorist attacks by the Chechen

separatists, the jihadists — they have always taken responsibility. This one, they never took responsibility for. Anyway, the bombing was the pretext for starting the Second Chechen War, which was a much more successful war. It was framed not just as a war but as a counter-terrorist operation against what Yeltsin called the ‘center of international terrorism in the world.’ But it was still a war. Grozny was bombed again. It was a shorter war because the insurgent movement was crushed to a much greater extent than during the first war, but there was still potential for strong resistance in the Chechen population.

Moscow partnered up with Akhmad Kadyrov, who was actually on the separatist side during the first Chechen War. The goal was to co-opt a Chechen. Slowly but surely Kadyrov was built up as a leader of Chechnya. Then he was killed in an attack by insurgents in 2005. After him, his son, who used to be his bodyguard, became the dictator of Chechnya. Today Chechnya is part of the Russian Federation, but if you look at Moscow’s relation to all the other Federation subjects, the relationship to Chechnya is truly very different. Federal law does not apply in Chechnya. It is Kadyrov’s law that operates in Chechnya; Kadyrov’s troops that guard Chechnya. In a sense, Chechnya really has become an independent unit in the Russian Federation. But this hinges on the interdependence between Putin and

Kadyrov.

Putin still needs Kadyrov to keep his hold on Chechnya. In return Kadyrov has in effect acquired the kind of independence the Chechens had been fighting for. The problem is of course that the Chechen people today do not have independence from Kadyrov, and the Kadyrov regime does not match Chechen culture and traditions, at least not in terms of political structure. It is a pyramid. He is actually kind of a dictator. Traditional Chechen society is a clan society, which has been very enduring. In wars you have warlords dominating, and in peace you have an egalitarian political system where people are not organized into this pyramid of power.

In addition, Kadyrov has been pretty useful for Moscow. He sent off his troops to fight in eastern Ukraine, and we have seen in the last few years, kind of strangely, the use of Kadyrov as a religious diplomat. He is sent off to the Middle East. He is a useful policy tool for Russia projecting itself as a new power in the Middle East today, saying that Russia knows how to operate in the Middle East and the United States does not. The reason is that Russia is a multinational power and used to living with Muslims, to incorporating Islam and Christianity and different religions. Kadyrov functions as an ambassador for Russian-Islamic relations — a symbol of Russia's good touch with Islam.

Kadyrov's father was killed, and now there is kind of a father-son relationship between Kadyrov and Putin. As I have said, they are mutually dependent on each other and Putin really trusts Kadyrov. During demonstrations in Moscow for example, there were confirmed reports that Kadyrov had his troops living in the president's hotel in Moscow. If the demonstrations got out of hand, Putin would rather use the Kadyrovtsy, he would rather trust the Kadyrovtsy to use violence against the demonstrators, and not trust his own Russian police. In addition to that, he really holds an iron grip on the republic for Putin.

FSR: That is fascinating. I have read that he might be

interested in stepping down at some point, does that seem at all likely?

JW: Well he has said that several times. He has given up his title as president, and been doing this bowing act where he shows Putin is his master, but no, I do not think that is realistic. I have not seen the numbers for this year, but Chechnya is probably the most dependent federal subject in the Russian Federation on funding from the Russian budget. Kadyrov controls this funding, so I cannot see any way of replacing him; and the way he punishes opposition — oppositionists have a hard time in Russia, but it is peanuts compared to Chechnya. You die. In Chechnya, you cannot be in opposition. I myself know a Chechen boy who was trying

to write an article about something, and he is in prison in Grozny, tortured. It is a really repressive regime.

It is a more repressive regime than Russia. The problem for Putin is that his deal with Kadyrov is very unpopular in circles of the Russian elite, even into the upper echelons, for example, the FSB. Kadyrov and the FSB are both bastions for Putin's power, but their interests do not align at all. The FSB are not allowed to operate inside Chechnya.

FSR: Internationally, how would you describe the view of the relationship between Kadyrov and Putin, Chechnya and Russia?

JW: In the West, people were very preoccupied by Chechnya and the gross human rights violations during the First Chechen War, and, to some extent, during the Second Chechen War. After 9/11 and the War on Terror, the focus on Chechnya faded away. With the terrible terrorist acts in Dombrovka Theater and Beslan, the official Russian version, that this is just part of the War on Terror, was accepted, at least among the Western political elite.

After 9/11, Putin and Bush entered a so-called 'strategic partnership' in the fight against international terrorism. For Russia, that war was the war in Chechnya. For the United States, it was something different. That partnership actually had quite remarkable results — NATO shared intelligence with Russia, and the NATO-Russia

Council was established to let Russia sit at the table as an equal when international terrorism was discussed. However, the West and Russia were talking about different things when they were talking about the War on Terror. This was the reason Russia and the West parted ways after just a couple of years.

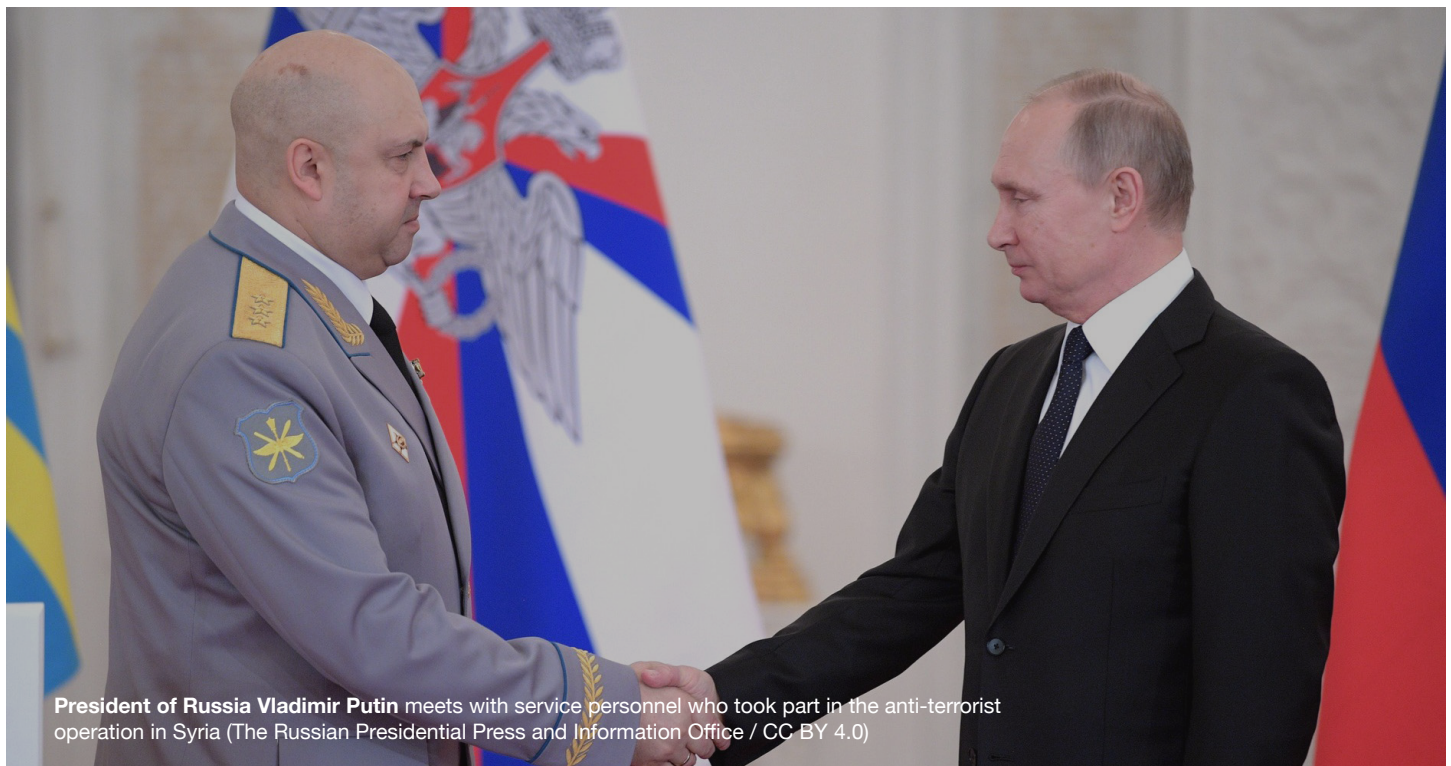
First, Russia did not agree that the war in Iraq was a follow-up to the War on Terror. On the contrary, it was creating terrorism. That is where the partnership cracked. Second, Russia felt the West was betraying them with treatment of Chechen terrorists. For example, several of the modern Chechen separatists were refugees in the West, and the West refused to extradite them. This disagreement on ‘Who is a terrorist?’ was a key reason why Moscow started to talk about double standards. “How come the West makes it about human rights in Chechnya, in the northern Caucasus, in relation to the war on terror, and then they pursue their own war on terror and human rights do not matter?” That is part of the story. The problematic parts of Chechnya were subsumed by the War on Terror for a period in the 2000s and then it was kind of forgotten about. Now we are shocked by stories of Kadyrov and Chechnya, but we do not really hear anything.

When you come to 2014, the real rise of Russia’s con-

flict with the West, there is the return of this view of Russia, similar to the Cold War, as one big entity. You saw the Kremlin, but not all the countries and issues inside it. That is the way it is now. We talk about Russia, and Putin, and we create very flat pictures without any detail. We certainly forget about the inside of the Russian Federation. I just had some journalists here, who wanted to know something about the Northern Caucasus. It struck me that these journalists, as opposed to the ones 15 years ago, do not even know where the North Caucasus is! Which means that today the attention is not there. That is the same for western politicians. Chechnya, and the Northern Caucasus, are not very important right now because we are talking about investing resources in our conflict with Russia.

FSR: What do you see, potentially, as the future of the relationship between Kadyrov and Putin, Chechnya and Russia?

JW: It could be a ticking bomb. First of all, what started as an insurgency in Chechnya became a much wider insurgency in several of the republics in the Northern Caucasus. The Kremlin managed to decapitate the leadership of this insurgency. Then the Islamic State managed to establish itself as the official head of the insurgency in the Northern Caucasus. When the Islamic



President of Russia Vladimir Putin meets with service personnel who took part in the anti-terrorist operation in Syria (The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)

State materialized in Syria and Iraq, a lot of insurgents actually left the Northern Caucasus to fight in its ranks. The talk in Russia, for a long time, has been, “What happens when they return? How can we see to it they do not return?” That is part of the reason Russia entered Syria in the first place — it was not just about making sure there was no color revolution or regime change in Syria, it was also about hitting the North Caucasian jihadists in Syria. This was even said explicitly by Putin.

The problem with the Russian approach to terrorism — and the Western approach too — is that it is treated as such a danger that no other tools than killing are found. This is the story of the second war in Chechnya. If you do not talk to terrorists, you just kill them, you basically have to kill the whole republic. This is also how Moscow thinks about how to deal with returning jihadists from Syria: decapitate them, and the problem will go away. From my point of view, this is a misunderstanding. The whole story of Chechnya, and the spillover of insurgency from Chechnya to neighboring republics is of course that it does not help to kill them. New ones pop up. Even if Russia succeeds in closing the borders to returning jihadists, even if it has succeeded in killing off the leaders of the North Caucasian insurgency, the problem is going to return. The roots for mobilizing around Islam, around injustice, against corruption — that potential is still there and is fairly widespread. Not only in Chechnya, which again is a different case because Kadyrov is in full control, but in the neighboring republics. This is what people who do fieldwork on the ground in the Northern Caucasus tell you every time you meet them: the potential for mobilization here is quite big. The more policies of brute force are employed — the default mode of Russian governance — it is like pouring gasoline on the fire. That is going to be a problem for Russian control of that region in the future.

In Dagestan, for example, they are trying to uproot the

traditional system of governance of the local elite. This creates an even greater potential for mobilization as you have grievances and local leadership who have lost their positions who can easily grab this potential call for resistance. That is the bleak picture of what could happen in the North Caucasus.

When the Kadyrovs first came to power, they were quite popular because the population was fed up with war. Anybody who could bring an end to war was a legitimate leader. But as time goes by, and he is such a repressive leader, his support in the Chechen population is dwindling. He does not redistribute economic resources and he relies on violence to keep the population in check. This said, he has funds from the Kremlin, he has the guns, and the trained men, so it is not easy for an insurgency to build up in Chechnya.

There is, however, pressure on Putin not to spend so much money on keeping Chechnya. The economic situation in Russia is not so good and he has been asked many times, “What about Kadyrov? Will you do something about him? He does unacceptable stuff.” His answer is always, still, “Yes I know there are problematic things, but that is how they are down there.” So for the time being, Putin is not going to withdraw his support for Kadyrov. If the internal pressure on Putin becomes bigger though, there is potential, and without that support, Kadyrov would not be able to maintain his grip the way he does today.

Julie Wilhelmsen

Julie Wilhelmsen is a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. She conducts research in the fields of critical security studies, Russian foreign and security policies and the radicalization of Islam in Eurasia. Wilhelmsen has also written about convergence in Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia and about Russian approaches to the fight against terrorism. She holds a master's degree in post-Soviet and Russian studies from the London School of Economics and holds a PhD in Political Science at the University of Oslo.