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# The "Chechen Problem"—how the Chechen conflicts have shaped Russian domestic and foreign security perspectives

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The “Chechen Problem”— How the Chechen Conflicts have Shaped Russian  
Domestic and Foreign Security Perspectives

Honors Thesis, Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University

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## I. Abstract

A resurgent Russia and the threat of extremist ideology are two major topics currently facing the international community. For Russia, both issues have arisen simultaneously within the Russian republic of Chechnya. While the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 triggered calls for independence among various groups in Russia, the case of the Chechen Republic can reveal unique characteristics of Russia's perspective on its domestic and international security position. This thesis aims to emphasize the importance of the impact of the Chechen Wars on the evolution of Russia's security perspective. I will show that Russia's experiences with Chechnya in the First and Second Chechen Wars have influenced its attitudes towards security on both a domestic and international scale. My thesis will add to the discussion on Russia's security evolution by bringing the case of Chechnya as an additional element to be used in the analysis of Russia's perspective of itself, thereby adding to scholarship on the shaping of modern Russia.

The following thesis, broken up into four sections, will discuss the lessons learned by Russia throughout the Chechen Wars. It will also analyze the ways in which the lessons from Chechnya have been applied to specific events, or to the trajectory of Russia more generally, both domestically and internationally. Throughout, I argue that Russia's experiences with Chechnya have played a key role in shaping Russia's current security mentality. While the lessons learned from Chechnya are the basis of my argument, I include circumstantial points that reference Russia's vulnerability as a new nation, as well as the rise of Vladimir Putin. As a result, I will also challenge current scholarship that has downplayed Chechnya as a central component in the development of Russia's modern security strategy. As a disclaimer, my paper does not seek to address all components of Russian security perspectives, strategy, or of the Chechen conflicts.

Rather, it offers a unique lens upon which to view Russian perspectives on domestic and foreign security. In attempts to construct a concise argument, not all of the necessary elements of the Chechen conflict or its impact can be addressed. However, the essence of my thesis paper will be to argue that, by better understanding Chechnya's history with Russia, it is possible to better understand Russia.

## II. Acknowledgements

It goes without saying that the formation of this thesis was not an individual effort. It is with the unwavering support of my family, friends, and Boston University's exceptional faculty that this project was possible.

In particular, I would like to thank my friends and family for believing in me even when my own wavered, and for all of their words and wishes that have helped me along the way. I would also like to thank Professor John D. Woodward, Jr., my thesis advisor, whose continued guidance and encouragement, both inside and outside of this process have driven me to better myself as a student, a researcher, and an independent thinker. His mentorship as a professor and thesis advisor are part of my success story, and I could not be more grateful for his consistent support. As well, I would like to thank Professor Igor Lukes and Professor Vesko Garčević, who have taken part in my thesis defense panel, and whom I admire greatly for their work and expertise. I would also like to give a special thank you to Dr. Fiona Hill and senior editor for POLITICO, Maura Reynolds, who have both graciously accepted my invitation to speak with them on the topic of this thesis. Their kindness and generosity is much appreciated, as has been their undeniable expertise and fascinating insights. The interviews of these two remarkable women have contributed substantially to my understanding of this intriguing, yet complex, topic.

Finally, I would like to thank those who have taken the time to read, are currently reading, or will read this thesis: I hope that you find it interesting and thought-provoking. More importantly, I hope that it encourages you to challenge yourself in both your undertakings and capacity for nuanced argument.

### III. Introduction

The republic of Chechnya has endured a tumultuous history, rooted in its struggle for national identity. As primarily mountain-dwelling people accustomed to harsh living conditions and difficult manual labor, the Chechen people have struggled as an ethnic, religious, and geographic minority under the rule of the dominant presence of the Soviet Union, later turned Russian Federation. Chechnya's strategic location on the outer edges of Russia and within the rugged Caucasus mountains served to dramatize the events that unfolded between it and the regime in Moscow. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 initially sparked the subsequent violence that erupted in Chechnya in the years following. The Chechens' dissatisfaction with their territorial status resulting from the breakup of the USSR further emboldened their rebellion against Russia. The Chechens claimed that, due to the granting of autonomy to other states formerly a part of the USSR, Chechnya had a legitimate right to autonomy, as had been granted to other nations that had separated from Russia.<sup>1</sup>

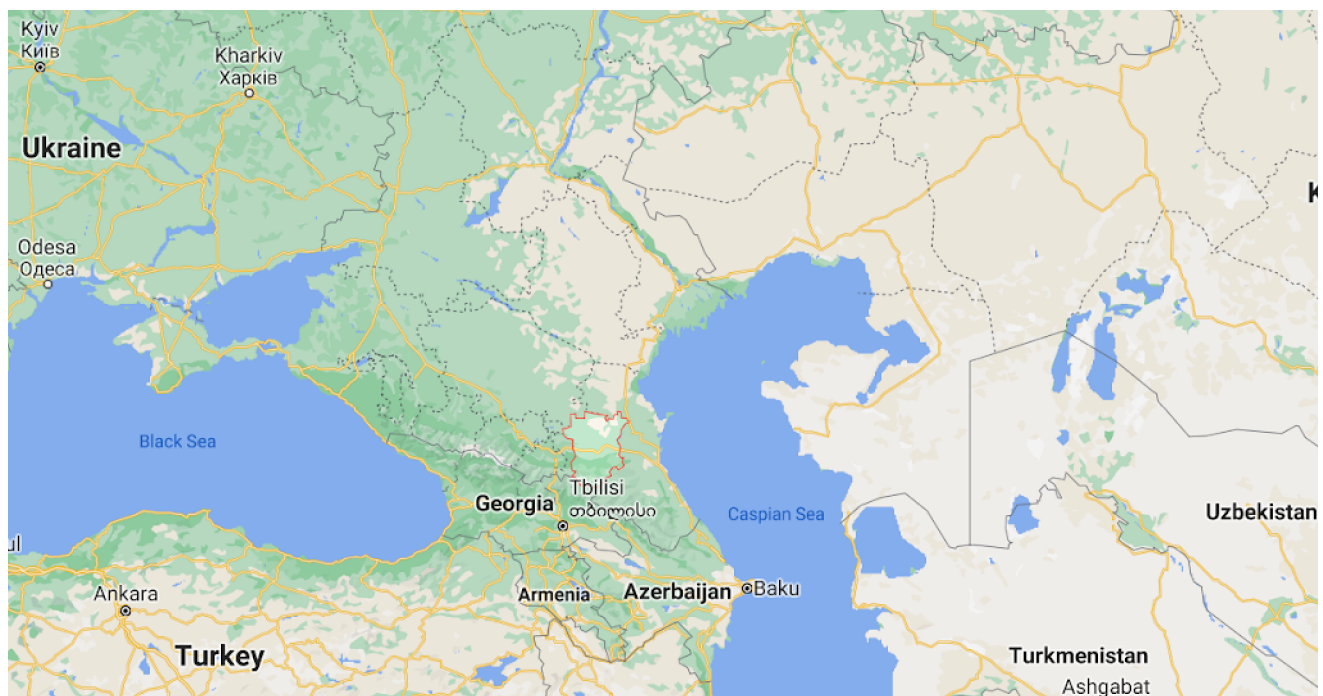
The First and Second Chechen Wars, as they are now referred to, took place between 1994-1996 and 1999-2009, respectively. They are of particular interest to academics and experts of Russian history, as the conflicts constitute the first major domestic conflict endured by the newly formed Russian Federation. Here, the Chechen Wars serve as case studies for a broader analysis of security studies and Russian security. Among the conflicts, the choices by both the regimes in Grozny and Moscow, helped shape the modern Russian outlook on security by helping instill within it a sense of constant caution and hostility which have characterized much of Russia's relationship with the Western Hemisphere over the past few decades. In particular, the reaction

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox. Conflict in the North Caucasus and Its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation*, p. 67

and behaviors in the direct aftermath of the Chechen Wars, from the Russian perspective, are looked at closely and compared with more recent examples of Russian domestic response to security matters.

By analyzing the main events of the Chechen Wars, it is possible to identify similarities between Russia's experiences with Chechnya and its behaviors in the realm of domestic and foreign security policy. In a time where understanding Russia's foreign policy motives are critically important in preempting and de-escalating hostile actions against other actors, both regionally and globally, Chechnya may serve as the key to unlocking part of the mystery of the Russian security mindset.



**Chechnya, outlined in red, and surrounding areas<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> “Chechnya - Чеченская Республика, Russia”, Google Maps, March 22, 2021

## A. Literature Review

*There is an abundant amount of literature covering the topic of Chechnya, Russia, and the First and Second Chechen Wars. The distinction comes when searching for discussions of Chechen impact on Russia, specifically from a security perspective. While I had trouble finding much content about the specific role that Chechnya had in shaping modern Russian security perspective and strategy, the amalgamation of resources I was able to find that discussed the history, relations, and implications of the Chechen-Russian relationship was significant. In combining the literature on Chechnya and Russia with that of Russian security in the post-Cold War era, I have been able to achieve a high level of understanding of the ways in which Chechnya helped shape contemporary Russian security perspectives. In my literature review, I aim to consolidate the elements from existing research, add context, and identify the useful takeaways from each.*

John B. Dunlop's historical account of the evolution of the Chechen people in his book, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*<sup>3</sup>, is a concise recollection of events that make up Chechnya's history, especially as it relates to its turbulent past with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. While the book is rarely mentioned in the following pages, the book, nonetheless, can be viewed as a paramount text in the broader scope of academia in Russian and Chechen history. In many ways, the book serves as the backbone of this thesis, as well as a constant reminder of the importance of history in any contemporary discussion.

Julie Wilhelmsen presents the unique character of the "Russian self" in her book *The Securitization of Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable*<sup>4</sup>. She outlines the significance of justification and unity in the Russian mindset, particularly in the context of the second invasion into Chechnya in 1999. The event, framed as a "counterterrorism campaign" to the Russian citizen, is a lesson in Russian domestic politics that illustrates that with any act of aggression must come the presentation of an honorable purpose.

Fiona Hill's report *Russia's Tinderbox: Conflict in the North Caucasus And its Implications for The Future of the Russian Federation*<sup>5</sup>, outlines the various factors that played a part in sparking conflict in the North Caucasus in detail. Ethnic tensions, strategic economic and geopolitical location, and power imbalances all played a role in the outbreak of the first Chechen War.

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<sup>3</sup> John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, 1998

<sup>4</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen, *Russia's Securitization of Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable*, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox. Conflict in the North Caucasus and Its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation*, 1995

Furthermore, the report details shortcomings of the new Russian Federation in handling the Chechen problem, and helps emphasize the security mindset of Russia while on the verge of the first conflict.

*Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*<sup>6</sup> is a book written by Dmitriï Trenin and Anatol Lieven that discusses Russia's takeaways from its conflicts with Chechnya from a military standpoint. It is used in the discussion of the "lessons learned" from Chechnya to emphasize the shift in military strategy and adaptation of Russian strategic thinking in the events that followed the conflicts with Chechnya.

*Security in Translation: Securitization Theory and the Localization of Threat*<sup>7</sup> by Holger Stritzel traces the evolution of ideas about, meanings and connotations of, and social implications of the concept of security. It offers general guidance on the history of securitization theory and terms central to the thesis, like "security" and "threat", and provides a lens with which to view the security and threat environment of the post-Cold War era. Though the book is not cited in the thesis, it should be considered an authoritative source on the linguistic importance of key terms and concepts within the field of security.

Hanna Notte's article in Middle East Policy Journal, *Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals*<sup>8</sup>, discusses the impact of the Chechen Wars on Russia's policy regarding Syria and the wider Middle East. Notte outlines how Russia's narrative of a counterterrorism campaign against Chechnya impacted its attitudes towards terrorism and politics within the region, including the complex relationship with the Assad regime. Particularly in a post 9/11 context, Notte highlights several opportunities for US-Russia cooperation based on case studies that include Slovenia and the Global War on Terror (GWOT), as well as areas for improvement.

In his report, *Russia's Threat Perceptions and Strategic Posture*<sup>9</sup>, Dmitriï Trenin discusses Russian perceptions of its security environment in the post-Cold War era. He gives reasons for shifts or continuations in Russian domestic and foreign policy, with Trenin mentioning the value of Chechnya in shaping Russian perceptions. Trenin goes on to identify and classify Russia's perceived threats through a strategic and security lens. The report is used to support the claim of the significance of Chechnya in shaping regional domestic and foreign policy, as well as a source

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<sup>6</sup> Aleksei Malashenko, Dmitriï Trenin, and Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Holger Stritzel, *Security in Translation: Securitization Theory and the Localization of Threat*, 2014

<sup>8</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", 2016

<sup>9</sup> Dmitriï Trenin, *Russian Security Strategy under Putin: Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture*, 2007

to begin analyzing Putin and Russia's collective objectives through the process of "Chechenization".

In her book, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*<sup>10</sup>, Aglaya Snetkov uses Chechnya as a case study for the development of Russian Security Policy under the Putin and Medvedev regime. Having drawn directly from Russian primary sources, Snetkov is able to articulate the ways in which Chechnya came to represent Russia's greater identity crisis, and later, a story of success that guided Russia's perceptions of its own security position as well as future courses of action. The book provides a look at the making of Russian contemporary domestic and foreign policy under Putin, while simultaneously providing a deeper understanding of Chechnya's significance. As it is the only source that provides substantial ties between Chechnya and its implications on Russian security, it is drawn upon heavily.

Francis Naylor's *Geography of Asymmetrical Conflict: Geographic Perception in Post Chechen War Ingushetia*<sup>11</sup> focuses on the perceptions of those living in Ingushetia during the post-Chechen War, War in Ingushetia timeframe. Naylor emphasizes the role of the Chechen conflict in shaping the government response and counterinsurgency effort in Ingushetia. This source is used to discuss the implications of the Chechen Wars on Russian domestic security strategy in the following years .

Emil Souleimanov's *The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?*<sup>12</sup> examines the causal factors and status (as of 2017) of the weakening Insurgency of the North Caucasus, which began immediately following the end of the Second Chechen War. Souleimanov discusses adaptations of Russian military strategy as a result of Chechnya, which are used to showcase the implementation of the lessons learned from Chechnya in Russian domestic events.

Dr. Fiona Hill is an acclaimed foreign affairs and national security expert with subject-matter expertise on Europe and Russia. She has served in many notable positions in her field, including as a member of the US National Security Council, though she now works as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. In my interview with Dr. Fiona Hill, I asked explicitly about the role of the Chechen conflicts on both Russia and Putin. As the two have become somewhat synonymous, especially in recent years, I felt it necessary to identify the similarities and

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<sup>10</sup> Aglaya Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*, 2014

<sup>11</sup> Francis Naylor, *Geography of Asymmetrical Conflict: Geographic Perception in Post Chechen War Ingushetia*, 2014

<sup>12</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?", 2017

differences among the perceptions of each. Although Dr. Hill affirmed the categorization of the “lessons learned” from Chechnya on a high level, she challenged the novelty of Russia’s policy shifts in the context of greater Russian and Soviet history. Overall, I came away from the interview with a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which this important event was both monumental and, in other respects, a continuation of historical strategy simply shaped to fit a new framework.<sup>13</sup>

Maura Reynolds is currently a distinguished reporter and senior editor for POLITICO, where she writes primarily on issues of Russian affairs. In 2001, Reynolds was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for her on-the-ground reporting of the First Chechen War. In my interview with Maura Reynolds, I dug into the most significant mistakes made by Russia during the First Chechen War, and how those mistakes played out domestically in post-Chechen War Russia. We also discussed existing misconceptions of Russia which has led to its tumultuous relationship with the West. Primarily, this interview was used to strengthen the foundations of Part I and Part IV used in the recommendations section of this thesis.<sup>14</sup>

*Resetting Transatlantic Relations*<sup>15</sup> is a lecture given by Dr. Fiona Hill, in partnership with former High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Frederica Mogherini, in October 2020 about the obstacles facing the Transatlantic relationship between the United States and Europe. Framed in the context of the post-WWII, Cold War era, Hill presents a contemporary picture of the global threats facing the partnership, including climate change, the ongoing pandemic, terrorism, and decaying diplomatic relationships between the US and Europe, the EU, NATO, and Russia. She addresses the most pressing questions on the transatlantic relationships, Western institutions, and Russia, and outlines pathways for dealing with such issues in the future. This lecture is used to discuss recommendations and pathways forward for the Western relationship with Russia.

*The Putin Profile: A Conversation with Dr. Fiona Hill*<sup>16</sup> is a July 2020 interview conducted with Fiona Hill by the Wilson Institute’s Kennan Center. The conversation consisted of Hill’s thoughts about the current trajectory of the Russian Federation, as well as that of President Vladimir Putin. The interview gave some insight into the inner thoughts of Putin and his nuanced decision-making process, as well as some of the greatest obstacles facing the US-Russia

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<sup>13</sup> Fiona Hill, Personal interview, 12 March 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

<sup>15</sup> “High-Level Transatlantic Lecture by Fiona Hill: ‘Resetting Transatlantic Relations’”, College of Europe on YouTube, 2020

<sup>16</sup> “The Putin Profile: A Conversation with Dr. Fiona Hill”, The Woodrow Wilson Center on YouTube, 2020

relationship. It included various suggestions, with an emphasis on the United States, for steps to improve the relationship. The interview is mainly utilized in the final section of the thesis, which addresses recommendations for moving forward with Russia, as well as ways to decrease overall aggression and hostility between Russia and the West.

In addition to Dr. Hill's above lectures, articles from The Atlantic Council<sup>17</sup>, the Council on Foreign Relations<sup>18</sup>, the European Council on Foreign Relations<sup>19</sup>, Brookings Institution<sup>20</sup>, and NATO<sup>21</sup> are used to facilitate the discussion of contemporary West-Russia relations. In conjunction with arguments of Chechnya's significance, the articles are used to showcase the most beneficial outlets for improving the West-Russia relationship.

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Vershbow and Daniel Fried, "How the West Should Deal with Russia", Atlantic Council

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Masters and Stephen Sestanovich, "What's Next for Russia's Relations With the West?", 2018

<sup>19</sup> Kadri Liik, "The Last of the Offended: Russia's First Post-Putin Diplomats", 2019

<sup>20</sup> Jesse Kornbluth, "Highlights: Navigating US-Russia Relations in 2020 and beyond", 2020

<sup>21</sup> NATO, "NATO - Topic: Relations with Russia", 2020

#### IV. Lessons from Chechnya

One of the primary arguments of this thesis is that Russia took away several significant lessons from its dealings with Chechnya that have both uniquely impacted domestic and foreign policy and helped shape the persona of what is today's Russian Federation. While the lessons are complex, their impacts are straightforward, having clear implications on the Russia that came out of the conflicts. To be clear, it cannot be forgotten that all of Russia's history has helped shape it in some way, since most agree that much of contemporary Russian behavior dates to events in its Soviet and Imperial past.<sup>22</sup> However, it is nonetheless important to identify pivot points that may have had greater weight in shaping Russia's collective security mindset. The significance of Chechnya is compounded by its status as the first domestic conflict within Russia after the dissolution of the USSR, and that the First Chechen War ended in a rare Russian military defeat. The traumatic nature of the defeat in the first war amplified the impact on Russia. While they will be addressed individually, the primary lessons learned from Chechnya are as follows:

1. The importance of preventing opposition or dissent from spreading
2. The importance of justification for actions taken by the state
3. The turbulent nature of division, and the security of unity
4. The importance of coherent strategy, including strong leadership

#### ***The importance of preventing opposition or dissent from spreading***

In the case of Chechnya, little to no active measures were taken to quell dissent before the First Chechen War. A lack of organizational structure or unified policy regarding the handling of ethnic minorities characterized the old USSR and carried over to the Russian Federation in its

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<sup>22</sup> Olga Oliker, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, Scott Boston, *Russian Foreign Policy in Historical and Current Context: A Reassessment*

early years. The general lack of direction led to the government in Moscow's inability to keep tabs on the events unfolding in Chechnya and intervening early and can be considered a major failure by the government at the time.<sup>23</sup> Once the inevitability of intervention hit, the chaos that ensued with Chechnya enveloped the attention of Moscow, who then missed other ethnic conflicts that had been sparked as a sort of "domino effect". Regional tensions had long existed before the Chechen conflict, but the scale of the violence that erupted between it and Russia sent a clear message of the disaster that could unfold when a dissatisfied and increasingly destitute population revolted against the government.<sup>24</sup> The death toll resulting from the Chechen Wars, especially civilian, far exceeded that of any other domestic conflicts at the time, with Russian losses amounting to approximately 6000.<sup>25</sup> Dissent, and the lessons associated with it, are evident in the human cost of the wars, as well as the overall destruction caused by the level of violence that took place in the conflicts.

Chechnya's declaration of secession from Russia in November 1991, believing it had the same rights as those of union republics,<sup>26</sup> set off a series of events by other North Caucasus groups to assert their own autonomy. North Ossetia formed a National Guard, Ingushetia sought its own autonomy and formed militias, and the region began rapidly arming in a way that can be attributed to Chechnya's first major attempt at independence. Russia's attempt to reassert control over the region came in the form of a July 1992 law preventing territorial changes. Many groups in the region, however, came to see the action as a betrayal, and served to inflame tensions

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<sup>23</sup> Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox. Conflict in the North Caucasus and Its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation*, pp. 16, 19, 32, 83

<sup>24</sup> Trenin, Malashenko, and Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier*, p. 56

<sup>25</sup> Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict*, p. 48

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 62

between the peoples of the North Caucasus and the Russian Federation.<sup>27</sup> Even in the beginning of the first war, the Russian reaction in Chechnya became an indicator for Russian response to ethnic conflict in the region or forceful action against the will of the government. In the case of the North Ossetia-Ingushetia conflict, Russian response had been “conditioned by the secession of Chechnya”.<sup>28</sup> From that point on, Russia acted in a timely manner against groups that sought to destabilize the North Caucasus, likely to correct for the tumultuously slow start that characterized the lead up to the first war.

Although, by no means the only group disgruntled with Russia’s refusal to grant increased levels of independence, Chechnya’s decision to secede became the catalyst for the descent of the entire region into chaos. Russia had been able to trace its headaches within the region to Chechnya and have taken steps since the conflict to assure that independence-based uprisings are not repeated. For instance, one need not look further than the Second Chechen War, where Russia invaded Chechnya as, one could argue, a preemptive measure from the point of view of Moscow. Chechnya’s importance, in another sense, stems from its role as a catalyst to other conflicts of the North Caucasus largely due to structural issues within the government, as well as a lack of attention to a developing opposition force. As a result, The Chechen secessionist movement successfully gained a following capable of going head-to-head with the regime in Moscow. Learning from their Chechen mistakes, Russia has become notorious for quelling opposition, whether by actively hunting opposition leaders or former officials in other countries,<sup>29</sup> arresting

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 37

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>29</sup> “Alexei Navalny: ‘Poisoned’ Russian Opposition Leader in a Coma”, BBC News

individuals upon their arrival on Russian soil, or making sure that threatening figures to the regime disappear.<sup>30</sup>

### ***The importance of justification for actions taken by the state***

Chechen stereotypes began to develop based on the early-1990s conditions within Chechnya due to economic struggles, bad leadership, high unemployment, and collapse of educational and health care institutions in Chechnya. Anti-Chechnya policies by Moscow contributed to the perpetuation of such stereotypes, fostering increased feelings of resentment and hostility towards Chechens. The “Chechen Problem” originated from the increasing rates of lawlessness occurring in Chechnya and the criminal activities that became rampant as a result. The banditry, with roots in Chechen national struggle, would expand into a more sinister form of retaliation that would help set the stage for Russian legitimization of violent acts committed in Chechnya. Russia, concerned with its hold on authority, utilized the press to control narratives and, therefore, the wider domestic population.

Between the first and second conflicts, Russia’s relationship with the media shifted noticeably. Despite popular assumptions, the timeframe leading up to, and during, the first conflict marked a period of relative freedom for the media.<sup>31</sup> Far from the clear suppression that exists today, Russia’s pre-Chechen War media became a hopeful example of what modern-day Russian society could be. Unfortunately, as the events in Chechnya unfolded and dissent mounted, the media’s privileged position prevented Russia from conducting operations effectively. Even more concerning, the press inhibited Russia from pushing forth the narrative necessary to win over the

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<sup>30</sup> “Defining Forced Disappearance”, Forced Disappearances in Chechnya, Human Rights Watch (HRW)

<sup>31</sup> Trenin, Malashenko, and Lieven, “*Russia's Restless Frontier*”, p. 18

Russian people. The Chechen Problem, therefore, became a threat in terms of not only territorial endangerment, but also of a broader vulnerability to internal criticism by the press that placed Russia on even higher alert. In the second conflict, Russia's control of the media shifted considerably, resulting in high approval ratings of the war.<sup>32</sup> Russia, of course, also had an interest in minimizing its own losses and shortcomings, though this is not significant for the analysis of the conflict, as such behavior is typical of many states in wartime. The shift in media coverage, however, between the first and second Chechen conflicts was a clear maneuver aimed at controlling a narrative that could be used to gain the support of the people, thereby ensuring multifaceted Russian success - militarily, politically, and socially.

In her book, Dr. Julie Wilhelmsen presents the idea of the "Russian self," a metaphorical persona unifying the Russian subcontinent into a single living, breathing entity with human-like features. From an international relations perspective, the concept is not so unusual, given that countries run by leaders and citizens take on almost-human qualities. Dr. Wilhelmsen stresses the importance of not only Russia's view of itself, but its concern with how it is perceived to the outside world. The Russian "self", as Wilhelmsen writes, is further solidified by the Chechen Wars, particularly the second. Presented as a counterterrorism campaign, the Second Chechen War serves to underline the fact that countries often utilize conflict to support their own vision of themselves, almost always in a positive manner.<sup>33</sup> Of course, this is not a unique feature to Russia, as parallels can be drawn with almost every other nation in the world which has engaged in conflict, whether domestic or international. In fact, this phenomenon is not exclusive to states, as it is an innately human quality that characterizes individuals, groups, and nations.

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<sup>32</sup> Olga Olikier, "Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat", 2001

<sup>33</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen, "Russia's Securitized Chechnya: How War Became Acceptable", p. 10

Russia's purpose for classifying the conflict as a counterterrorism operation is as follows: in doing so, Russia gained popular support for the campaign, thereby avoiding dissent or negative consequences in its courses of action, while simultaneously promoting the positive perspectives that unified and boosted morale of the entire ethnic-Russian population. Importantly, the justification itself had validity given that terrorist attacks had occurred outside of Chechnya, giving the claim the believability necessary to garner widespread support. For example, both the attack on Bidonovsk (1995) and Kizlyar–Pervomayskoye (1996) included hostage crises which terrified and angered the Russian population.<sup>34</sup> Crises like Bidonovsk and Kizlyar-Pervomayskoye laid the groundwork for Russia's future attacks on Chechnya. The support Russia garnered as a result of the crises aided in justifying its cause against the Chechens and solidified the Chechnya as a "problem" in need of a solution.

Indeed, the metaphorical lines differentiating Chechen nationalism of the first war from Chechen Islamic extremism had been blurred by the time of the second war.<sup>35</sup> As evident by the massive bombing campaigns occurring throughout Chechnya and surrounding areas of the North Caucasus in the fall of 1999<sup>36</sup>, a narrative had been constructed by Russia about Chechnya, even before the war, that had added to the legitimacy of such bombardments. Even indiscriminate bombings were legitimized to some extent as part of a wider campaign, evidence to what Wilhelmsen points to as the "linguistic articulations" that helped legitimize Chechnya's reputation as a place deserving of destruction.<sup>37</sup> Throughout the Second Chechen War, repeated

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<sup>34</sup> Cassidy, Robert M. *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict*, p. 45

<sup>35</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", p. 61

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelmsen, pp. 188-190

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192

bombings were justified based on a narrative that had already proven to be effective. The First Chechen War instilled within the newly named Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, the lesson that constructing a narrative early, and sticking with it, was an effective way to maintain support, regardless of the gruesome optics.

Russia's justification of its bombings of Chechnya, which included various human rights abuses, received full support from the media at the time. Newspaper accounts confirmed the carefully constructed narrative of Chechnya as a terrorist threat<sup>38</sup> and, thus, helped establish a national reputation for the republic that Putin and other leaders would be able to exploit in the coming years. The media in Russia has long played a role in its identity, so the 'victory' over the media was one that allowed Russia to continue its course of action, as it could be assured that it had the people's confidence.

It is now necessary to briefly discuss the relevance of Putin's entrance into the story at such a pivotal moment. Since Putin entered his Prime Minister role immediately thrust into a major domestic conflict, his first tests as a leader came from Chechnya, and have undoubtedly stuck in his mind nearly two decades later. Chechnya, therefore, takes on added significance, seeing as the current leader of the Russian Federation is the same person that was only beginning his rise in 1999. As much as the lessons from Chechnya were lessons for Russia, they were even more so lessons for the young Prime Minister, in which the counter-terrorist campaign against Chechnya "was a laboratory, a test case of how war becomes acceptable in Putin's Russia".<sup>39</sup> Putin's political rise during the interlude of the two wars remains a critical component of the Chechen

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 149

<sup>39</sup> Wilhelmsen, p. 12

conflicts' significance. The profound impact of the conflicts on Putin, including a tolerance for chaos in foreign affairs, have characterized much of Russia's foreign policy making in post Chechen-War Russia.

In a personal interview conducted with national security and foreign affairs expert Dr. Fiona Hill, Hill mentioned that Chechnya became a "practice space" for Russia in which it could test the effectiveness of its response. She affirmed the notion of the Russian self,<sup>40</sup> whereby Russia can be personified as an entity needing to be fulfilled through affirmation of its right-doing, as well as the wrongdoing of others. This can be clearly seen in Russia's portrayal of Chechnya as "the other" throughout the conflicts, a trend which has continued to represent Russia's treatment of an adversary, especially one threatening to Russia's security perception. Justification became strategically necessary to maintain support, but also cognitively, as a mechanism to feed this desire of self-fulfillment and self-realization.

### ***The turbulent nature of division, and the security of unity***

In the leadup to the first Chechen conflict, a history of inequality and struggle on the part of Chechnya and other Caucasian peoples generated feelings of hostility and distrust towards ethnic Russians and the Russian government. Chechnya, uniquely, constituted the first instance of an internal threat to national sovereignty. Following the breakup of the USSR, the territorial vulnerability of the Federation could still be felt. Chechnya's exploitation of Russia's vulnerability exacerbated the threat it posed to Russia's already delicate authority and served to widen ethnic and national divisions. From a Chechen perspective, the autonomy granted to former Soviet republics legitimized ongoing calls for national liberation and the questioning of

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<sup>40</sup> Fiona Hill. Personal interview. 12 March 2021.

its borders. From a Russian perspective, Chechnya's dissatisfaction with its national situation constituted a real internal threat to the already delicate power balance of the Federation. As a result, the first Chechen conflict can be considered, more than anything, a conflict of authority and legitimacy.

While Chechnya sought the authority and legitimacy through its own statehood, Moscow sought to consolidate authority and legitimacy within its own newly formed state. The questioning of Russian legitimacy and authority by Chechnya alluded to the broader issue of Russian unity. The messy breakup of the USSR had already served as a catalyst for unrest in the region, though the level of frustration in Chechnya boiled over into a force impossible to ignore. Thus, the First Chechen War threatened the heart of Russian national unity from the inside by emphasizing ethnic and regional divisions. The second war proved to be a continuation of the first in regard to the accentuation of divisions within the federation but included an important reversal in post-Cold War thinking that would mark a change in Russia's threat perceptions.

The Second Chechen War served to further instill the lesson of the dangers of division.

Along with the ongoing conflict, Moscow perceived Chechnya's separatism as a "possible catalyst of spillover to other Russian regions," placing Russia on high alert and increasing its domestic threat perception.<sup>41</sup> Insofar as Russia was already a cautious nation, based on a history of invasions and an inherited memory of regional and global conflict, Chechnya's secessionist intentions have made Russia more cautious. Indeed, in a 2000 interview for his biography, Putin stated:

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<sup>41</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", p. 59

*“The essence of the ... situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR.... If we did not do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... I was convinced that if we did not immediately stop the extremists [in Chechnya], then in no time at all we would be facing a second Yugoslavia across the entire territory of the Russian Federation — the Yugoslavization of Russia.”*<sup>42</sup>

Drawing parallels with the case of Yugoslavia, Putin viewed the situation in Chechnya as a similar threat to Russia. Speaking at the start of the Second Chechen War, he made it clear that Chechnya was an internal threat to Russia posing a barrier to Russian standard way of life. The Chechen Problem, in the eyes of Russian leadership, was not a matter of politics, but a question of sustained existence. From a security standpoint, Russia’s expressed perception of itself as an isolated state with few allies is a trend that has roots in the Chechen response.

While the end of the Cold War brought about feelings of optimism for a change in the dynamics of the West-Russia relationship, the positive outlook was relatively short lived. The idea of collective security echoed by both Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, while against the grain of traditional Russian strategic philosophy, had been turned on its head by the time Putin had come to power, primarily due to “post-Cold War strategic developments” including Chechnya.<sup>43</sup> The high levels of violence and chaos that took place throughout the First Chechen War may have traumatized Russia, but the Russian tolerance for violence that ensued became a central tactic for Russia’s policy of Chechenization.<sup>44</sup> Although generally thought of as a domestic

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60

<sup>43</sup> Dmitriï Trenin, *Russia's Threat Perception and Strategic Posture*, p. 35

<sup>44</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

conflict, the international underpinnings of the Second Chechen War regarding the rising concern over growing jihadist presence within Chechnya have likely contributed to the repudiation of Gorbachev and Yeltsin's post-Cold War hopefulness.

***The importance of coherent regional strategy, including strong leadership***

Before the Chechen Wars, Russian regional policy towards the North Caucasus had lacked clear organizational structure and direction. Policy towards the region had, to an extent, become an amalgamation of directions outlined by a myriad of separate institutions, with little to no coordination among them and none having final authority.<sup>45</sup> Partially a remnant of the USSR, the lack of centralized regional policy contributed to some of Russia's hardships leading up to and throughout the conflicts. For instance, Moscow's deployment and subsequent withdrawal of Russian troops from Grozny, following an unsuccessful intervention attempt, signaled a clear lack of preparedness on the Russian side.<sup>46</sup> The fact that such an embarrassing showing by Russia came so soon after Chechnya's declaration of its independence only prompted more confidence from Chechen General Dzhokar Dudayev and his supporters, who later refused Russian attempts at negotiations.

In the second standoff between Russia and Chechnya in 1992, then-president Yeltsin, again, called off Russian troops out of fear of another reputational blow.<sup>47</sup> Another failure by Yeltsin came in November 1994, in which Russia's support of Chechen opposition resulted in the capture of 70 Russian servicemen, and the bolstering of support for General Dudayev.<sup>48</sup> While

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<sup>45</sup> Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox*, pp. 19-20

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74

further humiliation may have been prevented, the damage was done. Russia had backed down from Chechnya again, and Yeltsin had proven himself to be a weak leader in the eyes of both his opponents and, increasingly, his political allies. As much as Yeltsin's leadership was weak strategically, it was also weak perceptively. Chechnya's will to fight and confidence in its eventual victory grew with each of Russia's lackluster showings. Both President Yeltsin and the Russian government were unprepared for the kind of fight the Chechens were willing to bring, made clear by the simple revelation by Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev that "we messed up in Chechnya."<sup>49</sup> The combination of weak Russian leadership and disorganized planning led to the humiliation of Russian forces in the formative years of the Russian conflict and, subsequently, set the stage for the informal Chechen victory of the first war.

Here, I must also address the counterargument to my claims of Yeltsin's weak leadership. It is true that, in the First Chechen War, President Yeltsin can be accredited with at least one successful attempt, which came in December 1994, after the Russian Ministry of Defense decided to finally authorize direct Russian military intervention in the region to quell the unrest.<sup>50</sup> The result, while a disaster from a human rights standpoint, did restore some of Yeltsin's credibility as a leader at a time when it had been falling and the political necessity for showing strength arose. Despite this comeback for Yeltsin, the success had come too late. From a strategic standpoint, the failed initial attempts at handling Chechnya had backfired, and had already boosted morale within the Chechen ranks, and conversely deteriorated that of Russia. The importance of the first impression, in the case of the first war, was pivotal in the ultimate outcome.

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<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin, *U.S. and Russian Policymaking With Respect to the Use of Force*, 1996

<sup>50</sup> Fiona Hill, *Russia's Tinderbox. Conflict in the North Caucasus and Its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation*, pp. 75-76

Even if Yeltsin had been able to unify Russian response during the course of the first war, it would have come too late, as there was no way to overlook the unprepared state of the Russian military in the initial phases. The fact that, by the end of the first war, the status of the Russian Federation had not yet been settled only emphasized Russia's weak leadership and lack of strategy.<sup>51</sup> Even so, Chechnya is considered the "victor" of the First Chechen War, which has further compounded Russia's perceived threat heading into the second war. As will be made clear in the next section, however, the victory that had eluded Russia in the First Chechen War did not repeat itself in the second; mishaps of Russian leadership and policy from that point on would be entirely different.

Yeltsin's leadership, which came to an end in the beginning of the Second Chechen War, gave rise to a new leader eager to make up for the humiliation that had occurred. The rise of a figure like Putin, and the strategy that came along with him, went directly against the previous leader's tendencies, and can be understood as a correction of earlier mistakes in the first war. The trauma of the first war had cemented a willingness within Russia to reassert itself as a country, and within Vladimir Putin to assert himself as a leader capable of molding a victorious Russia.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 64

## V. Domestic Security Implications

As discussed in the first part of this thesis, Russia learned four significant lessons from the conflict in Chechnya which, as its first major domestic conflict since the creation of the Russian Federation, had notable implications on Russian domestic policy following the Chechen Wars. In this section, I discuss the major events and policies which can be viewed through various lenses, including one of continuation of the lessons learned from Chechnya. I will address two domestic conflicts, the War in Ingushetia (2007-2015) and the Insurgency in the North Caucasus (2009-2017). Since the two domestic conflicts were in close proximity to one another, and closely related to the conflict in Chechnya, they can effectively highlight the ways in which Russian behavior adapted, either in accordance with the methods that worked, or in opposition to previous failures. I will then follow with an analysis of major Russian domestic policies which can be linked with the lessons from the Chechen encounters. An emphasis will be placed on the policies and frameworks adopted as a result of Vladimir Putin's plan of "Chechenization", the process of reforming and reconstructing Chechnya as a way to solve the Chechen problem. Through Chechenization, Putin and Russia reassert dominance over the once unruly republic of Chechnya and force it to align more closely with Russia's priorities.

I must first address two central foreign policy theories - historical continuity and the imposed insecurity theory. Historical continuity theory, in Russian foreign policy, hypothesizes that events in Russian history have seen continuity for centuries, and that Russia's perceived "aggressive, expansionist, and imperialist tendencies" are so deeply rooted in Russian culture that the course of the country must inherently proceed in a similar fashion. Imposed insecurity theory, on the other hand, rests on the assumption that Russian security is derived from the insecurity of its

neighbors and, therefore, requires “near constant state of uncertainty and dependence” by states in close proximity to Russia in order to avoid real or perceived territorial threats.<sup>52</sup> Historical continuity theory comes into conflict with the central claim of my thesis, which is that the Chechen Wars had a profound impact on Russian security strategy in its formative years as a nascent country and are visible in Russia’s behavior and actions. The theory would argue that I am overstating the importance of the conflicts, and that the entire course of Russian history has dictated its reaction.

To reconcile this schism, I must disagree with, and adjust, the claims of historical continuity theory, particularly in regard to the importance of recency. While I agree that Russia’s past plays a role in shaping its present and future, the recency effect, a psychological term generally attributed to people’s emphasis on recent events due to better memory, would argue that more recent events in Russian history play a larger role in shaping its actions. Russia’s vulnerable status as a nascent state, coupled with the relative recency of the Chechen conflict, gave the first and second wars a greater role in the Russian psyche, especially given the dramatic events and conclusion. Despite the second having ended over a decade ago, the context in which they occurred give them continued relevance, from a domestic and international security standpoint, in the eyes of Russian Federation.

### *War in Ingushetia*

Chechnya has served as an important symbol in Russian security, having been transformed from “an existential threat in the early 2000s” to a case of successful state-building which has helped

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<sup>52</sup> Tyler Pack, *Chechnya, Georgia, and Theories of Foreign Policy*, pp. 2, 5

shape the approach to other domestic and foreign security threats.<sup>53</sup> The War in Ingushetia, in some ways an extension of the Chechen conflict given Ingushetia's role, has hallmarks of both the First and Second Chechen Wars. In the case of the War in Ingushetia, Russia's 2006 counterterrorism framework outlined the successful practices that had been used in Chechnya and could be applied elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> The counter-insurgency tactics developed by Russia to fight back and ultimately succeed in the second Chechen conflict were carried over to Ingushetia, where, yet again, narratives of terrorist influence in the region and the need for a swift response was spread to garner support from the masses. As part of the counterinsurgency, Russia actively censored its media outlets by claiming that the media attention played to the terrorists' advantage, and therefore needed to be controlled.<sup>55</sup>

Censorship and control of the media is by no means a new practice; its effective use in Chechnya directly contributed to its repeated use in Ingushetia. In the case of Chechnya, terrorist attacks perpetrated against Russia, while they were used to help justify Russia's incursion into Chechnya, also threatened Russia's ability to project its domestic control. Therefore, Russia put measures in place allowing it the authority to censor the media in situations in which "national security" was at stake. Not only was censorship and media control a method to prevent internal dissent, but it was also a mechanism by which the government was able to further its narrative of defense against insurgent terrorists. Such authoritative measures, first put in place for almost identical purposes in Chechnya, were repeated in Ingushetia, one of the first post-Chechen conflicts.

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<sup>53</sup> Aglaya Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*, pp. 2-3

<sup>54</sup> "As If They Fell From the Sky": Counterinsurgency, Rights Violations, and Rampant Impunity in Ingushetia"

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The “Islamic renaissance” that emerged in neighboring regions is often attributed directly to the Chechen wars.<sup>56</sup> The War in Ingushetia, one such case, constituted the first opportunity by the seasoned Russian military to showcase that it has learned from its previous mistakes. In the previous conflict, the Russian military had seen the entire region of Chechnya as a security threat, but it had neglected the social impact of its actions and, unintentionally, inflamed the already deeply-seeded distrust and dissatisfaction with the government. A similar policy to that of Chechenization, which was put in place to help reform Chechnya into a more cooperative actor, was pushed forth in Ingushetia. Indeed, towards the end of the War in Ingushetia, Moscow began efforts to combat unemployment, expand urban areas, and improve infrastructure.<sup>57</sup> Identical to Chechnya, in which Russia came to the realization that a key element to successful regional policy involves winning over the local population, Ingushetia provides an example in which the policies aimed at rebuilding favor and unity in Chechnya were replicated in a later domestic conflict.

The result of this conflict stands in direct opposition to that of the First Chechen War, as Russia was not hesitant to apply heavy pressure and military force against Ingushetia to avoid repeated humiliation. Whereas failure to act quickly and uniformly had hampered Russia’s efforts in the First Chechen War, Ingushetia proved to be a case of quick response. The humanitarian situation was horrific, but Russia’s objectives were focused on the existential threat posed by what it had deemed to be an increasingly dangerous religious movement.

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<sup>56</sup> Aleksei Malashenko, Dmitrii Trenin, and Anatol Lieven, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*, p. 79

<sup>57</sup> Francis Naylor, *Geography of Asymmetrical Conflict: Geographic Perception in Post Chechen War Ingushetia*, p. 48

As the years have passed, Russia has acquired a reputation for swift and severe action when it comes to domestic conflicts. Since the First Chechen War, which Russia failed to act quickly enough to quell the rebellion, Russia has opted for a “crush it early” approach, as opposed to seeking peaceful but time-consuming resolutions. No longer willing to take its chances, Russia has shifted its domestic policy from a more open-minded vision of the nineties to one of merciless authority. While not necessarily a novel idea in Russian history, the significance of the shift in strategic policy for the Russian Federation, nonetheless, requires examination. Before the conflict, Russia had shown an easing in its pressure on opposition and dissent, but the rebellion resulted in a quick reversal. Any discussions about whether the open-mindedness would have continued given other circumstances are purely speculative, though the reactionary nature of Russia in Chechnya may aid in understanding its perception.

### *Insurgency in North Caucasus*

Immediately following the Second Chechen War, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus was a low-level conflict fought between Russia and Islamist militants associated with the Caucasus Emirate, a jihadist organization operating out of parts of Syria and the Caucasus region. The conflict displayed a few key adaptations made on the part of Russia following Chechnya and served to further prove the fact that Russia’s security strategy changed in large part due to the lessons it learned from the Chechen Wars. In the case of the insurgency, more structured, coherent military tactics and overall strategy were applied, as opposed to the lackluster showing in Chechnya that inhibited Russia’s ability to achieve victory in the first war.

The disorganization, resulting from the indiscriminate deaths of many civilians in the Chechen Wars, were partially due to the unpreparedness of the Russian military, though this lesson was seen to have been corrected in response to the insurgency. *Zachistkas*, or mop-up operations, were applied towards the end of the Second Chechen War and were aimed at creating a more targeted approach to finding and eliminating insurgents and jihadists.

However, the precision of these operations had been far improved by the Russians in response to the Insurgency in the North Caucasus. In between the First and Second Chechen Wars, Russia developed a substantially more organized approach towards its targets and perceived security threats.<sup>58</sup> In addition to the *zachistkas*, the Russian military, by the time of the insurgency, had brought in specialized elite counterinsurgency forces to lead the counterinsurgency operation, as opposed to Chechnya, where traditionally trained troops were utilized.<sup>59</sup> The organizational and structural change enabled Russia to combat insurgents more effectively and constituted a major shift from the total war tactics of the First Chechen War.

While the two military-style changes can be primarily viewed through a structural lens, they can also be considered attempts by Russia to encourage unity and limit division within the region. In Chechnya, the indiscriminate killing of civilians led to large numbers of Chechens becoming more involved in the cause against Russia and served as a focal point for Russian understanding of the threat of radicalization that comes from targeting its own citizens. The division that came from Russia's indiscriminate bombings in Chechnya made Russia more wary of the implications,

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<sup>58</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?", p. 49

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 50

thereby triggering a discernible change in the North Caucasus Insurgency, in which the implementation of the novel tactics had led to a decrease in insurgent violence.<sup>60</sup>

The concept of “Chechenization” is regarded as the process undertaken by the Russian Federation in the aftermath of the Chechen Wars to reform (i.e., pacify) the republic of Chechnya into an unproblematic, obedient puppet regime that could be controlled from Moscow. What is overlooked, however, is the Chechenization that occurred outside of the Chechen republic, and the steps taken by the Russian Federation, with Putin at the forefront, to put in place measures aimed at preventing the types of activity that led directly to the outbreak of the Chechen conflicts. Policies and actions geared towards crackdowns on opposition, justification in the form of carefully crafted narratives, ensuring unity and preventing division, and guaranteeing strong leadership and structured policy approaches all came in the years following the wars, and can be attributed heavily to the lessons learned in Chechnya.

The central figures in the process of Chechenization are, of course, Vladimir Putin, as well as the former and current leaders of Chechnya, now-deceased Akhmad Kadyrov and his son, Ramzan Kadyrov. Despite once being part of the separatist movement that opposed the government, the Kadyrovs grew closer to Putin and Moscow, and became critical to helping eliminate the sorts of religiously-motivated aggression that characterized the Second Chechen War. The prevention of religious dissent within Chechnya has contributed directly to Putin’s vision of a more united, and more secure, Russian Federation. The leadership installed in Chechnya and other republics following the war was one of the mechanisms aimed at preventing religiously-fueled dissent from spreading within the region and rising to the pre-Chechen War levels. Though religious

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

dissent has since occurred in Ingushetia and elsewhere, there has been markedly less, and the dissent that has existed has not posed a serious existential threat to the Federation.

While leadership and military interference were pivotal in the control of religious opposition within Chechnya, the wars also sparked broader political opposition from outside of the Caucasus that was addressed primarily through control over the media. Since the wars, other methods at inhibiting domestic dissent have been introduced; these include heavier control of the media, discouraging and delegitimizing protests, harassment of opposition leaders, and increased control of the internet.<sup>61</sup> While such factors, when considered independently, do not trace back to any one event and, to some extent, represent a broader Russian policy grounded in historical continuity theory, the broader image of such crackdowns on opposition are evidently linked with Chechnya. The successful tactics used to censor the media's coverage of events deemed threatening to national security at the time of the Chechen conflicts have become hallmarks of the Russian Federation.

Putin's relationship with the media has also been shaped by Russia's, and his, experiences in Chechnya. As previously mentioned, the press enjoyed relative freedom during the first war, but the eventual crackdown by the government in the later years, and Russia's subsequent victory, helped solidify the association between open media coverage and chaotic regional politics.<sup>62</sup> In the interview with Dr. Fiona Hill, she emphasized the inherent link between Russia's territorial integrity and its perception of domestic security.<sup>63</sup> Until the Second Chechen War, the media had been perceived as acting against the will of the government and, consequently, in encouragement

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<sup>61</sup> Maria Lipman, "How Putin Silences Dissent: Inside the Kremlin's Crackdown"

<sup>62</sup> Uwe Halback, *Chechnya's Status within the Russian Federation*, p. 31

<sup>63</sup> Fiona Hill. Personal interview. 12 March 2021.

of the Chechen rebellion that directly threatened Russia's territorial integrity. The perception of the press as a threat by the top members of the Russian government was, therefore, in direct opposition to Russia's domestic security, and required a correction. Since the second war, Russia has continued to showcase its control over the media through various laws, such as one enacted in 2014 that prohibits "calls to harm the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation".<sup>64</sup> From a policy perspective, Chechnya has made Russia hyper-aware of its territorial vulnerabilities and has acted as a catalyst for the manipulation of policies to further an authoritarian agenda.

Western reaction has been largely centered around the argument that Russia's assertions of control over the media represent a larger attempt by the regime to inhibit democracy and place limitations on human rights. This narrative, while partially accurate, fails to consider the reasoning behind such actions. As seen in the First Chechen War, the freedom of the press has been perceived as a threat to domestic stability, rather than a proponent of it. Yes, maintaining a grip over the media has afforded Putin consistently high popularity among his constituents and therefore allowed him to maintain his position of power.

However, reducing Russia's control over the media to simply a power grab inadequately represents the real threat perceived by Russia during the First Chechen War. The alternative, which has rightfully been criticized by human rights organizations,<sup>65</sup> should be reexamined through the lens of the "Chechen problem" which suggests that, through increased censorship of media outlets, Russia has been able to reassert control over its own territory and achieve a higher level of overall domestic security.

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<sup>64</sup> Uwe Halback, *Chechnya's Status within the Russian Federation*, p. 10

<sup>65</sup> "As If They Fell From the Sky": Counterinsurgency, Rights Violations, and Rampant Impunity in Ingushetia"

Similarly to the 2014 law, Chechnya has also become a pretext for various other authoritarian measures that have resulted in increased corruption, attempts at extraterritorial justice, and espionage activities.<sup>66</sup> The traumatic nature of Russia's initial experience with Chechnya, including the loss of the first war, have driven it to commit violent acts against Russian opposition leaders and other national governments. According to Maura Reynolds's on-the-ground reporting of the First Chechen War, Russia's response to Chechnya is largely emotional,<sup>67</sup> as it challenges the unity of Russian national identity and affirms Wilhelmsen's argument that Chechnya posed an existential threat to the notion of the "Russian self."

Though cracking down on opposition was an effective way for Putin to prevent security threats from gaining momentum, the ability to establish unity between Chechnya and Russia in the aftermath of the wars was part of the effort to prevent security threats from initially gaining traction. The most likely culprit for the establishment of a new Chechen-Russian relationship was the Kadyrov family, which enabled Putin to forge a relationship of trust and loyalty, as opposed to the Dudayev-Yeltsin relationship that ended poorly. In a famous November 1991 decree, General Dudayev called on "all Moscow-based Muslims to turn the city into a "disaster area".<sup>68</sup> To contrast, Chechnya's first president following the second war, Kadyrov has helped construct a Chechnya that "portrays itself as an advocate for Russian multiethnic unity."<sup>69</sup> Kadyrov's importance cannot be overstated, since he has successfully fulfilled his role within Russia's security framework as a pacifier for the republic.<sup>70</sup> His rise has become quintessential

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<sup>66</sup> Fiona Hill. Personal interview. 12 March 2021.

<sup>67</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Trenin, Malashenko, and Lieven, "*Russia's Restless Frontier*", p. 18

<sup>69</sup> Uwe Halback, *Chechnya's Status within the Russian Federation*, p. 6

<sup>70</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

for Russia and Putin's fulfillment of Chechenization, as Kadyrov's tactics of warlordism play directly into Russia's desire to regulate Chechnya, despite the violence and record of human rights abuses.

Post-Chechen Wars, Russia went about centralizing its political structures in an attempt to establish overarching control over its territory. Putin's inheritance of the Russian presidency in May 2000, right around the beginning of the Second Chechen War, came along with some dramatic changes aimed at avenging the loss of the first war and restructuring the Russian political system in a way that would provide for stabilization through centralization. In essence:

*“The domestic institutional and bureaucratic context of Putin's first term as president was, therefore, fraught with elements of continuity from the Yeltsin period, but also radical signs of change. [In his 2008 book “Putin's leadership: Character and consequences”, Richard Sakwa] characterises this initial period of the Putin leadership as a turn towards needed centralisation and stabilisation, aimed at restoring the ‘grandeur of office’”.*<sup>71</sup>

Putin's rise in 2000 was a response to Russian structural disorganization of the mid and late nineties. His remaining in power is a signal of the regime's (and to some extent, the people's) satisfaction with the stability and relative peace that has resulted and endured. At its core, Chechnya exemplified the weaknesses of Russia's conflicting political hierarchy and organizational structure. As a response, Russian leadership initially fought back to address previous errors and has since remained steadfast along the path that had been set in the second war.

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<sup>71</sup> Licinia Simão, “Do Leaders Still Decide? The Role of Leadership in Russian Foreign Policymaking”, p. 489

Compared to what it was in the early nineties, contemporary Russia has become a shadow of itself. As of 2017, Russia has continued along the path of centralization, with some Russian experts referring to the process as “hyper-centralization”. Russia’s fixation with maintaining its territorial integrity is associated in its psyche to its previous lack of structure, which has directly led to its continuation on a pathway that emphasizes clear political structures and leadership roles.<sup>72</sup>

The domestic implications of the Chechen Problem, as it has been referred to, has forced Russia to examine the effectiveness of its policies regarding social freedoms and resort to old historical methods of authoritarianism and state-control.

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<sup>72</sup> Uwe Halback, *Chechnya’s Status within the Russian Federation*, p. 12

## VI. International Security Implications

Though Russia's domestic policy and conflicts have showcased the lessons learned from the Chechen conflicts, it is also important to examine the ways in which Russian foreign policy and conflict have done the same. For Chechnya's impact to hold true in the way that I argue, it must be shown that Russia's foreign security strategy and perspective have also been impacted by the conflict. For these reasons, I discuss the impact of the conflict on Russian foreign policy and external conflict in the following pages.

By incorporating elements of international relations theory and expert opinions, I strive to show that, foreign affairs shifted because of the first and second Chechen Wars, as did domestic affairs. In particular, I address the most notable foreign conflicts, particularly the conflict between Russia and Ukraine in the Crimea (2014) and the Syrian Civil War (2015). Additionally, I analyze the broader trends in Russian foreign policy and security strategy shifts along with the extent to which they have been shaped by the Chechen War.

### *Syria*

The Chechen Wars, in many ways, represent an entirely different security threat than does Russia's presence in Syria. Some may wonder how it is possible for a previous domestic conflict to impact so heavily an international one, though the trends that began because of the Chechen conflicts, particularly the success of the counterterrorism justification campaign, may provide some insight. For example, the religious divisions that were sparked during the Chechen Wars have become a recurring theme during the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2014, in which the fears of division and potential spillover into Russian territory were important factors in keeping

Russia engaged.<sup>73</sup> The Islamization of the Chechen conflict has, for better or worse, become an integral part in defining the Russian relationship with Chechnya, and, as a result, have pulled Russia deeper into conflicts with religious undertones out of concern for their spread to Russia.

In the case of Syria, other economic, political, and social factors drove Russia to become involved, though it is clear by Russia's portrayal of the conflict as a security threat to the Russian populace that old wounds were at stake as well. The recency of the Chechen wars and Russia's need to deal with religious differences domestically made the conflict even more relevant for this study, as it provided an opportunity for Russia to act on its knowledge of the dangers of division and involve itself as a preemptive measure.

In addition to fears that the Syrian conflict could reawaken past divisions and oppose the domestic policies aimed at stabilizing various groups in Russia, it also provided Russia the opportunity to implement the series of justification responses that enabled it to succeed in its second campaign against the Chechens. The involvement of Russia in the Syrian conflict gave Russia the opportunity to project an "overarching frame of reference (counterterrorism) onto the entire conflict".<sup>74</sup> The ability of Russia to project its counterterrorist narrative has been boosted by transfer of fighters from the North Caucasus region to Syria to support the jihadist cause against the Assad regime.<sup>75</sup> As the Chechen conflict had taught Russia that justifying action can have extraordinary importance in garnering and maintaining support among the Russian population, the same was seen during the Syrian conflict. The moralistic overtones of the official Russian narrative surrounding the Syrian conflict served to justify Russia's decision to intervene

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<sup>73</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", pp. 59-60

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 62

<sup>75</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?", p. 74

in the Middle East to its citizenry and has allowed it to maintain a persona as a leading nation in the war on terror and the stand against groups like the Islamic State.

To summarize, Russia's involvement in Syria can be viewed through a Chechen lens in which Russia's primary objectives in the region are to prevent the religious radicalism and division that characterized parts of the Chechen insurgency from being reinvigorated by religious infighting and general instability in a neighboring region. To do so, Russia has actively participated in the propping up of the Assad regime, as well as reemphasizing and expanding the counterterrorism campaign from domestic to global interference. Russian strategic perspectives have shifted from domestic-focused to more global, especially as the counterterrorism campaign has been increasingly presented as an international operation as of July 2000, where Putin officially shifted in his presentation of the Chechen conflict as a threat that extended beyond borders.<sup>76</sup>

### *Ukraine*

Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 was interpreted as historic in some regards, whereas it could also be viewed as a less surprising step in the context of post-Chechen War Russia and Putin. Chechnya revealed to both Russia and Putin the volatility of its territorial security and made them both hyper-aware of potential triggers that could lead to chaos. As a result, Putin has helped form a Russia willing and able to strike at any threats to Russian security, whether real or perceived. In the case of Ukraine, the rapidly evolving political situation that followed the Maidan revolution ended in a country ready to draw closer relations to Europe and the European Union (EU).<sup>77</sup> This trigger can be connected to previous events in Ukraine, such as that of the

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<sup>76</sup> Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", p. 60

<sup>77</sup> Aglaya Snetkov, *Russia's Security Policy under Putin*, p. 75

Orange Revolution (2004-2005), in which Ukraine's internal unrest awakened old fears within Russia of its own susceptibility to instability. Russia's perception of the threat posed by the European Union as an actor with interests in direct opposition to those of the Russian Federation pushed it to its breaking point.

Russia's justification of Crimean annexation represents another pattern in post-Chechnya Russian security strategy, since its use in the Chechen Wars helped shape the narrative needed to win over Russian support for the action, thereby increasing Russia's perceived level of security. Just as Chechnya was presented and perceived by the Russian population, so too was Ukraine. The annexation was met with massive civilian support, helping shift Putin's popularity and adding to his and Russia's perceived security position.<sup>78</sup> Chechnya was framed as a counterterrorist threat in the same way that Ukraine was presented as a threat to Russian nationalism, therefore sparking a similar reaction among the Russian people.

The justification process that had been so successful in Chechnya had paid off again, though the case of Ukraine seems to be a case of a perceived threat more so than a real one, since little evidence exists to justify Russia's claims that an overwhelming majority of Crimeans favored joining the Federation.<sup>79</sup> Despite this, Putin's mischaracterization of sentiment in Crimea to the Russian people also helped drive Russian nationalism, another key lesson taken from the Chechen conflicts.

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<sup>78</sup> Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six Years after Illegal Annexation"

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

The approach towards Ukraine has also mirrored the approach of the Russian military after they had adapted to the conditions of fighting in Chechnya. Whereas it took some time to realize that specialized forces were needed to combat the guerilla warfare occurring in Chechnya, Russia responded to the Ukrainian crisis in Crimea with deployments of elite units without hesitation.<sup>80</sup> This adaptive military approach marks a change in traditional Russian military response in favor of a hybrid-warfare, elite forces model. The original course of action used in Chechnya was not the organized strategy needed, but the mistake was not repeated in Crimea. The application of a more organized strategy in Ukraine marks an application of the initial failed attempt in Chechnya that was later corrected in the second war.

Chechnya, in this light, should be thought of as the first domino to fall, since it is sealed in the memory of Russia as the first security dilemma, and an extremely costly one. It is interesting, however, to note the opposing approaches by Russia towards self-determination in Ukraine and Chechnya. Whereas the Chechens' self-determination within Russia added to the perceived security threat, that of ethnic Russians in Ukraine was harnessed by the Russian Federation in its justification of Crimea's annexation. The perception of self-determination does not diminish the influence of Chechnya on future security issues like Ukraine. If anything, it strengthens the argument, as this seemingly contradictory point serves to showcase Russia's capacity to manipulate events in a way that serves its own agenda.

Unlike the Yeltsin era, which ended soon after the start of the Second Chechen War, Putin's rise to power is often referred to as a "return to a centralised system of decisions" referred to as

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<sup>80</sup> Emil Souleimanov, "The North Caucasus Insurgency: Dead or Alive?", p. 59

“power vertikal”.<sup>81</sup> In essence, the transition of power from Yeltsin to Putin marked a shift in Russia’s approach to foreign policy by reassociating the position of the Russian president with shaping foreign policy objectives. It is important to mention that, prior to Yeltsin, a highly centralized form of policymaking defined the Soviet system, so as not to suggest that the Chechen conflict somehow marked an entirely new role of the Russian presidency. The Chechen Wars have, however, marked the beginning of a different leader and style of leadership for the Russian Federation that has since persisted. Unlike Yeltsin, Putin has become synonymous with centralization and has set a clear foreign policy direction for Russia.<sup>82</sup> Putin’s rapid rise to power can be seen as a rebuke of the previous regime’s handling of the First Chechen War, while his successful performance in the second war helped him maintain positive approval of the Russian people and solidify power. The failure of the Yeltsin regime to establish a central strategy for the Chechen conflict put Russia in an unfamiliar position of weakness that Putin was certain not to replicate. The centralized structure of the Putin regime has become a staple of Russia’s current security strategy, which associates a centralized system with a secure Russia.

The genius of Vladimir Putin is, at its core, a correction of Yeltsin’s mistakes. The threat of Chechnya came from its direct opposition to the idea of a greater Russian nation and replacement with an ethnic and religious nationalism that struck at the heart of a country that had previously been united under a common ideology. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had not yet found its unifying force and had begun exposing cracks that Chechnya ultimately took advantage of. One of the greatest impacts of the Chechen conflict is the rise and development of Putin and his leadership style, which, though distinct from the old Soviet style in many ways, has traces of

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<sup>81</sup> Licinia Simão, “Do Leaders Still Decide? The Role of Leadership in Russian Foreign Policymaking”, p. 483

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 492

the USSR's unification strategy which cast a wide ideological net, which ultimately enabled a system of government to carry on for nearly seven decades. Putin, as opposed to Yeltsin, was able to reinvigorate Russia's sense of common identity through strong appeals to nationalism that were independent of ethnicity, race, religion, or other divisive elements. The divisive nature of the Chechen movement that threatened Russia internally led Putin to adopt a new kind of Russian nationalism that could serve as a symbol of Russian unity, thereby discouraging both domestic and international efforts to come between Russians and Russia. In this light, the rise of Putin as a unification symbol, in the context of a divided Russia in 2000, has led Russia and Putin scholars like Fiona Hill to characterize Putin as the ultimate Russian statesman, or *государственник* ("Gosudarstvenik").<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Clifford Gaddy and Fiona Hill, "Vladimir Putin as Statist: Restoring the Greatness of Russia"

## VII. Pathways Forward

Chechnya has played a significant role in shaping Russia's security perspective, beginning with the outbreak of the First Chechen War and continuing to this day. Through Russia's action and reaction to the War in Ingushetia, the Insurgency in the North Caucasus, and its general policy implementation since Chechnya, Russia has shown that it has taken and applied various lessons domestically. Russia's active participation in Syria and Ukraine has shown its willingness to take the lessons from the Chechen conflicts and applied them in its global affairs.

From Russia's security perspective, Chechnya changed everything: the volatility of Russia's borders, the malleability of the Russian national identity, and the weaknesses left over from the Soviet era, all became exposed. Most notably, Chechnya uncovered the truest point of sensitivity in Russian perceptions of security: territory. While Russian threat perception remains complex and multidimensional, much of the lessons learned from Chechnya connect back to Russia's fear of compromising its territorial integrity, and its responses to the lessons from the conflicts mark an attempt by Russia to restore confidence in its borders.

Since the Cold War, the United States has looked for ways to ease the relationship with the then Soviet Union and now Russian Federation, arguably to no avail. It appears, in both Russian and American media, the two states have been pitted against each other in an endless battle, with no winner in sight. From both a Russian and Western perspective, attempts to restore the attitudes of optimism for a fresh start after the collapse of the Soviet Union began to slowly fade, while Chechnya served to hasten the process. Improvement of West-Russia relations have since

become an elusive concept, though it is worth reexamining the potential of improved relations through the newfound understanding of Russia as a result of the Chechen case study.

The recommendations below are based upon both the understanding of Russia through the lens of Chechnya impact, as well as the expert opinions of subject-matter experts like Dr. Fiona Hill and Maura Reynolds, among others. While the strain of the West-Russia relationship will require years, or even decades, to repair, the implementation of the following recommendations would set the two sides on a positive course that has so far evaded both.

### *Cultivate understanding of Russia*

According to experts like Fiona Hill, the Chechen conflict imparted Russia with a tolerance for messiness in both domestic and global affairs.<sup>84</sup> Since then, Russia has had an increased tolerance for violence, espionage, and chaotic operations in its handling of conflicts. As a result, Russia has become accustomed to dealing with matters unilaterally, opting for an approach in which it can exert maximum control. As a result of its disregard for professional approaches, which emphasize diplomatic negotiation and condemn unilateral acts of aggression, Russia has alienated itself from the West. On the other hand, the West has failed to understand Russia's reasoning behind its often hostile activities internal and external to its spheres of influence.

In an open letter to US policymakers, 103 foreign-policy experts outlined the dangerous trajectory of the US-Russia relationship given the continued strain and exchanged hostilities between the two entities.<sup>85</sup> Countries of the Western Hemisphere, led by the United States, have

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<sup>84</sup> Fiona Hill. Personal interview. 12 March 2021.

<sup>85</sup> Rose Gottemoeller, Thomas Graham, Fiona Hill, Jon Huntsman, Jr., Robert Legvold, and Thomas R. Pickering, "Opinion: It's Time to Rethink Our Russia Policy", POLITICO

fundamentally misunderstood the Russian perspective. Instead, they have adopted the belief that Russia is set on destroying Western society and asserting global domination. This mischaracterization ignores important components of the Russian experience, like the Chechen conflicts, which have made it wary of its global power position and sensitive to the subject of Western influence. The first step in improving West-Russia relations must come from an improved understanding of the experiences of each actor and the ways in which the respective experiences of each have impacted their respective perceptions and outlooks.

From the standpoint of the Chechen conflicts and their impact on Russia, the West's comprehension of Russia's reasoning behind its response to the conflict, and how those responses have shaped future responses, must be deepened. As an example, Western perspective may focus on the Chechen rebellion as an instance of Russian aggression and suppression against one of its ethnic populations for the purpose of consolidating power to use internationally. From the perspective of Russian leadership, however, Chechnya constituted an uprising that, if not properly quelled, could threaten the territorial integrity and national identity of the whole Russian Federation. Inevitably, Russia's conflict with Chechnya included an element of power politics. However, the difference in perception of Chechnya's importance to both the West and Russia have contributed to a wider misunderstanding of the intentions and priorities of each.

Continued or increased funding to think tanks, federally funded research and development centers (FFRDC), and academic institutions undertaking research on foreign affairs and Russia will help facilitate a less superficial understanding of Russia, while helping dismantle old perceptions blurred by outdated Cold War rhetoric. Additionally, increased involvement of, and

reliance on, regional and foreign policy experts in high-level negotiations or in the policymaking process will ensure that attitudes towards Russia do not reflect biased or partisan attitudes. Maura Reynolds's on-the-ground reporting in Chechnya helped inject understanding of an otherwise distant conflict into the American conversation about Russian foreign policy.<sup>86</sup> Fiona Hill's time as a student in the Soviet Union and as a senior advisor engaging with high-level Russian officials have contributed to her current depth of understanding of the Russian perspective, making her an invaluable asset for building Western competency in approaching Russia.<sup>87</sup> Without the efforts of such individuals, the West-Russia, or US-Russia, relationship would lack the first-hand experience necessary to markedly improve it. Prioritization of expertise in talks and policymaking, and encouragement of research and travel will be instrumental in reinvigorating the West-Russia relationship.

### *Practice Strategic Empathy*

As Fiona Hill states, "strategic empathy" is a unique quality, grounded in education and awareness, that allows for one state to better approach issues related to the latter by acknowledging and understanding the perspectives of the latter state.<sup>88</sup> The trauma and humiliation associated with the First Chechen War instilled strategic empathy in Russia,<sup>89</sup> while simultaneously implanting Russia with a feeling of vengeance towards Chechnya and a distrust of the outside world. Strategic empathy allowed Russia to acknowledge and develop close relations with countries that had dealt with terrorism, as the Chechen Wars gave Russia a novel experience with jihadist activities within its borders. For example, in the aftermath of Chechnya,

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<sup>86</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Fiona Hill. Personal interview. 12 March 2021.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Maura Reynolds. Personal interview. 19 March 2021.

Russia showed a willingness to join forces with the West to tackle global terrorism, evident in the campaign for the War on Terror that followed the events of 9/11.<sup>90</sup> Strategic empathy, though not guaranteed, has the potential to bring together adversarial nations in a way that allows for the pursuit of shared strategic goals and for de-escalation of hostilities between state actors.

Practicing strategic empathy allows for the identification and pursuit of common objectives. The Chechen conflicts provided Russia with an awareness of terrorism's threat, though other events have given it a strong interest in arms control and the environment related issues. Unfortunately, cooperative efforts such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have grinded to a halt. The current breakdown of formerly successful efforts, however, is not a comment on the effectiveness of strategic empathy. Rather, the breakdown suggests that previously shared priorities that allowed for cooperation have fundamentally shifted, and that strategic empathy was likely not a component holding the effort together. Strategic empathy, therefore, can provide a more long-term solution for the improvement of West-Russia relations, since its effectiveness does not depend on the existence of shared priorities.

Sufficient expertise and understanding on the part of national leadership are required to put strategic empathy to practice, which adds a level of importance to the previously emphasized cultivation of understanding between the West and Russia. The importance of perception must also remain preeminent because strategic empathy requires an understanding of not only the realities faced by a state, but its perceptions. The significance of the Chechen Wars stems not from the results of the conflict, but the impact on the Russian security perspective. Russia's perspective of Chechnya forced it to reconsider its sense of security. It became hyper-aware of

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<sup>90</sup> Alexander Vershbow and Daniel Fried, "How the West Should Deal with Russia", Atlantic Council

domestic and international events near its territory or spheres of influence, and more willing to respond quickly as a defense mechanism. Strategic empathy requires acknowledging the traumas that Russia endured during the Chechen War while not forgetting the atrocities that it took part in. In effect, strategic empathy does not take sides, but rather considers both a country's actions and perceptions.

*Act in unison with allies and institutions*

Historically, alliances have always been a critical part of the international system, as alliances allow nations to combine resources and influence, utilizing them in a more impactful way. Especially in the post-WWII era, international institutions have become the place where much of the discourse and solutions regarding global affairs takes place. The United States and the West are no exception, with institutions like NATO forming based on concepts of collective security and the shared objectives of stability and prosperity.

Despite NATO's proven effectiveness at preventing global conflict, it has largely failed to reign in or engage with Russia. In fact, the Chechen Wars serve as examples in which nearly no NATO involvement occurred.<sup>91</sup> Russia has perceived NATO's silence as disinterest and as an invitation to continue acting aggressively in the region without consequence. The lack of European interest in Chechnya may have allowed for continued cooperation with Russia in the short-term; however, in the long term, its detachment signaled to Russia of the West's "white flag" mentality towards matters within Russia's spheres of influence. NATO's lack of response to the Chechen Wars has played out dreadfully, as Russia has felt empowered to act out in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere.

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<sup>91</sup> Walter Comins-Richmond, "NATO and U.S. Choose Silence on Chechnya", Los Angeles Times

Effective alliances will likely help deter Russia from continued acts of hostility, though NATO's relationship with Russia has taken a severe knock because of Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. NATO's outlook on Russia outlines the relationship's presently tumultuous status, while acknowledging previous cooperative efforts in various areas that have served the interests of both sides.<sup>92</sup> Officially, NATO has suspended cooperation with Russia, though official "political and military channels of communication remain open".<sup>93</sup> Despite NATO's valid response towards Russia in light of the situation in Crimea, ignoring Russia has not proven to be a successful strategy, as no-response does not equate to a negative response.

The West has repeatedly mistaken Russia for an actor operating by a similar set of security assumptions. On the contrary, a lack of response to international provocations by Russia is a far worse approach than an appropriate show of force.<sup>94</sup> Instead of inaction and alienation, NATO must correct past precedents and push back against Russian aggression, especially when directed against weaker neighboring countries. NATO must also harness the soft-power capabilities of its members to draw Russia into negotiation talks, thereby deterring Russian aggression and encouraging progress through the diplomatic process.

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<sup>92</sup> "NATO - Topic: Relations with Russia," North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Maura Reynolds, Personal interview, 19 March 2021.

## VIII. Conclusion

The Chechen Wars, which took place between 1994 and 2009, had a profound impact on the trajectory of the Russian state, as well as on the overall Russian psyche and security perspective. Chechnya's dissatisfaction with its territorial status after the breakup of the Soviet Union led to a rebellion against the new Russian Federation which ultimately resulted in two distinct conflicts in which clear lessons were identified and described. While the lessons of Chechnya may not have constituted a momentous shift in Russian history, they had and continue to have an enduring role in shaping the behavior of the current Russian regime.

Opposition and dissent had a place in Russia towards the end of the Soviet period and the beginning of the Federation, though the shift in the relationship and use of the media around this time marked an attempt by Russia to reassert authority over both its territory and its citizens. The shifts in the allowance of criticism in the media's coverage of the wars to a highly controlled narrative can be interpreted as a preventative measure of future conflict and a tactical maneuver aimed at improving Russian response. The media also served a central role in establishing and spreading the "Russian" (i.e., government) narrative of the fight against Chechnya as a counterterrorism campaign. By assuring favorable press coverage and issuing official statements directed against Chechnya, Russia, led by President Putin, was able to successfully change the course of the conflict and achieve victory after previously suffering defeat in the first war. This lesson comes from the application of new methods in the Second Chechen War that corrected the mistakes of the first, though Russia had circumstantial help, as the conflict evolved to include more religious Islamic elements.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> James Hughes, "*Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*", p. 94

Russia's experience with a rogue republic soon after its de facto creation had also made it hyper-aware of the internal elements which threatened its domestic security, including the divisive political and religious sentiment stemming from Chechnya. The general sense of unity that had come from the shared experiences of two world wars and been ingrained in the Soviet system had seemingly begun to wear off by the time of Chechen Wars, forcing Russia to reexamine its understanding of the role of division within its borders.

By all accounts, Putin has made it a priority to adopt a stance that encourages wider Russian unity and prevents division, which includes consistent remarks aimed at pitting Russia against the United States and the West. Such rhetoric, while strategic in many ways, has enabled Putin to prevent the emergence of domestic enemies by providing a foreign scapegoat. Division within Russia, of which the Chechen Wars continues to be the prime example, has become relatively weak since the conflicts, and stands in direct contrast to the strong front of unity pushed forth by the Russian government today.

By the Second Chechen War, the ineffectiveness of Boris Yeltsin and the lack of coherent strategy towards Chechnya in the first war shifted to a strategically efficient military force with a leader with an adept understanding of conflict. The necessity of strong leadership and coherent policy composed the final major lesson of Chechnya and is evident in the future conflicts and general leadership style of Putin in the years following. The shift towards more elite, specialized fighting forces in both the Second Chechen War and in the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere in Russia, illustrate that the Chechen Wars encouraged Russia to be unbashful to the use of targeted force. Putin's rise to political power brought Russian foreign policy into closer

alignment with the old tradition of the Soviet Union, enabling a more organized response to conflict from the top-down. Finally, the move toward warlordism as a response to the Chechen problem has echoed in other regions of Russia and has served to prop up Russia's perception of internal and international stability.

While the typical portrayal of Russia as an aggressor has its validity, it is not wholly accurate. Unfortunately, such a narrative ends up being a reductive representation of a complex entity. In accordance with historical continuity theory, modern Russia has been shaped by a long history dating back centuries. Despite this, the recency of events like the Chechen wars have an arguably greater impact on the perspective of modern Russia.

Emphasis on continued research and better understanding of adversarial perspectives, in addition to cultivation of strategic empathy, will reinvigorate the potential of the West-Russia relationship. Coordination and cooperation with allies will help assure that improvements made in the relationship can remain steadfast. Significant work lies ahead for both parties, as overcoming Cold War perceptions and rhetoric will require serious effort. Progress can only proceed slowly, however, if the Chechen conflicts have proven anything, Russia is capable of change, for better or for worse.

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