Independence Through Information War: Chechnyaâ??s Story and Ukraine Connection

Description

Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dubious videos have surfaced across social media platforms depicting intense combat operations of Chechen forces loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov uses online platforms to showcase Chechen soldiers fighting against Ukrainian forces, a move seen as a PR tactic serving both his image and Kremlin propaganda.

By contrast, Chechen volunteers fighting for Ukraine represent their current struggle as a historic opportunity to challenge the Russian Federation and regain independence. Since the early 1990s, the Chechen independence movement has consistently recognized the importance of conveying their struggle to break free from the Russian Federation to global audiences. This communication took the form of facilitating access for foreign journalists in the 1990s, and subsequently expanded to include the use of digital platforms like the Internet and mobile phones, which is congruent with current Ukrainian operations in the information environment.

The wars in Chechnya and Ukraine are examples of conflicts where the Russian Federation has aimed to regain influence and control over countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union. One aspect of these conflicts, from an informational point of view, is the use of euphemisms by Russian authorities to justify military intervention. Official Russian sources branded the Second Russo-Chechen war (1999-2009) as a â??counter-terrorist operationâ?? and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a â??special military operation.â?? This retrospective analysis delves into the role the information environment has played in the ongoing Chechen struggle for independence as both a backdrop to the current efforts of Chechen volunteers fighting for Ukraine and a link to the overall Chechen and Ukrainian approaches to their respective information activities.

Punching above their weight

Ichkeria, widely recognized by the global community as Chechnya (although this name is derived from the Russian exoethnonym), has a turbulent history intertwined with the Russian Empire since the 16th century. Throughout conflicts involving Chechnya such as the Caucasus War (1817 â?? 1864), Russia has portrayed its offensive operations as defensive measures, and launched information campaigns to

discredit the Chechen people and their culture. Common terms that the Russian Empire used to denigrate the Chechens were â??the worst of the bandits,â?? implying that they were violent and lawless, and referring to Chechnya as their â??nest.â?? Post the 1917 October Revolution, brief Chechen independence was soon overshadowed by Soviet incorporation, followed by the mass deportation of Chechens during World War II, accusing them of collaboration. Chechens returned home in 1957. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they declared independence of a new Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet aviation general, became the president of Chechnya in 1991, pushing for a definitive break from its Soviet past and establishing Ichkeria as a democratic and secular state. Amid a post-Soviet crisis, Russia could do little else than accept Chechnyaâ??s independence. After the end of the 1993 political crisis in Russia, Moscow sought to regain control over Chechnya, resulting in failed political settlements and covert military actions against the Chechen government. When Chechens in November 1994 captured Russian tankmen inside Chechnya, it led to public embarrassment for the Kremlin due to international media coverage. This culminated in Russia launching a full-scale military operation against Chechnya on Dec. 11, 1994. The invasion of Chechnya was marked by notable refusals to participate among the Russian military, negatively impacting the operationâ??s public image. Despite the unexpected resilience of the Chechen army, Russia employed aggressive tactics, including heavy bombing in Grozny, resulting in massive civilian casualties and global disapproval.

No less importantly, the Chechen operation also created shockwaves inside Russia thanks to the established cooperation between the Chechen government and the Russian press, including the Media-Most holding of Russian oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky and its outlets such as NTV, TNT, and Ekho Moskvy radio station. The Chechens dominated the Russian information space by exploiting the main vulnerability of the post-Soviet approach to information support for conflict: banal silence. Throughout the First Russo-Chechen War, journalists, including international ones, often had more opportunity to communicate with representatives of the â??separatistâ?? Chechens than with Russian military officials or the authorities in Moscow. For example, Chechen officials would pay taxi fares of journalists travelling from Dagestan to Chechnya to record interviews. There were also several Chechen newspapers and two Chechen radio stations, Radio Free Caucasus in Latvia, and a Chechen information centre in Poland. There are clear parallels between Chechen activities in the 1990s and current Ukrainian efforts aimed at gaining international attention by highlighting Russian brutality through a deft use of social media and overt public messaging, which has yielded greater Western arms donations and backing for sanctions against Russia.

Besides pursuing international attention for their cause, Chechen leaders also searched, given the significant population and military asymmetries, for an ideology to motivate the total mobilization of society. Islam became such an ideology, and the country began to dismantle the remnants of the Soviet judicial system and establish Sharia law. Many researchers believe that the proliferation of Wahhabism and Salafism in Chechnya was not a cause, but a consequence of the Russian invasion in 1994. The radicalization of Muslims became a distinct phenomenon within this trend, inevitably altering the forms and methods of resistance.

The historic Khasavyurt Accords in August 1996 marked the end of the First Russo-Chechen War, securing a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya in the presence of observers from the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This marked a substantial victory for the Chechen people, despite the unfortunate loss of their leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, at the hands of Russian security services in the lead-up to these negotiations.

The Empire strikes back

In 1997, under OSCE observation, Chechnya elected moderate leader Aslan Maskhadov as president. Maskhadov then met with Boris Yeltsin to sign a peace treaty, emphasizing the refusal to use force and commitment to international law principles. However, the document served as a pretext for Wahhabis and other radical Islamists to claim that Maskhadov had betrayed the national and religious interests of the North Caucasian people. After major clashes between supporters and opponents of Wahhabism, which resulted in dozens of casualties, the Chechen government officially banned Wahhabi organisations. Paradoxically, in 1998, the Russian Presidential Commission on Countering Political Extremism concluded that Wahhabism was not an extremist movement. Some political analysts believe that this indicated Russiaâ??s interest in supporting the opposition to the Chechen government, even in the face of extremists. Some prominent Russian figures, including Anna Politkovskaya and Boris Berezovsky, asserted that it was the Russian government that orchestrated a provocation in the form of an invasion by a group of Chechen-based Islamic militants led by Shamil Basayev into the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan in August 1999. These border conflicts escalated tensions between Russia and Wahhabi groups, leading to the start of the Second Russo-Chechen War in October of that year. It is worth mentioning that the Russian authorities had been planning an invasion of Chechnya as early as March 1999, long before these events, as former Russian Prime Minister Stepashin later admitted.

Russian forces reclaimed Chechen territory, effectively ending Chechen independence by May 2000. The Russian authorities conducted an informational campaign by making considerable efforts to control coverage of events. The government also attempted to restrict journalistsâ?? access to certain

areas, especially those where active fighting was taking place. Nevertheless, many Russian and foreign journalists continued to work in the region without accreditation, risking their own safety. In addition, Chechens started using the Internet and mobile phones to communicate with the outside world. Websites were used to raise money, propagate the Chechen point of view on the conflict and unite the diaspora, show videos of successful combat operations against the Russian army, and expose war crimes committed against the Chechen population. These sites also sold themed merchandise to promote the Chechen agenda and fundraising activities. This is very much akin to current Ukrainian efforts, including crowdfunding goods for the army and the needs of citizens who are not able to help themselves, thereby broadening the scope of engagement.

Despite the efforts of Russian authorities to control the information space, Chechen information and psychological operations continued even after the military defeat of the main forces of Chechnya. Their main channels were websites, e-mails, the Russian press, lobby groups, the Russian intellectual and cultural elite, political organizations and movements in Russia, the Chechen diaspora, and public organisations in Russia and elsewhere. The Committee of Soldiersâ?? Mothers of Russia, for example, exerted high-profile pressure on the Russian government in 1995 to disclose the actual number of casualties in the First Russo-Chechen War â?? now considered one of the significant reasons for its end. This is one of the remarkable advantages that the Chechen independence movement was able to accomplish in comparison with the Ukrainian effort. The Chechen message, especially during the First Russo-Chechen war, resonated more within Russian society than Ukrainian efforts to do the same. In that respect, the current Russian media landscape has grown more state-controlled during the last two decades, which leaves little room for dissenting opinions.

That said, Chechnya was unable to achieve the same informational results in the Second Russo-Chechen War that it did in the first, largely due to the Russian governmentâ??s efforts at censorship and improvements to its information warfare approach. This time, most of the Russian population supported the invasion. Also, international objections were tempered by arguments comparing Russiaâ??s invasion of Chechnya to NATOâ??s operations in Kosovo and linking Chechen armed forces to global terrorist organizations. In the Russian political discourse, the Chechen government was made responsible for terrorist attacks, including those for which neither radical Islamists nor other groups had claimed responsibility, such as the 1999 bombings of residential buildings in Moscow and other Russian cities. In 2002, Russian command was widely criticized for a disastrous rescue operation at the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, where about 117 hostages died from a soporific gas used by Russian special forces. Despite this, Russia succeeded in linking this and other acts of terrorism to Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov, which critically damaged his reputation. Any chance for an internationally mediated peace settlement was lost.

Waking the sleeping wolf

The basic strategy implemented by Russia at the final stage of the Second Russo-Chechen War was the so-called â??Chechenisationâ?? of the conflict, wherein Russia framed the conflict as an internal Chechen affair; the supporters of independence were rebels against the legitimate authority of the Chechen government allied with Russia. Akhmat Kadyrov, the former highest Islamic cleric of Chechnya, who had changed sides and aided federal forces a year earlier, was appointed the head of the pro-Russian administration of the Chechen Republic in June 2000. He was later elected president of the Chechen Republic under Russian law in 2003 but was killed in an assassination attempt a year later. Chechnyaâ??s pro-Russian administration is now headed by his son, Ramzan Kadyrov.

The persecution and subsequent killing of Chechen leaders by Russian security services fuelled a divide between radical Islamists and the democratic factions within Chechen leadership, including in the information space. Internet websites such as â??Kavkaz-Centreâ?? and social media networks now play a significant role in this information war. Along with the traditional resources of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, the messenger service Telegram is becoming increasingly popular due to less content regulation. Typical methods of propaganda on Chechen internet resources include the popularization of ideologically colored geographical names. For example, the province name â??vilayat Nokhchiychoyâ?? signifies Chechnyaâ??s integration into the Caucusus Emirate while, the Islamic theology-associated term â??murtadsâ?? in relation to representatives of the pro-Russian administration of Chechnya, highlights use of Islamic terms with a political meaning. These sites also reference the history of the North Caucasus, in particular the centuries-long confrontation with the Russian Empire.

A new stage of the Chechen struggle started after the beginning of Russiaâ??s hybrid aggression against Ukraine. The Ukrainian government created conditions for volunteer Chechen battalions, such as the Sheikh Mansur and the Dzhokhar Dudayev battalions, to operate on its territory. Many are former members of the army of the Chechen Republic who took refuge in European or Middle Eastern countries after their defeat in the Second Russo-Chechen War and now wish to return to service. These volunteers see the war in Ukraine as a historic chance to defeat the Russian Federation and restore Chechen independence. After Russiaâ??s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this narrative has significantly intensified and expanded to include spreading the idea of an independent Ichkeria, positioning the war in Ukraine as a â??gazavatâ?? (Caucasian variant of jihad) for Chechens, recruiting new fighters from Europe and the Middle East, where several hundred thousand Chechens reside, and psychological and military preparation for full-scale combat operations. On 18 October 2022, the Verkhovna Rada (parliament) of Ukraine adopted a resolution recognizing the territory of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as â??temporarily occupied by the Russian Federationâ?? and

condemning the commission of genocide of the Chechen people.

A world of difference

When comparing the responses of the international community to these conflicts in Chechnya and Ukraine, it is apparent that the two wars have received distinct levels of attention. Although the Russians in both cases have faced international condemnation, the war in Ukraine has received greater solidarity from Western nations compared to the conflict in Chechnya. This difference can be partially attributed to the geopolitical consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which pose a threat to European security. Additionally, the war in Ukraine, which began in 2014, has created a robust civil society movement, which has been proven effective in the information realm, exposing alleged war crimes, atrocities, and environmental disasters, advocating for international support, building strong connections with global media, and using crowdfunding campaigns. Since the start of the 2022 invasion, these civil society organizations have collaborated in tandem with governmental initiatives.

Similarly, the Chechens â?? as described in this article â?? have also used different platforms to raise awareness for their cause. This includes the use of social media channels, documentaries, and other publications. They have successfully reached out to the Russian public, which led to a vocal anti-war movement in Russia during the First Russo-Chechen War, something Ukraine has not been able to duplicate. Furthermore, Chechens have engaged in diplomatic relations with foreign governments and international organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the European Union, and the United States.

Despite these efforts, Chechnya has struggled in vain to gain widespread recognition, especially during the Second Russo-Chechen War. One reason for this is Russiaâ??s substantial influence over other nations in the Caucasus region. Another reason is the association of the independence movement with terrorism and extremism, which has hampered the success and impact of Chechen information campaigns. As a result, Chechnya has not been able to achieve the same level of global influence as Ukraine. The volunteers of the Chechen volunteer battalions fighting on the side of Ukraine hope that their current efforts will contribute to Russia losing not only its war on Ukraine, but also improve the chances for renewed Chechen independence in the long term.

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Main image: Fighters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Chechen volunteer battalion named after Sheikh Mansur. Donetsk region, 2023. Photo by Ilya Varzhanskyi.

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