

Russia

Chechnya

Political Rights:	7
Civil Liberties:	7
Status:	Not Free

Overview:

In 2004, the debilitating, long-term civil war in Chechnya continued to victimize civilians through acts of terrorism, “disappearances,” and war crimes perpetrated by various parties to the conflict. Violence spread significantly outside the confines of Chechnya, as rebels and terrorists conducted strikes in neighboring regions and in the Russian heartland. Attacks included suicide bombings that brought down two Russian passenger airlines in August and an assault on a school in the town of Beslan in neighboring North Ossetia. The year also saw the assassination in May of Akhmad Kadyrov, the Kremlin’s handpicked Chechen president. On August 29, after an election to fill the post of the assassinated president, the authorities declared the former interior minister, Alu Alkhanov, president.

A small, partly mountainous Northern Caucasus republic, Chechnya has been at war with Russia for much of its history since the late 1700s. In February 1944, the Chechens were deported en masse to Kazakhstan under the pretext of their having collaborated with Germany during World War II. Officially rehabilitated in 1957 and allowed to return to their homeland, they remained politically suspect and were excluded from the region’s administration.

After being elected Chechnya’s president in October 1991, former Soviet Air Force Commander Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed Chechnya’s independence. Moscow responded with an economic blockade. In 1994, Russia began assisting Chechens opposed to Dudayev, whose rule was marked by growing corruption and the rise of powerful clans and criminal gangs. Russian president Boris Yeltsin sent 40,000 troops into Chechnya by mid-December and attacked the capital, Grozny, widening the conflict. As casualties mounted, Russian public opposition to the war increased, fueled by criticism from much of the country’s then-independent media. In April 1996, Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile.

A peace deal was signed in August 1996, resulting in the withdrawal of most Russian forces from Chechnya. However, a final settlement on the republic’s status was put off until 2001. In May 1997, Russia and Chechnya reached an accord recognizing the elected president, Aslan Maskhadov, as Chechnya’s legitimate leader.

Following incursions into neighboring Dagestan by renegade Chechen rebels and deadly apartment bombings in Russia that the Kremlin blamed on Chechen militants, then-Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin launched a second military offensive on Chechnya in September 1999. Russian troops conquered the flat terrain in the north of the republic, but progress slowed considerably as they neared heavily defended Grozny. Amid hostilities, Moscow withdrew recognition of Maskhadov.

Russia’s indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets caused some 200,000 people to flee Chechnya, most to the tiny neighboring Russian republic of Ingushetia. After federal troops finally captured Grozny in February 2000, the Russian military focused on rebel strongholds in the southern mountainous region. Russian security sweeps led to atrocities in which civilians were regularly beaten, raped, or killed. Russian forces were subject to almost daily guerilla bomb

and sniper attacks by rebels. The renewed campaign enjoyed broad popular support in Russia fueled by the media's now one-sided reporting favoring the official government position.

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Moscow defended its actions in Chechnya as part of the broader war on global terrorism, asserting a connection between Chechen separatists and terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, the terrorist network; no connections have been proven. As the war has persisted and atrocities have mounted, some Chechen fighters have engaged in terrorist acts. In an ordeal covered live by Russian television, a group of Chechen rebels stormed a Moscow theater on October 23, 2002, taking 750 people hostage. More than 120 hostages died, most from the effects of a sedative gas that Russian troops used to incapacitate the rebels. Russian authorities reported that all 41 of the rebels had been killed.

As part of a largely unsuccessful Russian campaign to build up the authority of pro-Moscow Chechen factions, a March 23, 2003 referendum on a new Chechen constitution took place in the absence of open and free media, with opponents of the referendum and its questions effectively silenced. Chechnya's Moscow-appointed administration claimed results indicated a voter turnout of 85 percent, with 96 percent of voters in favor of the Kremlin-backed constitution. However, an independent survey of voter sentiments by the Russian rights group Memorial found that 80 percent of the indigenous population opposed the referendum.

After the referendum, presidential and legislative elections, which were held on October 5, 2003, saw the victory of Kremlin-backed candidate Akhmad Kadyrov as president. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe criticized the elections for not offering voters significant choice, and the U.S. government judged them as "seriously flawed."

Reliable estimates suggest that thousands of Chechens, mostly civilians, died in 2004 as a result of the conflict. Rights groups estimate that an average of 50 people disappear each month, usually as a result of abductions believed to originate with Russian forces. Increasingly women, children, and adolescent males from pro-rebel families are targeted. Pro-Russian Chechen officials this year admitted that more than 200,000 have died since war broke out in Chechnya in 1994 and hundreds of thousands have been wounded and displaced.

Officially more than 70,000 Russian troops and security forces remain in Chechnya. In 2004, Russia attempted to transfer increased responsibility for the counterinsurgency effort to Chechen units linked to criminal activities, torture, and gross rights violations.

Chechen fighters assassinated Kadyrov and a dozen others in May 2004 in an explosion that ripped through a stadium. The bomb had been planted in the concrete months earlier when the stadium was under repair. In August, female *shahid* (martyr) terrorists opposed to the Russian occupation blew up two Russian passenger airplanes that had left Moscow.

After Kadyrov's death, authorities scheduled a new election on August 29. Alu Alkanov, a graduate of the U.S.S.R.'s Academy of the Interior Ministry and Chechnya's interior minister since 2003, won with a reported 74 percent of the vote amid a claimed 85 percent voter turnout. Journalists observing the process pronounced the voter-turnout figure wildly inflated.

On September 1, anti-Russian terrorist guerrillas carried out a military assault in the neighboring republic of North Ossetia, taking over a school in the town of Beslan. Some 400 people—half of them children—died in the hostage situation, after local citizens moved to rescue their relatives.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Residents of Chechnya do not have the means to change their government democratically. While the 1997 presidential elections—conducted by the region’s separatist authorities—were characterized by international observers as reasonably free and fair, the resumption of war in the republic in 1999 led to the total evisceration of the political rights of Chechens. President Aslan Maskhadov fled the capital city in December 1999, and the parliament elected in 1997 ceased to function. In June 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin enacted a decree establishing direct presidential rule over Chechnya.

Claims by the Russian government that they were returning the region to democratic rule by means of a March 2003 referendum lacked credibility. The referendum was orchestrated by the Kremlin, with no opportunity for debate, widespread vote rigging, and official results that indicated a voter turnout of 85 percent and nearly unanimous support for a new constitution.

In the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections of October 5, 2003, candidates representing a genuine alternative were not on the ballot and real debate was stifled in an atmosphere of repression and censorship. After the assassination of the newly elected president, Akhmad Kadyrov, in May 2004, a new election was conducted under similarly undemocratic circumstances. Under the authoritarian rule of President Alu Alkhanov, as under Kadyrov, there is no party pluralism and politicians who advocate Chechen state independence are unable to work openly and freely. The current regime, which includes Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the assassinated president, is linked to a network of criminal Chechen groups and is denounced by Maskhadov and separatist Chechens as traitorous.

The disruptive effects of the war continue to severely hinder news production and the free flow of information. Russian state-run television and radio continue to broadcast in Chechnya, although much of the population remains without electricity. Alkhanov’s administration effectively controls all other broadcast and most print media, which predominantly reflect official viewpoints. There are three licensed television broadcasters, whose content is pro-regime. The Chechen rebel government operates a Web site with reports about the conflict and other news from its perspective. The editors of an independent weekly, *Groznensky Rabochy*, left Chechnya in 1999. The paper is now edited in Moscow and has limited distribution in Chechnya amid increased government restrictions on media coverage of the conflict. The paper’s editor reports that there is widespread self-censorship by reporters who fear violent reprisals from rebels and pro-government forces.

The Russian military imposes severe restrictions on journalists’ access to the widening Chechen war zone, issuing accreditation primarily to those of proven loyalty to the Russian government. Few foreign reporters are allowed into the breakaway republic, and when they are allowed entry, access is restricted by military and police authorities, as journalists covering the war must be accompanied at all times by military officials. In 2004, Russian and Georgian journalists who traveled to the region to cover the aftermath of the siege at Beslan appear to have been drugged, presumably by Russian authorities. One Russian journalist employed by U.S.-funded Radio Liberty was detained by Russian authorities and prevented from covering the siege.

Most Chechens are Muslims who practice Sufism, a mystical form of Islam. The Wahhabi sect, with roots in Saudi Arabia and characterized by a strict observance of Islam, has been banned, although adherents to its radical fundamentalist Islamic teachings form an important core of those engaged in terrorism against civilians. Since the start of the last war in 1994, many of the republic’s schools have been damaged or destroyed, and education in

Chechnya has been sporadic. Most schools have not been renovated and continue to lack such basic amenities as textbooks, electricity, and running water.

Some charitable nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working on humanitarian, cultural, and social issues are allowed to operate but are under increasing Russian government criticism and pressure. An important but small Western-supported NGO, the LAM Center for Complex Research and Popularization of Chechen Culture, conducts activities in Russia to promote intergroup understanding and makes small grants to a small network of embattled NGOs. However, associational and trade union life is dominated by pro-regime organizations, and any groups and NGO activists that are viewed as sympathetic to the cause of Chechen independence are subject to persecution.

Russian government officials threaten international NGOs active in the country. In May 2004, the official spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexander Yakovenko, told a press conference in Moscow that most humanitarian organizations in Chechnya are improperly involved in monitoring activities instead of giving humanitarian assistance. His remarks echoed those of Putin, who had broadly criticized Russian NGOs in his state of the nation address.

Occasional protests are held by family members pressing for action on the abduction and murder of their relatives. In March 2004, medical students in Grozny protested the forced abduction of a colleague. There have been occasional strikes including one by teachers and students protesting forced abductions and raids on schools by masked gunmen associated with the Russian occupation.

Amid widespread conflict, the rule of law is virtually nonexistent. Civilians are subject to harassment and violence, including torture, rape, and extrajudicial executions, at the hands of Russian soldiers. Senior Russian military authorities have shown disregard for these widespread abuses. The new police and security structures—some of them created by recruitment from private armies and militarized gangs loyal to Alkhanov's new regime—are engaged in widespread criminal activity and rights violations. Particularly notorious is the former Presidential Security Service—renamed the Akhmad Kadyrov Special Purpose Regiment in 2004—which is reportedly involved in extortion, abductions, trading in contraband, and the maintenance of unsanctioned prisons and torture chambers.

Extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and other war crimes are rarely investigated and even more rarely punished. In an unprecedented development, on July 25, 2003, a military court in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, found Russian Colonel Yuri Budanov guilty of kidnapping and murdering a Chechen woman and sentenced him to 10 years in a maximum security prison. In 2004, this sentence was upheld on appeal by higher Russian courts. In December 2003, a Russian military court initiated the trial of four soldiers for murders alleged to have been committed in the Shattoi region of Chechnya in January 2002.

Russian troops engage in so-called mopping-up operations in which they seal off entire towns and conduct house-to-house searches for suspected rebels. During these security sweeps, soldiers have been accused of beating and torturing civilians, looting, and extorting money. Thousands of Chechens have gone missing or been found dead after such operations. In 2002, Chechnya issued new rules for troops conducting sweeps, including identifying themselves and providing a full list of those detained. Rights activists have accused federal troops, as well as pro-Russian Chechen government forces, of widely ignoring these rules. Human rights groups report the ongoing operation of illegal filtration camps by Russian authorities and Alkhanov's security forces. The camps detain and "filter" out Chechens suspected of ties to rebel groups, with "filtration" often used as a euphemism for "murder."

While many external refugee camps have been closed and Chechens who fled the violence have been pressured to return to their homes, there are still tens of thousands of refugees outside of Chechnya. Many refugees who return live in appalling conditions in tent camps, abandoned buildings, or cramped quarters with friends or relatives. There are tens of thousands of additional internally displaced persons inside the region and well over 100,000 long-term homeless, many of them orphaned children and teens.

Travel to and from the republic and inside its borders is severely restricted. After the resumption of the war, the Russian military failed to provide safe exit routes from the conflict zones for noncombatants.

Widespread corruption and the economic devastation caused by the war severely limit equality of opportunity. Ransoms obtained from kidnapping and the lucrative illegal oil trade provide money for Chechens and members of the Russian military. Much of the republic's infrastructure and housing remains damaged or destroyed after years of war, with reconstruction funds widely believed to have been substantially misappropriated by corrupt local authorities. In the capital city of Grozny, the long-term conflict has devastated civilian life, with more than 60 percent of all buildings completely destroyed. Much of the population ekes out a living selling produce or other goods at local markets. Residents who have found work are employed mostly by the local police, the Chechen administration, or the oil and construction sectors, or at small enterprises, including cafés.

While women continue to face discrimination in a traditional, male-dominated culture, the war has resulted in many women becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Russian soldiers reportedly rape Chechen women in areas controlled by federal forces. Increasing numbers of women were reported to have been abducted and have disappeared.