

CASE STUDIES

Russia



Protesters gather in Vienna after the killing of vocal Chechen government critic “Martin B.” Austrian police arrested two Russians from Chechnya for the fatal shooting. Image credit: Alex Halada/AFP via Getty Images.

The Russian government conducts highly aggressive transnational repression activities abroad. Its campaign, which heavily relies on assassination as a tool, targets former insiders and others who are perceived as threats to the regime’s security. The government pairs this campaign with control over key cultural institutions operating abroad, in an effort to exert influence over the Russian diaspora. Unlike other states profiled in this report, however, the government does not use coercive measures against the Russian diaspora as a whole. Instead, it focuses on repressing activism within its own borders and on maintaining control of the domestic information environment to ensure that exiles do not reach domestic audiences.¹⁷⁷ Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, represents a significant exception by employing a brutal direct campaign to control the Chechen diaspora;

his campaign is a unique example of a subnational regime operating its own transnational repression campaign.

The Russian campaign accounts for 7 of 26 assassinations or assassination attempts since 2014, as catalogued in Freedom House’s global survey. It is also responsible for assaults, detentions, unlawful deportations, and renditions in eight countries, mostly in Europe. Of the 32 documented physical cases of Russian transnational repression, a remarkable 20 have a Chechen nexus.

The Kremlin

Since coming to power in 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin has engaged in an ongoing subversion campaign in Europe and the United States, using tactics short of war.

As part of this “political warfare,”¹⁷⁸ the Putin government frequently builds influence networks through corrupt and corrupting means, disseminates disinformation, builds alliances with antiliberal parties and political actors, and conducts hacking operations. The government does all this while resisting and avoiding attribution, unlike in overt and clearly attributed public diplomacy efforts or soft-power efforts that rely on persuasion and attraction.

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The Kremlin’s approach to transnational repression extends naturally from this “political warfare” concept. When selecting individual targets, the Kremlin focuses its efforts on those who may have defected to NATO member states and cooperate with their intelligence agencies, those who were considered to have previously engaged in armed conflict against Russia, or those who have run afoul of security services through business or political activities. A surprisingly common tactic is **assassination**; former intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko was successfully killed via radiation poisoning in 2006,¹⁷⁹ while a nerve agent was used in the attempted assassination of former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and daughter Yulia in 2018.¹⁸⁰ At a minimum, in Ukraine, Bulgaria, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the Kremlin has shown a willingness to kill perceived enemies abroad.¹⁸¹ These attacks also come against the backdrop of numerous unexplained deaths of high-profile Russians in exile, their business partners, and other potential targets of the Russian state.¹⁸² Even in cases where the evidence is unambiguous—the use of rare radioactive isotopes and nerve agents only available to the Russian government, or the clear identification of Russian intelligence agents—the government continues to deny its role. Most importantly, it continues to employ assassination as a tactic in the face of vocal international condemnation for doing so. In addition to eliminating the individual attacked, this overt campaign sends a message to anyone involved in political, intelligence, or business activities related to the Russian state. The ripple effect of each assassination goes beyond the individual.

This assassination campaign exists within a continuum alongside other tactics. The Kremlin is perhaps the world’s

most prolific abuser of the **Interpol** notice system. As other governments have found, Interpol notices and diffusions (see “Methods of Transnational Repression”) are low-cost means for the Kremlin to harass and detain exiles.¹⁸³ The Kremlin’s targeting of financier Bill Browder through Interpol Red Notices has made the tool famous,¹⁸⁴ but it uses the tactic to an extraordinary extent, and often against targets far less prominent. Without more transparency at Interpol, it is difficult to determine why or how the Kremlin is able to use its notice system so extensively. Nevertheless, Russia is responsible for a staggering 38 percent of all public Red Notices in the world, while the United States is responsible 4.3 percent and China 0.5 percent.¹⁸⁵ Russian authorities have even been able to use Red Notices to detain individuals residing in the United States for long periods of time.¹⁸⁶ For instance, in two separate public cases in the last two years, Russian asylum seekers spent over a year in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention based on Russian-sourced Interpol Red Notices.

Beyond the abuse of Interpol, Russians abroad who are engaged in high-profile political opposition face **surveillance and sophisticated hacking** campaigns with the same techniques the government uses against high-priority national security targets.¹⁸⁷

The Kremlin combines these tactics with efforts to control the key pillars of the Russian community abroad—the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian-language media, and Russian cultural institutions. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian government has regained control over official cultural institutions with a presence abroad; this is especially true of the Orthodox Church, which reunited in 2006 under President Putin’s leadership with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which emerged following the Russian Revolution.¹⁸⁸ In 2008, Moscow launched Rossotrudnichestvo (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) to coordinate activities meant to facilitate engagement with the diaspora, as well as other formal “soft power” activities.

Unlike other governments, like Rwanda’s, the Kremlin’s transnational repression campaign does not seek to control the entire Russian diaspora with coercion. Instead, the regime’s domestic repression drives activists and others out of the country, seemingly on purpose. Despite Putin’s increased rhetoric surrounding the importance of “compatriots” abroad and the creation of

Rossotrudnichestvo, much of the diaspora does not appear to be a priority. This may be rooted in the Russian government's dismissive attitude towards political opposition abroad: it does not believe opposition efforts can be effective without a domestic presence. As a Russian political exile living in Europe told Freedom House: "Generally the regime's position is, 'no person, no problem.'"¹⁸⁹

The Chechen Republic

In distinction from the above, Russian citizens from the Chechen Republic, a province in the North Caucasus, face a total campaign of transnational repression directed by provincial leader Ramzan Kadyrov, with the approval of the Russian central government. The Chechen diaspora formed as the result of over a century of Russian occupation and colonization, and expanded dramatically during the 1994–96 and 1999–2000 wars for independence from Russia. After the defeat of the separatist movement in 2000, Kadyrov's father, Akhmad, headed the reintegrated republic under Russian rule. Ramzan, in turn, came to power soon after his father's assassination in 2004.

As leader of the Chechen Republic, Kadyrov has presided over a regime of remarkable brutality, defined by extensive torture, extrajudicial killings, anti-LGBT+ purges, and the murders of journalists and human rights defenders.¹⁹⁰ With a small, mostly rural population of under 1.5 million, Kadyrov's rule has taken on a highly personal character, approaching that of a personality cult.¹⁹¹ Intense repression has driven tens of thousands of Chechens to flee the territory, often seeking asylum in Europe for fear that they would not be safe from Kadyrov and his circle in other parts of Russia.

Even in exile, Kadyrov's brutality follows Chechens. Two assassinations in early 2009—of former military commander Sulim Yamadayev in Dubai, and of former bodyguard Umar Israilov in Austria—marked the beginning of the pattern. Israilov had fled the country and turned witness against the regime, testifying to a pattern of torture and execution by Kadyrov and his circle. He was killed before his testimony could be heard in court.¹⁹²

Since then, Chechen dissidents abroad have been **killed and attacked** at alarming rates. In 2016, two Chechens living in Turkey, Ruslan Israpilov and Abdulwahid Edelgiriev, were killed by people later identified by international media outlets as Russian agents.¹⁹³ In August 2019, former fighter Selimkhan Khangoshvili was shot and killed on a park bench in central Berlin. In January

2020, prominent Kadyrov critic Imran Aliyev was stabbed to death in a hotel room in Lille, France.¹⁹⁴ In February, another critic, Tumso Abdurahmonov, was attacked with a hammer in his apartment in Sweden while he slept, but he managed to subdue his assailant. Abdurahmonov claimed he warned authorities about a Chechen man who traveled with Aliyev to France and subsequently fled Europe after Aliyev's killing.¹⁹⁵ And in July, Mamikhan Umarov, a Kadyrov critic who was working with European authorities, was killed in a Vienna suburb.¹⁹⁶

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There is strong evidence connecting these attacks to Kadyrov, but they most likely require the cooperation and engagement of the Kremlin itself. Investigative journalists at Bellingcat identified the man caught fleeing the scene of Khangoshvili's murder as a contract killer linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).¹⁹⁷ Abdurahmonov's attackers would have had to engage in extensive travel and possess sufficient operational skill to enter his Swedish residence while he slept.

Unlike for other Russian citizens abroad, the Chechen assassination campaign rests atop a base of extensive **surveillance, digital intimidation, and coercion by proxy** against the entire Chechen diaspora.¹⁹⁸ With Chechens living abroad increasing turning to digital platforms like YouTube to voice their dissent against Kadyrov, the government has found it easy to collect information on its critics from open sources. The government then arrests, threatens, and sometimes tortures family members who remain in Chechnya, to use as leverage against dissenters abroad. Meanwhile, the government has learned to use its own tools to recruit or even seed asylum seekers to act as agents within the Chechen diaspora.¹⁹⁹

Despite the extreme repression that Chechens face at home, asylum in Europe has become difficult to achieve for many individuals seeking to join what journalist and expert Elena Milashina called the "third wave" of Chechen refugees.²⁰⁰ The two wars for independence, along with the 2000–09 insurgency against Russia, bound Chechen militancy with international terrorism in the international imagination. The presence of Chechens and other North Caucasians in the

ranks of organizations that participated in the Syrian civil war, like the Islamic State (IS) militant group, contributed further to the perception of Chechnya first and foremost as a source of terrorist activity.²⁰¹

“This modern age and technology allow us to know everything and we can find any of you.”

–Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov

These associations have made it easier for European governments to default to national security arguments when rejecting asylum claims or deporting Chechens, especially as terrorist attacks regularly occur in Europe and amid hardening attitudes towards migration in general. Harsh border measures imposed after 2015 resulted in a constant process of “pushbacks” at the Belarusian-Polish land border, with Polish authorities returning Chechens without allowing them to apply for asylum.²⁰² Chechnya’s government understands this dynamic, and likely manipulates the distribution of national security information to European governments in order to prompt deportations.²⁰³

As Milashina has written, the situation is paradoxical: while European political authorities have recognized the uniquely

brutal nature of Kadyrov’s rule in Chechnya, they frequently deny asylum to Chechens who flee it.²⁰⁴ Those deported at the Chechen Republic’s request face brutality. Some who return to Chechnya from Europe are initially allowed to go free, only to be imprisoned or killed later in “security operations” that human rights groups have described as extrajudicial executions by another name.²⁰⁵

Kadyrov himself is open about his intent to control Chechens abroad, by force if necessary. In 2016, he spoke to state TV and addressed Chechens living abroad who criticized his regime:

You are harming yourselves. At some point, after 5 to 10 years you will have to return, or your parents will say you should come back, or you will be chased from Europe. Then there will be nowhere for you to go, and then we will make you answer for every one of your words, for every action you have taken. I know all the sites, I know all the youth who live in Europe, every Instagram, Facebook, every social site, we record all of your words and we note them, we have all of your information, who, what, we know it all. This modern age and technology allow us to know everything and we can find any of you, so don’t make it worse for yourselves.²⁰⁶

In September 2020, Kadyrov announced the formation of a new agency for Chechens abroad. He promised to “do better” to support “good Chechens,” while doing “to bad Chechens... what we have to.”²⁰⁷