

## THE REVIVAL OF CHECHNYA

After two wars in the past two decades, the southern Russian republic of Chechnya has achieved a relative peace. Unfortunately, according to an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* (CSM) (March 26, 2012), that peace comes at a very high price for Chechens, who are facing an increasing loss of rights.

Situated on the north flank of the Caucasus Mountains between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, Chechnya's area of 5,800 square miles (15,000 sq. km) is only slightly larger than the U.S. state of Maryland. Nearly surrounded by Russian territory, Chechnya shares its southern border in the high Caucasus with Georgia. Most of Chechnya's northern region consists of plains and lowlands and its agriculture occurs primarily in its western section.

Chechnya's geography makes it strategically important to Russia. Most of Russia's access routes between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea go through Chechnya. While rich

in oil itself, Chechnya also contains Russia's main oil and gas pipelines to Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

Nearly all of Chechnya's approximately 1.3 million people are Muslim. Although part of Russia, Chechens consider themselves Chechen and they speak the native Chechen language, which was originally based on Arabic script.

Though part of Russia for centuries, Chechnya has maintained its distinct culture, surviving both the Russian Empire's and the Soviet Union's powerful domination. The brutal wars between Chechnya and Russia in the past few decades attest to a long-standing hostility between the two.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Chechens resisted the authority of Moscow by claiming independence. As Moscow sought to rein in the rebel region, sending in troops in 1994, they were met with a fierce and determined force of Chechen fighters. The Russians suffered many casualties. Public outcry resulted in a peace deal in 1996 that gave Chechnya some autonomy, but not independence.

After the 1996 war, Moscow did not invest in Chechnya's reconstruction, leaving the region in shambles. Cruel warlords, organized crime syndicates and armed bandits essentially ruled the republic.

In 1999, Chechen fighters entered the neighbouring republic of Dagestan to support an Islamist group seeking independence for all of the Muslim republics of the Caucasus. Vladimir Putin, Russia's former prime minister, again sent in troops to subdue Chechnya.

Moscow declared a victory over the separatist movement in 2009 and removed most of its troops.

In all, Chechnya's two wars in 1994-96 and 1999-2009 left an estimated 350,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands as refugees. The wars left Chechnya's infrastructure in tatters and its capital, Grozny, largely reduced to mine fields and piles of rubble.

In only a few short years, and with billions of dollars in aid from Moscow, Chechnya has seen a revival, though many question at what cost. Grozny has practically been rebuilt in only six years. It now boasts broad avenues, high-rise apartments, a refurbished airport and the largest mosque in Europe, according to the CSM article. In fact, much of the entire republic has seen resurgence with electricity and water restored, new roads, sewage systems, schools and hospitals. But many claim Chechnya's physical progress has been expensive for its people—in the form of lost rights.

In exchange for peace, Moscow has given governance of Chechnya to its president, Ramzan Kadyrov. According to experts, Kadyrov rules almost completely independently of Russia, but he depends on Moscow to bankroll everything that goes on in Chechnya. Many liken Kadyrov's authority to a fiefdom.

Almost a cult of personality with his face on billboards throughout the republic, Kadyrov governs Chechnya with a heavy hand, cracking down on rebels and their families and allegedly moving to impose *sharia*, or Islamic law. In Chechnya's case, this includes mandatory headscarves and dress codes for women, encouraged polygamy and forgiveness for honor killings (often the murder of women by the men in their family for some infraction). Interestingly, *sharia* law violates Russia's constitution.

While most Chechens live in poverty, Kadyrov boasts impressive wealth. With an unemployment rate of almost 50 percent, Chechnya still has a long way to go economically. And with tens of thousands of mostly young men with nothing to do, Kadyrov insists Chechnya must be ruled with an iron fist. And that's just how Moscow likes it.

As long as Kadyrov keeps the separatist movement and its rebels restrained, Moscow seems willing to allow the president to remain independent in his decision making.

And that is *Geography in the News™*. April 27, 2012. #1143.

### Chechnya



**Sources:** GITN #483, "Danger in the Caucasus," Aug. 24, 1999;

Weir, Fred, "The high price of peace in Chechnya," *Christian Science Monitor*, Mar. 26, 2012; and [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country\\_profiles/2565049.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/2565049.stm)



Co-authors are Neal Lineback, Appalachian State University Professor Emeritus of Geography, and Geographer Mandy Lineback Gritzner. University News Director Jane Nicholson serves as technical editor.

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