Zooming In: Regional Perspectives on Russia

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NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

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Federal and Regional Dynamics of the Kremlin's New Cadre Strategy to Adapt to War

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Despite the unprecedented Western sanctions imposed over Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Russian economic and political system has so far demonstrated remarkable resilience, effectively coping with the crisis and successfully adapting to multiple challenges. A distinctive feature of this crisis is that, since its scale, duration, and outcome are far from clear, it requires the Russian leadership to implement long-term solutions to transition the national economy onto a war footing. President Vladimir Putin has called this "integrating [the war effort] into the economy." While Russian gross domestic product officially declined 1.2% in 2022, it bounced back with 3.6% growth in 2023, mostly driven by a ramp-up in the defense sector and related industries.

Maintaining this resilience will ultimately determine the survival of the current political regime in Russia and thus represents a critical task for Putin. Generally, we define authoritarian resilience as the capacity of a regime to persist in its current form by effectively coping with various disruptions, adapting to emerging and future challenges, and eventually transforming in ways that maintain its functioning while keeping the current authoritarian incumbent in office. While resilience (both democratic and authoritarian) is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be fully explained by a single factor, we argue that in territorially vast and diverse countries, "territorial resilience" is one of the main pillars for regime stability. In the case of Russia today, a lack of territorial resilience could undermine the Kremlin's ability to cope with the crisis triggered by the invasion of Ukraine.

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‘Territorial Resilience’ and the Kremlin’s New Cadre Strategy for the War

Territorial resilience can be assessed along two main dimensions. The first is the ability of the center to maintain control over the entire territory of a country. It is of principal importance that all regions demonstrate full loyalty to the national center, supporting all its initiatives and taking responsibility and blame for any failures of the center’s policies. The second is the ability of regional elites to effectively respond to challenges spawned by crises and deliver effective performance. These dimensions are deeply interconnected, and both, from the perspective of the Russian leadership, depend on the proper selection of personnel at the national and regional executive levels.

Moscow needs new leaders, and so do the regions: Cadres appointed before the war are more likely to struggle to carry out the new tasks required to militarize the national economy. In other words, the Kremlin must find federal- and regional-level cadres who will prove resilient to previously unseen challenges in the context of the Ukraine war. Importantly, they should be capable of effectively working together.

We analyze the personnel shifts that have occurred between the federal and regional levels since the start of the war. We argue that the previous cadre strategy continued to operate on inertia from the beginning of the war in February 2022 until early 2024, remaining largely unchanged from the prewar period as the Kremlin initially bided its time. Following the 2024 presidential election, however, the shift to a new strategy began because: (1) it had become clear that the war and sanctions would not end soon, and that the war effort needed to be “integrated into the economy;” and (2) a window of opportunity opened after the March 2024 presidential election, when a new government could be formed. This resulted in both “vertical” and “horizontal” reshuffling of federal officials and regional governors. In particular, several surprising changes were made at the federal level in May 2024, including four governors being appointed to head government ministries (the largest number called up in modern Russia’s history). These “promotions” to Moscow and new gubernatorial appointments have established the framework of the Kremlin’s new personnel strategy, geared for adaptation to the new reality.

The ‘Coping Period’ of 2022-2024: Maintaining the Status Quo in Personnel Policy

During what we call the “coping period,” from the start of the war until early 2024, the Kremlin generally opted to keep federal officials and governors in their positions and maintain the status quo, with the personnel changes that did occur being rather routine. In May 2022, Putin accepted the resignations of governors in

five regions and appointed acting ones. Two others resigned in 2023. Of the total seven governors who left office in 2022-2023 (see Table 1), four were finishing their first term, while Sergei Zhvachkin of Tomsk and Valery Radaev of Saratov both resigned in May 2022 as their second term was ending. The governor of Vologda, Oleg Kuvshinnikov, left office in October 2023 while serving his third term. Six of the seven received "honorable" positions at the federal level. Saratov's Radaev, Ryazan's Lyubimov, Krasnoyarsk's Uss, and Vologda's Kuvshinnikov became senators in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament. Tomsk's Zhvachkin went to Gazprom, while Kirov's Vasilyev was appointed as a deputy head of the Federal State Statistics Service. This smooth transition from regional- to federal-level roles suggests a lack of friction in relations between the different levels of power.

Table 1. Turnover of governors in 2022-2023

Region	Former governor	Term start	Term end	Successor	Successor status
Tomsk	Sergei Zhvachkin	2012	May 2022	Vladimir Mazur	Returnee
Saratov	Valery Radaev	2012	May 2022	Roman Busargin	Local
Kirov	Igor Vasilyev	2016	May 2022	Alexander Sokolov	Outsider
Mari El	Alexander Evstifeev	2017	May 2022	Yuri Zaitsev	Outsider
Ryazan	Nikolai Lyubimov	2017	May 2022	Pavel Malkov	Outsider
Krasnoyarsk	Alexander Uss	2017	April 2023	Mikhail Kotyukov	Returnee
Vologda	Oleg Kuvshinnikov	2011	October 2023	Georgy Filimonov	Returnee

Their successors, appointed by Putin as acting governors, came from diverse backgrounds. Only one, Roman Busargin in Saratov, was a "local," having served as vice governor prior to his appointment. Three other appointees—Alexander Sokolov in Kirov, Pavel Malkov in Ryazan, and Yuri Zaitsev in Mari El—were complete "outsiders," with no prior connection to these regions. Additionally, there was a group of so-called "returnees": Vladimir Mazur in Tomsk, Georgy Filimonov in Vologda, and Mikhail Kotyukov in Krasnoyarsk. They had some connection to these regions but had subsequently lived and worked elsewhere. Thus, the Presidential Administration largely adhered to its prewar approach of appointing governors to regions where they had either weak or no ties among the regional elites.

The Kremlin Shifts Cadre Policy to Adapt to Long War and Confrontation with West

Starting in early 2024, the Kremlin's cadre strategy started to shift, marked by vertical and horizontal reshuffling of federal officials and governors. The presidential election in March 2024 and the subsequent formation of a new government created a window of opportunity for major personnel changes to address new challenges and tasks. The first step entailed replacing long-time Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu with economist Andrei Belousov, who had been serving as a first deputy prime minister. Given Belousov's economic expertise, combined with his experience in various industrial sectors (including the defense industry), he was seen by the Kremlin as well-suited to manage the military's significant budgetary demands.

To judge by his previous work, Belousov's core belief is that the state is the driver of the economy and innovation, a perspective consistent with Putin's vision of state sovereignty. The main task of Belousov is far more complex than what was asked of Shoigu as the minister of defense: He is expected to "integrate [the war effort] into the economy," i.e., ensure that the Russian economy, despite Western sanctions, can continue to sustain its military machine while enhancing its competitiveness. Belousov's appointment clearly signals that the Kremlin is preparing for a long and costly war in Ukraine, that current and future wars will demand ever more export of weapons from Russia. In addition, the Russian leadership seems to be operating on the assumption that global conflicts are set to increase, which will spur demand for Russian arms exports.

The second step of the Kremlin's new cadre strategy involved calling up the most promising governors to federal positions in Moscow. There were five such governors, four of whom became ministers. Mikhail Degtyarev, the governor of Khabarovsk, was named minister of sports, while Anton Alikhanov from Kaliningrad was appointed minister of industry and trade, becoming the youngest member of the government. Note that Alikhanov had served in 2013-2015 as a deputy director and then the director for state regulation of foreign trade at the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Roman Starovoyt of Kursk was tapped to be minister of transport. Finally, Sergei Tsivilev, who headed Kemerovo Region, was selected as minister of energy. The fifth governor brought to Moscow, Alexei Dyumin of Tula, was made Putin's aide and secretary of the State Council.

During a meeting with the new government, Putin stated that he expected the new ministers, especially the four former governors, to "prove themselves" and expressed the hope that "They will use their skills and the experience they have gained in the Russian regions to their fullest advantage when addressing the tasks they will face in the federal government." It is the promotion of Dyumin, however,

that is arguably the most "eye-catching." Putin's bodyguard during his first and second terms, he is considered one of the president's closest allies. He is now tasked with overseeing the defense industry, the State Council (an advisory body to the president), and sports.

As the dust was settling from Putin's post-inauguration cabinet reshuffle, the Presidential Administration issued a new set of guidelines for its propagandists. Documents obtained by Meduza show that Russian state-controlled and pro-Kremlin media outlets were instructed to focus their coverage on the former regional governors who were promoted to ministerial positions, highlighting that they had earned these promotions through "effective work" while emphasizing their unique capabilities. For instance, Tsivilev was to be presented as having "proved himself" by "managing a complex region with its own specifications." Starovoyt is "battle-tested," since Kursk Region is "on the front line" and regularly shelled. Finally, Degtyarev "led a complex region" and "gained voter support."

At the end of May, two other governors, Natalya Komarova of Khanty-Mansi and Dmitri Azarov of Samara, resigned. Komarova, who had headed the region since 2010 and was reelected for a third term in 2020, could have stayed in office until 2025. In September, she was appointed to represent Khanty-Mansi in the Federation Council. Meanwhile, Azarov stepped down after one term, heading to the state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec to serve as an advisor to CEO Sergei Chemezov. Given that Rostec supplies nearly 80% of the arms for the war in Ukraine, Azarov's experience in the defense-heavy region of Samara is expected to prove valuable at Rostec. In 2022, enterprises fulfilling state defense orders in Samara managed to ramp up their production by 21%. Finally, Oleg Khorokhordin of the Altai Republic resigned in June ("in connection with the transition to a new [unnamed] workplace"). As shown in Table 2, eight governors were replaced in May-June 2024.

Table 2. Turnover of governors since 2024

Region	Former governor	Term start	Term end	Successor	Successor status
Khabarovsk	Mikhail Degtyarev	2020	May 2024	Dmitri Demeshin	Outsider
Kaliningrad	Anton Alikhanov	2016	May 2024	Alexei Besprozvannykh	Outsider
Kursk	Roman Starovoyt	2018	May 2024	Alexei Smirnov	Local
Tula	Alexei Dyumin	2016	May 2024	Dmitri Milyaev	Local

Kemerovo	Sergei Tsivilev	2018	May 2024	Ilya Seredyuk	Local
Khanty-Mansi	Natalya Komarova	2010	May 2024	Ruslan Kukharuk	Returnee
Samara	Dmitri Azarov	2017	May 2024	Vyacheslav Fedorishchev	Outsider
Altai (Republic)	Oleg Khorokhordin	2019	June 2024	Andrei Turchak	Outsider

Putin appointed three locals, four outsiders, and one returnee as acting heads of these regions. The locals included Alexei Smirnov in Kursk, Dmitri Milyaev in Tula, and Ilya Seredyuk in Kemerovo, all of whom had been serving as first deputy governors before their appointments. The outsiders were Dmitri Demeshin in Khabarovsk, Alexei Besprozvannykh in Kaliningrad, Vyacheslav Fedorishchev in Samara, and Andrei Turchak in the Altai Republic. The latter appointment was particularly surprising: Turchak previously held two high-level positions at the federal level (in the leadership of the United Russia party and the Federation Council), which made this role appear to be a demotion. Finally, Ruslan Kukharuk in Khanty-Mansi is a returnee. Born and educated in the region, he had moved to neighboring Tyumen, where he served as city mayor most recently.

The Samara and Tula appointments reflect the particular importance of these regions in the current circumstances, since together they account for a substantial share of the defense industry. With Dyumin promoted to Moscow, his associate Milyaev stayed behind in Tula, while Fyodorishchev, another Tula deputy governor under Dyumin, was tapped to replace Azarov in Samara. Fyodorishchev worked for over eight years in Dyumin's team in Tula and refers to him as "my commander." Tula and Samara will continue to be overseen by Dyumin in his new role in Moscow. For their part, Milyaev and Fyodorishchev possess specific skills and insights related to the defense industry, with the Kremlin deeming them capable of addressing the new challenges stemming from the militarization of the national economy.

Kremlin Again Opts to Tackle New Challenges with Personnel Changes, Not Reforms

In the first two years of the Ukraine war, the Kremlin's strategy remained unchanged. However, the recent partial reshuffling of elites at both the federal and regional levels indicates that the leadership anticipates a protracted war and confrontation with the West. As defense minister, Belousov has been asked to solve fundamentally different problems than his predecessor dealt with. Meanwhile, the governors who have been promoted to federal roles are expected

to act more energetically and coherently to "integrate [the war effort] into the national economy."

The Russian political regime is responding to the war-related crisis not with institutional reforms, but with personnel changes, with the goal of finding and correctly placing the "right people." The new cadre strategy is just beginning to be implemented, and more moves may follow. At the behest of the Presidential Administration, it is being supported by pro-Kremlin media to highlight the "success" of Putin's personnel policy and his ability to make "unerring and thoughtful" choices. This approach is consistent with how the regime has historically addressed other issues, such as corruption. Its limitations are well known.

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NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Political Actors in the North Caucasus and Moscow Hijacking Decolonization to Cement Their Power

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has reignited debates around post-colonialism and post-imperialism in Russia, sparking challenges to biases in Russian Studies in the West and calls for the breakup of the Russian Federation and the decolonization of "occupied" territories there. Meanwhile, the decolonization narrative has been seized by various political actors inside and outside of Russia to further their own agendas. The North Caucasus, with its unique social backdrop and historical experience, is often seen as the likely focal point of the decolonization process and a potential unraveling of the Russian Federation.

This policy memo explores how regional elites, foreign-based nationalist actors, and local social movements in the North Caucasus are coopting decolonization narratives for their own political benefit. It argues that the lack of compromise within the decolonization movement has had unintended effects, inadvertently strengthening pro-Kremlin forces in the region and the "vertical of power." Nonetheless, Western policymakers can influence decolonization and promote a more constructive agenda, one that safeguards and supports ethnic-minority activists and avoids simply exploiting the movement as a geopolitical tool.

Decolonization in the North Caucasus: Reclaiming Control of Politics, Education

When discussed in academic settings, a maximalist approach to "domestic decolonization" in Russia often means nonethnic citizens of Russia reclaiming control of their political and educational institutions. This entails challenging the historical legacies of colonialism, addressing long-lasting trauma and atrocities committed during the Russian conquest, and asserting the right to speak openly about these topics. In the North Caucasus, domestic decolonization includes freely

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discussing and documenting the 1940s deportations, the post-Soviet wars in Chechnya, and the Caucasian wars of the 1800s. This process aims to decolonize the teaching of North Caucasus history and challenge the Russian monopoly on the education system. It addresses institutional racism, deep-seated discrimination, and stigmatization within Russian society in relation to North Caucasians. On the basis of their non-Slavic appearance, they have been victims of discrimination in employment and housing, as well as heightened securitization.

Disintegration of Russia, as a Path to Decolonization, Fraught with Challenges, Risks

There is a tangible desire in the North Caucasus to break free from Moscow and its oppressive, racist policies toward local culture and history. Nonetheless, specifics about how to initiate and carry out such a process remain elusive, causing major friction among political actors. Historical precedents suggest that decolonization can lead to severe violence, undemocratic outcomes, and enduring neocolonial structures.

For many nationalist groups based outside of Russia, decolonization means the complete disintegration of the Russian Federation and the creation of fully independent states. The Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum, established in the spring of 2022, promotes the idea of a "civilized post-Russian space" as a broad political project. Primarily composed of ethnic-minority exiles, it advocates for the creation of 34 new states out of the current Russian Federation. Its influence within Russia is limited, yet the group's international activities attract considerable attention, prompting many foreign policymakers and diplomats to reckon with its agenda. Among the major obstacles, beyond the evident discord between exiles and many who remain in Russia, is the lack of a clear political vision for the period following secession and disintegration.

The post-Russia political landscape of the North Caucasus looks quite ambiguous. Some peoples, such as the Kalmyks and Ingush, have previously declared their independence and formed liberation armies. Meanwhile, jihadist groups have exploited the domestic decolonization narrative, advocating for a Sharia-based state in the Caucasus. Others who have previously fought for independence from Moscow, like the Chechens and their Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, have strategies geared toward establishing diplomatic ties with Western countries and are fighting against Russia in Ukraine. Overall, discussions are ongoing about forming a political union among the various national groups in the North Caucasus, drawing inspiration from the Civil War-era Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus and the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, established in 1991. These discussions remain embryonic, however, unable to overcome issues that have plagued pan-Caucasian movements for over a century, including ethnic and religious differences, land-related disputes, and unaddressed generational traumas.

Uniting against a common enemy in the pursuit of a short-term hyperbolic goal is one thing—often in the context of a war of survival, like in Ukraine today—but planning for a sustainable political solution is a far more challenging task. Initiating decolonization in a multinational federal state ruled by a very repressive dictatorial regime like Russia appears even more difficult. Nonetheless, calls for decolonization have become routine among anti-Kremlin actors—particularly those based abroad, who can make extreme demands at little risk—often ignoring the reality of compromise or negotiations with local elites or Moscow. For instance, the terrorist attacks in Dagestan in June 2024 have been framed as part of the broader decolonization movement, even though Islamic State Caucasus Province, which claimed responsibility for the attacks, has remained silent on the issue. Some foreign-based activists have proposed reforming Russia and its federal system, yet such proposed compromises are drowned out in the fervent propaganda around Ukraine. Consequently, the decolonization discourse, particularly in the North Caucasus, has reinvigorated state structures by providing them with a justification to increase repression and strengthen the vertical of power.

Local Elites Opportunistically Use Decolonization Discourse in Dealings with Kremlin

Various political actors in the North Caucasus have coopted and expanded the decolonization discourse to serve their own interests. Local elites, while not entirely opposed to limited political decolonization—which they frame as liberation from Moscow's imposed vertical of power—remain deeply ambivalent. Their political survival is tied more closely to Moscow than to their own constituencies. It is from Moscow that funding and repressive mechanisms emanate, which makes decolonization, for these elites, more about modernizing federalism than dismantling it. Lacking common ground with decolonization activists, they see rejecting and suppressing domestic, organic decolonization as the only viable path forward for themselves.

Thus, for local political elites in the North Caucasus, decolonization is often opportunistic, characterized by a more subtle and limited approach to challenge the vertical of power. This dynamic was evident in the aftermath of the June 2024 terrorist attacks: When Investigative Committee Chair Alexander Bastrykin and the Coordinating Center for Muslims of the North Caucasus (which unites the region's muftiates) called for a blanket ban on the niqab and regulation of Islamic garments, regional political actors opposed the initiative by positioning themselves as against federal interference in the region.

Meanwhile, Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, again cast himself as the defender of Muslims in Russia. He urged authorities to distinguish between genuine Muslims and extremists and cautioned against sweeping measures. Similarly, the head of Dagestan, Sergei Melikov, along with Dagestan's muftiate,

after initially labeling the niqab a security risk and supporting the proposed ban, eventually backtracked and opposed the proposal. This illustrates how local leaders navigate the decolonial discourse, using it as a tool to assert regional autonomy while avoiding direct confrontation with the Kremlin's centralized authority.

Another example: In September 2022, during mobilization for the war in Ukraine, Kadyrov refused to mobilize residents of Chechnya. This rare defiance of a mandate from Moscow represents part of his survival strategy, namely, balancing local pressures for decolonization with federal demands for the war effort. Kadyrov promotes a narrative that, given his loyalty to the Kremlin, it is he who is best positioned to shield the Chechen people from the horrors of the war. In other instances, he has skillfully portrayed himself as both a loyal follower of Russian President Vladimir Putin and a fervent Chechen nationalist, proclaiming himself a true Ichkerian—a champion of Chechen independence. This dual role highlights the current precarious position of leaders in the North Caucasus, who are caught between the decolonization movement and the war in Ukraine.

The absence of a meaningful alliance between foreign-based nationalist groups, local movements, and local elites creates conditions conducive to political violence. In particular, the promotion of decolonization from abroad, in direct opposition to the Kremlin and without securing tangible support from local elites, has had the unintended consequence of fostering a highly repressive environment that places both local activists and the broader population at risk. With no credible alternatives to decolonization in Russia other than the country's disintegration, local elites have positioned themselves as the sole representatives of ethnic minorities in their dealings with the Kremlin. As long as foreign-based ethnic minorities continue to push maximalist positions without establishing a viable political presence on the ground, the primary beneficiaries of the post-imperial discourse will remain Kremlin loyalists in the North Caucasus and, ultimately, the Kremlin itself. Barring the unlikely collapse of Putin's regime, the burden of decolonization in the region will fall entirely on the local population.

Decolonization as a Tool for the Kremlin to Justify Repression, Cement Its Power

In the context of the war in Ukraine and Russia's strained relations with Western governments, the Kremlin is exploiting the decolonization discourse to suppress opposition figures under the pretext of national security. Amid claims by Putin that the West is using decolonization as a tool to weaken Russia by other means, all shapes of human rights and political activities have been portrayed as security threats, which are then used to justify increasing repression. This manipulation of the decolonization discourse, combined with the Ukrainian army's occupation of part of Kursk Region, has reinforced the Kremlin's narrative that Russia is threatened by NATO and its proxies.

Article 280.3 of Russia's Criminal Code, a new law enacted after the invasion of Ukraine targeting those who "discredit" the Russian army, has been widely used to suppress nationalist and decolonization movements inside Russia. Under the law, many local activists have been labeled "foreign agents" for allegedly receiving support from the West and now face lengthy prison sentences. In 2023, for example, Moscow outlawed the Free Buryatia Foundation advocacy group, designating it an "undesirable organization" and placing its members on Russia's wanted list. Overall, Moscow's increasing practice of branding Russian citizens with Western ties as "foreign agents" has resulted in a growing number of asylum requests in Western countries.

West Should Support Genuine Decolonization and Protect Exiles

Decolonization, pregnant with geopolitical ramifications, presents both a curse and a blessing for Western policymakers. On the one hand, the principles of decolonization are broadly endorsed, and it offers a unique avenue, amid Moscow's struggles in Ukraine, to potentially foster long-term liberal and democratic progress in Russia; on the other hand, the unintended consequences of decolonization can be politically complex and perilous, as seen in the Kremlin's exploitation of the decolonization discourse to suppress the opposition both at home and abroad while advancing its own narrative in the Global South.

The West should prioritize two key objectives. First, it must determine whether it will fully support the overall decolonization process in Russia. If so, it should learn from mistakes made during the emergence of the Russian Federation in the 1990s. The arc of Chechnya's democratic development following the First Chechen War, marked by tepid Western backing and a subsequent cycle of violence, serves as a cautionary tale: Due to inadequate institutional and financial support, the government of Aslan Maskhadov, which came to power in the 1997 Chechen general election, failed to consolidate its democratic and decolonization project. This abandonment of the Chechens and their liberal-democratic aspirations by the West had devastating consequences for the North Caucasus as a whole, leading to more state repression and democratic backsliding and fueling the rise of Russian neo-imperial policies toward Georgia and Ukraine.

Western policymakers should support genuine decolonization efforts, prioritizing authentic political projects and reforms, rather than viewing decolonization merely as a geopolitical opportunity or a synonym for violent opposition to the Kremlin and Moscow-aligned local forces. True decolonization should be a bottom-up process driven by Russian citizens in Russia, not just exiles.

Second, Western governments have a responsibility to safeguard political exiles and ethnic minorities living outside of Russia. European governments, in particular, have a dismal track record of protecting political exiles fleeing violence in the North Caucasus and opposing the autocratic regime in Chechnya. Over the past 15 years, Ramzan Kadyrov's death squads and Russian security services have

targeted more than 30 Chechen activists and political refugees in Europe and the Middle East.

Yet the recent political prisoner swap with Moscow, which included Vadim Krasikov—a hitman linked to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and its notorious Vympel unit—reveals that Western governments prioritize political imperatives over the well-being of political exiles. Recall that Krasikov had been sentenced to life imprisonment by a German court for murdering a former Chechen field commander in a Berlin park. The verdict not only highlighted the FSB's involvement in the crime but also described it as an act of "state terrorism."

Many Western governments have continued deporting political refugees and asylum seekers to Russia, primarily Chechens, Dagestanis, and Ingush, even after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Deportations, long a source of fear and safety concerns for North Caucasian asylum seekers, now also have a chilling effect on political activists in exile, discouraging them from engaging in the process of Russia's decolonization. Along with transnational persecution, deportations represent another tool that Moscow can wield to manipulate the decolonization movement. Western policymakers should recognize that their actions significantly influence this movement, determining whether it becomes a mere geopolitical bargaining chip or a genuine force for change in Russia.

Finally, decolonization in Russia also presents an opportunity to counter Moscow's rhetoric against neo-imperialism in Africa and its growing influence in the Sahel. Engaging in direct military confrontation with Russian mercenaries and their allies on the continent risks reinforcing the Kremlin's narrative and triggering diplomatic blowback, as evidenced by Ukraine's alleged support for Tuareg rebels in an assault on former Wagner troops in Mali—in response to which, Mali and Niger severed diplomatic ties with Kyiv. A more strategic approach would be to challenge the foundations of Russia's anti-Western imperialism by supporting gradual decolonization efforts within Russia itself.

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Language revitalization and recentralization in Russia

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Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, language policy has been a central issue in Russian regional politics. The Russian Federation has 21 republics within its internationally-recognized borders, each of which is the homeland of one or more "titular" non-Russian ethnic groups, such as the Tatars in the Republic of Tatarstan and the Kabardin and Balkar in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic. Members of these ethnic groups have historically spoken languages other than Russian. When Russian republics gained greater control over their political, economic, and cultural affairs in the 1990s, many of them used this newfound sovereignty to pursue policies aimed at revitalizing their titular cultures—in particular, their titular languages. However, as the Russian state recentralized under President Vladimir Putin, the government gradually restricted these policies. In 2018, the Russian Duma adopted amendments to the Federal Law on Education preventing compulsory education in titular languages for non-native speakers of the languages, substantially hindering efforts to revitalize these languages.

In this memo, I discuss the logic of both regional language policies and the Russian state's resistance to them. Regional language policies in the 1990s revitalized a core constituency for regional sovereignty (titular language speakers) and were broadly popular. Given that most regional governments were interested in maintaining their sovereignty, these factors presented clear incentives to pursue such policies. However, the link between regional sovereignty and language also made these policies a potential roadblock for attempts at political recentralization. The Russian government threaded this needle–pursuing recentralization while avoiding conflict–by focusing first on political and economic centralization and only later targeting key aspects of language policy. As such, the process is a clear example of a commitment problem. When Russia's regions had greater political sovereignty, the state committed to allowing them to pursue programs of

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linguistic revitalization. Once the regions lost their political sovereignty, they could not prevent the Russian state from reneging on this commitment.

Language and regional sovereignty movements in the 1990s

In the 1990s, the Russian Federation devolved a substantial amount of political and economic power to its regions, especially its autonomous republics. This process often involved signing individual bilateral agreements that granted regions varying levels of local control of their economies and politics. Many regions used their newfound sovereignty to implement policies that promoted their titular cultures. Language was at the forefront of these strategies, with almost all regions enshrining protections for these languages in their foundational documents and many dedicating considerable resources to media and education initiatives to promote them (for more on this topic, see Elise Giuliano's *Constructing Grievance: Ethnic Nationalism in Russia's Republics* and Dmitry Gorenburg's *Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation*).

Regional governments had strong incentives to do so. In particular, as Dmitry Gorenburg argues, developing programs for regional languages led to growth in a population invested in the perpetuation of these programs: language instructors, translators, and state and private sector employees whose linguistic skills were increasingly in demand. Because regional governments implicitly – and often explicitly – linked these programs to their political sovereignty, this population became deeply invested in preserving regional sovereignty. Indeed, in related work I have argued that the link between sovereignty and minority language status incentivizes *all* of its speakers to support regional sovereignty, since changes in sovereignty likely affect the linguistic opportunities available to them.

Public opinion data from the Colton/Hough surveys of 16 Russian republics in 1993 support arguments about a link between linguistic proficiency and support for regional sovereignty.[2] Specifically, Table 1 shows that speakers of titular languages were more likely to support regional sovereignty declarations than non-speakers across all 16 republics in the sample.[3]

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[2] The 1993 Colton/Hough surveys have a sample of approximately 1,000 respondents from each of 16 Russian republics. The survey combined data from the Chechen Republic and the Republic of Ingushetia since they previously constituted a single autonomous Soviet socialist republic. The survey did not include observations from the four autonomous oblasts that had become republics.

[3] The question asked respondents to use a five-point scale to respond to the question "How do you relate to the declarations of sovereignty in the former autonomous republics of the Russian Federation," with categories ranging from "Completely support" to "Categorically do not support." I dichotomize responses to represent the bottom two (support) categories.

Table 1: Proportion of regional population who support regional sovereignty declarations by linguistic fluency (1993)

	Overall	Titular speaking	Not titular-speaking
Republic of Mordovia	0.14 (0.11, 0.16)	0.15 (0.10, 0.19)	0.13 (0.10, 0.16)
Mari El Republic	0.21 (0.18, 0.24)	0.34 (0.28, 0.41)	0.16 (0.12, 0.19)
Chuvash Republic	0.30 (0.27, 0.34)	0.40 (0.35, 0.44)	0.16 (0.11, 0.20)
Republic of Dagestan	0.33 (0.29, 0.37)	0.33 (0.30 0.37)	0.28 (0.15, 0.41)
Komi Republic	0.37 (0.34, 0.41)	0.54 (0.46, 0.62)	0.33 (0.29, 0.37)
Republic of Karelia	0.38 (0.34, 0.41)	0.39 (0.28, 0.49)	0.38 (0.34, 0.41)
Republic of Buriatia	0.38 (0.35, 0.41)	0.63 (0.55, 0.70)	0.32 (0.28, 0.35)
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania	0.40 (0.36, 0.43)	0.48 (0.43, 0.53)	0.31 (0.26, 0.36)
Udmurt Republic	0.41 (0.37, 0.44)	0.54 (0.47, 0.61)	0.37 (0.33, 0.40)
Kabardino-Balkarian Republic	0.43 (0.39, 0.47)	0.55 (0.50, 0.59)	0.28 (0.23, 0.33)
Republic of Bashkortostan	0.54 (0.50, 0.57)	0.74 (0.69, 0.80)	0.45 (0.41, 0.49)
Republic of Tatarstan	0.54 (0.51, 0.58)	0.74 (0.70, 0.79)	0.39 (0.35, 0.44)
Republic of Kalmykia	0.55 (0.52, 0.59)	0.60 (0.53, 0.66)	0.54 (0.50, 0.58)
Tuva Republic	0.65 (0.62, 0.68)	0.83 (0.80, 0.86)	0.34 (0.29, 0.39)
Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	0.80 (0.78, 0.83)	0.96 (0.94, 0.98)	0.66 (0.62, 0.71)
Chechen-Ingushetia	0.81 (0.78, 0.84)	0.89 (0.87, 0.92)	0.57 (0.51, 0.64)

Data from 1993 Colton-Hough surveys. Statistics represent the mean and associated 95% confidence interval. "Titular speaking" refers to respondents who reported speaking one of a region's titular languages fluently (the top two categories in a six-point scale); "Not titular-speaking" encompasses all other respondents.

In addition to the indirect benefits of investing in a population that supports sovereignty, there were direct benefits to regional governments from promoting regional languages: doing so was broadly popular, especially among members of titular ethnic groups. Table 2 illustrates the proportion of respondents of different ethnic identities who fully agreed that a region's titular language should be taught in all schools in the republic as a mandatory subject.[4] In seven of the fifteen

[4] "Fully agree" is the top item of a three-point scale, with "Fully disagree" as the bottom option and "Only if citizens of the titular nationality comprise a majority of the population" the

republics (the question was not asked in Dagestan), a majority of the population supported mandatory education in the titular language. In eleven republics, a majority of the titular population supported this policy. Given the dominance of the Russian language in the Russian Federation, it is also important that a substantial proportion of ethnic Russians in most regions also supported the promotion of titular languages in education: in nine of the republics, more than 25% of the ethnic Russian population supported this policy.

Table 2: Proportion of regional population who supports mandatory titular-language education in schools (1993) by ethnicity

	Overall	Titular	Russian
Republic of Mordovia	0.20 (0.17, 0.22)	0.41 (0.35, 0.47)	0.11 (0.08, 0.13)
Udmurt Republic	0.20 (0.18, 0.23)	0.40 (0.34, 0.46)	0.11 (0.09, 0.14)
Republic of Bashkortostan	0.24 (0.22, 0.27)	0.57 (0.50, 0.64)	0.12 (0.09, 0.16)
Komi Republic	0.27 (0.24, 0.30)	0.49 (0.42, 0.55)	0.18 (0.15, 0.21)
Mari El Republic	0.29 (0.26, 0.32)	0.47 (0.42, 0.53)	0.20 (0.16, 0.23)
Chuvash Republic*	0.38 (0.35, 0.41)	0.51 (0.47, 0.55)	0.07 (0.04, 0.11)
Republic of Karelia	0.38 (0.35, 0.41)	0.56 (0.49, 0.63)	0.32 (0.28, 0.36)
Republic of Buriatia	0.53 (0.49, 0.56)	0.73 (0.67, 0.79)	0.45 (0.41, 0.49)
Republic of Tatarstan	0.56 (0.53, 0.59)	0.73 (0.69, 0.77)	0.43 (0.38, 0.48)
Sakha (Yakutia) Republic	0.61 (0.58, 0.64)	0.77 (0.73, 0.82)	0.48 (0.43, 0.52)
Kabardino-Balkarian Republic*	0.66 (0.63, 0.69)	0.79 (0.76, 0.83)	0.44 (0.39, 0.50)
Tuva Republic*	0.67 (0.64, 0.70)	0.77 (0.73, 0.80)	0.46 (0.41, 0.52)
Republic of North Ossetia-Alania*	0.68 (0.65, 0.71)	0.82 (0.79, 0.86)	0.51 (0.45, 0.56)
Republic of Kalmykia	0.74 (0.71, 0.77)	0.85 (0.82, 0.88)	0.61 (0.56, 0.66)
Chechen-Ingushetia*	0.87 (0.84, 0.89)	0.91 (0.89, 0.94)	0.72 (0.66, 0.78)

Data from 1993 Colton-Hough surveys. Statistics represent the mean and associated 95% confidence interval. "Titular" refers to respondents who reported belonging to one of a region's titular ethnic groups; "Russian" refers to a respondent who reported being an ethnic Russian. Asterisks denote regions with a majority titular population.

middle option. This cut-off likely undercounts support for titular language education in regions where the titular population was an absolute majority of the population.

These statistics indicate that there was a substantial constituency for concrete and costly efforts to promote regional titular languages. Furthermore, they demonstrate that a significant proportion of the population most likely to oppose these efforts did not. Given the political advantages of supporting titular languages, there were clear incentives for regional governments to pursue these policies. However, the connection between titular languages and support for regional sovereignty also placed linguistic revitalization campaigns in conflict with centralization efforts.

Recentralization under Putin

This situation presented a dilemma for the administration of Russian President Putin (1999-present, with an interlude 2008-2012 while he was Prime Minister), for whom recentralization of political power was a key goal. The revitalization and spread of titular languages across Russian republics created a potential threat to centralization efforts by developing a constituency invested in regional sovereignty. At the same time, an immediate crackdown on titular languages risked inciting unrest, given the large number of individuals invested in the languages and many regions' high level of political sovereignty.

The way the Putin administrations dealt with this paradox is a clear illustration of the commitment problem: for more than a decade, Putin's program focused on political and economic spheres, undermining regional governments' ability to resist demands from the center while also shifting expectations among regional residents. It was not until 2017 that the central government began a more overt attempt to hinder titular language revitalization programs. At this point, such efforts faced little mass resistance.[5]

Putin's first five years in power largely removed the political and economic infrastructure that underpinned the sovereignty of Russian republics. Russia's invasion of the *de facto* independent Chechen Republic in 1999 brutally reasserted federal control over the most prominent case of separatism in Russia. The invasion of the Chechen Republic was followed by multiple programs aimed at reasserting and standardizing federal control over the rest of Russia's regions. By 2005, all but one of the bilateral treaties between the Russian and regional governments—which had granted many regions high levels of sovereignty—had either expired or been terminated; at the same time, all regional constitutions were brought into alignment with the Russian Constitution.

In practice, this two-pronged approach to legislative recentralization meant that regions lost most of their control over economic resources (for example, the Sakha Republic lost control over revenue from its natural resources), while also losing most of the political accoutrements of sovereignty (for example, the Tuva Republic

[5] The discussion in this section draws extensively from my chapter in the edited volume Identity and Politics in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Routledge, 2015), available as a working paper here.

removed an article from its constitution that had granted it the right to secede). In 2005, the Russian government ended the election of regional heads—including those of Russia's republics—and switched to a system of direct appointments from the federal center. Although the election of governors resumed in 2012, most of the most powerful regional leaders had been replaced by federal appointees in the interim, weakening local power structures. In 2014, federal legislation made even voicing support for separatism in Russia illegal.

As this process of political and economic recentralization was unfolding, the federal government did target some particularly provocative cultural aspects of regional sovereignty. Most notably, the Russian Duma passed legislation in 2002 mandating the use of a Cyrillic alphabet for all indigenous languages of the Russian Federation. This legislation was largely aimed at reversing the Republic of Tatarstan's attempt to implement a Latin alphabet for the Tatar language. However, such policies were paired with overt signals that more significant cultural revitalization programs were not targets of recentralization efforts. For example, when the Russian Constitutional Court declined to hear Tatarstan's case opposing mandatory use of the Cyrillic alphabet in 2004, it also allowed the region to continue its policy of mandatory education in the Tatar language.

This pairing was a crucial element of the Russian government's recentralization strategy. Prohibiting the script change did not threaten the core of Tatarstan's project to revitalize Tatar identity. However, mandatory education in regional languages was—and remains—essential to this project in both Tatarstan and many other regions.

According to data from the 2021 Russian Census, titular language speakers are a majority of the population in only 11 of the 21 Russian republics, and constitute more than 75% of the population in just four of these regions. As such, for demographic reasons alone there are limited incentives for residents in many regions to learn a titular language over Russian, which is spoken by almost all residents of the Russian Federation. Without mandatory education in regional languages as a subject, many residents may choose not to teach their children these languages, effectively making positive demographic linguistic change impossible. Equally important is the symbolic aspect: mandatory education sends a strong signal that regional governments are both committed to the language and are capable of acting on that commitment. If regional governments cannot mandate titular language education, it sends the opposite message and drastically reduces the incentives of citizens to invest in the language.

The sequencing and pairing that characterized the initial period of Putin's recentralization campaign reassured regional governments and populations that political and economic recentralization did not necessarily imply cultural recentralization. By adopting this approach, the federal government undermined one of the primary justifications for regional sovereignty—that sovereignty was necessary for cultural preservation. Consequently, this strategy diminished the ability of regional governments and ethnic activists to mobilize against the

centralization program while their regions still enjoyed some degree of political sovereignty.

However, as the commitment problem literature demonstrates, once a peripheral government is weakened, the central government has little reason to honor its commitments. Legislation in 2007 that removed the regional component from education signaled that cultural recentralization remained on the federal government's agenda.[6] This legislation eliminated regional-specific education from schools across the Russian Federation, but left ambiguity about whether education in regional languages fell under the definition of a "regional component." Although the ambiguity allowed regions to pursue their language policies, this legislation paved the way for subsequent laws that were unambiguously detrimental to regional language policies.

Following a speech by Putin praising the role of the Russian language in unifying Russia and criticizing the instruction of regional languages to children who are not native speakers, federal prosecutors began investigating whether regional language education infringed on federal legislation in 2017. In 2018, the Russian Duma passed amendments that preserved the right of republics to teach their languages but denied them the ability to make such courses mandatory.

As with the case of Latinization, this legislation pairs positive and negative developments: while it restricts regional language policy, it does not completely eliminate it. However, given the fundamental importance of mandatory education for the development of regional languages, the negative effects on regional language revitalization far outweigh the positive.

The future of language revitalization in Russia

Unsurprisingly, many regional governments opposed the recent language legislation, and regional activists protested the new restrictions. However, due to their dependence on the federal center and their significantly reduced political sovereignty, regional governments chose to suppress popular opposition rather than foster it.

That said, there is evidence that the suppression of efforts to revitalize regional languages has come at a cost to the Russian government. Research demonstrates that the 2018 language restrictions led to reduced support for the government in subsequent elections in regions affected by the legislation. Furthermore, although regional governments have largely been able to stifle open dissent against the Russian government, signs of discontent persist. Notably, Russian republics were sites of significant protests against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the following general mobilization of troops. Public opinion data also suggests

[6] Szymon Jankiewicz and colleagues provide an excellent overview of legal debates regarding regional languages in Russia.

that members of titular populations in some regions are less supportive of Putin than members of other ethnic groups.

Finally, titular language promotion remains popular in at least some republics. Table 3 presents results from a November 2022 telephone survey conducted by the Levada Center in two republics, Tatarstan and Buriatia, which asked respondents about their level of support for mandatory education in their region's titular language in all schools (a similar question to that presented in Table 2, but with different response scales). An overwhelming majority of titular respondents, as well as a majority of ethnic Russians, supported such a policy.[7] This result provides evidence that regional linguistic revitalization remains popular in Russia, at least some regions, despite the efforts of the Russian government.

Table 3: Proportion of regional population who supports mandatory titular-language education in schools (2022) by ethnicity.

	Overall	Titular	Russian
Republic of Buriatia	0.66 (0.60, 0.72)	0.90 (0.81, 0.98)	0.60 (0.53, 0.68)
Republic of Tatarstan	0.70 (0.65, 0.76)	0.86 (0.80, 0.93)	0.55 (0.46, 0.65)

Data from 2022 regionally-representative telephone surveys conducted by the Levada Center. Statistics represent the mean and associated 95% confidence interval."Titular" refers to respondents who reported belonging to one of a region's titular ethnic groups; "Russian" refers to a respondent who reported being an ethnic Russian.

[7] I measure support as the top two items on the four-point response scale. This response scale differs from the 1993 survey, making direct comparison of results untenable.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Do Ordinary Tatarstani Residents Want to Separate from Russia?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 923
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There is currently much speculation regarding the prospects of Russia's disintegration. It is often assumed in Western media that the Kremlin's grip on ethnic regions across Russia is unwelcomed by the populations within these regions and that separatist movements will inevitably become popular the moment an opportunity arises. As the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War is consistently and rapidly evolving, it is difficult to predict what will happen after the war has ended (or when it will end). Still, it is important to understand presuppositions regarding separatist ideas among ordinary citizens prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

This memo is based on the research that I conducted in 2016 on everyday patriotism in Tatarstan[2] as well as data from other projects. While the authoritarian context prevented me from asking interviewees direct questions regarding their willingness or desire to live independently from Moscow or their aspirations for greater autonomy from the federal center, it is still possible to scrutinize the attitudes among residents of ethnic republics toward notions of homeland, their region, and Russia as well as to assess people's varying levels of place attachment and grievances pertaining to their residence, however they understand it. This memo is based primarily on the analysis of 42 interviews with residents of Tatarstan of various ethnicities and the two focus groups, during which participants were asked to draw their homeland, Tatarstan, and Russia and then explain their drawings to the others and then discuss in groups whether the chosen symbols are representative of homeland, Tatarstan and Russia respectively. This method of image elicitation helped to facilitate discussions about such sensitive topics as territorial grievances and aspirations for autonomy.

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[2] The study was conducted as a part of the "Patriotism in Contemporary Russia" project, supervised by K. Clement (2016–2017) and supported by the grant for the Foundation for Support of Liberal Education at the Center for Historical Research at the HSE, St. Petersburg.

Local Patriotism Prevails

Data from interviews with Tatarstani participants of various ethnicities suggests that their understanding of patriotism is primarily related to the local dimension—a district, town, or city—while pride is mostly associated with the regional dimension and, to a much lesser extent, the national dimension. Patriotism in Tatarstan was understood by the majority of the research participants as an activity related to "a small homeland," which was described as an entity much smaller than their region. Most times that people referred to their homeland, they were referring to a specific location in which they live or where they spent their childhood. This idea of a small homeland was often contrasted by the participants with the state patriotism imposed from above:

> The motherland is a place that you protect, that you love. You have washed your entryway—this is your homeland. You have planted a flower at your entryway—this is your homeland. You have grown a tree in your dacha—that's your homeland; built a house—that's your homeland. But my homeland for me, in any case, is not the aviation industry, it is not the Victory Parade—categorically! Because I am categorically against even the Immortal Regiment. I believe that they are memorialized at home. This [is a] policy of the state to justify the arms race. (Martha, 36 years old, Russian)

For some of the research participants, patriotism meant engagement in the improvement of urban areas. For socially active citizens, patriotism was associated with communication with officials through various means, from e-mails to the district administration about the need to fix sidewalks to the creation of urban movements (e.g., a push to construct bicycle lanes) or efforts to draw attention to a problem (e.g., writing and publishing articles about the accessibility limitations for people with disabilities). Overall, the interview data suggests that patriotism and homeland both have localized meanings in people´s understandings and drawings.

Tatarstani Patriotism

However, regional patriotism turned out to be the most pronounced and significant among the majority of research participants after being asked what it meant for them to be a resident of Tatarstan or being asked to explain their drawings of the republic. This was most strongly reflected during the focus groups' discussions. While their image of the homeland was often associated with nature, the image of Tatarstan was associated with progress, sports, multiculturalism, interethnic tolerance, growth, prosperity, and a high quality of life, among other similar factors. Very often, in both focus group discussions and individual interviews, the participants conceptualized Tatarstan as a unique Russian region that is highly distinct from the rest of the country.

Pride in Tatarstan as an advanced region that can serve as an example for the rest of Russia was expressed in literally every interview regardless of

participants' ethnic identities or ideological views. In the individual interviews, interethnic tolerance was the main point of pride in the republic; in the focus groups, in which the question was asked directly—"draw and explain your image of Tatarstan"—several other points of pride were discussed:

> The main symbol of Tatarstan for me is Suyumbike. Indeed, it is our tower, which is leaning like in Pisa; there is a certain charm to it. And, most importantly, thanks to the victory at the World Championship of our "Rubin" over "Barcelona," Kazan was recognized in the world. Before that, Kazan was simply not known anywhere. And now they say that Kazan—Rubin—they won over Barcelona. It's a fact. I think this was the brightest moment of my life. (Evgeny, 35 years old, focus group with ethnic Russians)

In the Tatar focus group, the image of Tatarstan was associated with nature, sports, and innovation, but it was also linked to the Tatars as an indigenous group, which brings prestige to the land:

> It may sound like self-boasting, but in Central Asia and everywhere else, well, indeed, a lot of enlightenment has come from the Tatars. And it is also connected with what they say about Innopolis—i.e., about the role of Tatarstan in the Eurasian integration project. It is an innovation and industrial center. Then, there is the progress that is characteristic of our people. When tourists come to Kazan, they say that they have it so good because they have oil. But that´s not it. We also have the most hardworking people. And cleanliness. Because Tatars are obsessed with the cleanliness of the house—high hygiene. (S., 28 years old, Tatar)

In general, both in the focus groups and the interviews, the narratives about the republic were almost exclusively positive, noting Tatarstan's progressiveness in contrast to the rest of Russia.

Ethnic Tatar Patriotism

The focus group and interviews with Tatars significantly differed from the focus group with Russians in one sense: the Tatars were far more critical when it came to their attitudes toward federal authorities and their evaluations of Russian prosperity and living conditions. Thus, even the vastness of Russia was explained not so much as an advantage (as it was among other participants) but as a problem:

> Well, on the one hand, it's wide and has a large amount of space. Therefore, one can build Gulag camps in many places. Right here, everywhere—yes [pointing to the territory beyond the Urals]. But, on the other hand, it is a huge space that is not tended, not cultivated. That is, it has great potential, but it is just in a state of neglect. (Ilgiz, 40 years old, Tatar)

The discussion in the Tatar focus group repeatedly gave way to mentions of Russia's rich natural resources (a consequence of its vast territory), for which the country has no use. It should be noted, however, that the oil rent of

Tatarstan was not directly discussed. In my opinion, this testifies to the presence of some self-censorship in the participants' answers during the focus group due to security concerns. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that such self-censorship had existed much before the decolonization narratives became criminalized.[3]

Moreover, in the Tatar focus group, multiculturalism was discussed as a distinctive feature of Tatarstan rather than one of Russian society as a whole. At the same time, while Moscow as a symbol of Russia was never mentioned by the participants of the ethnic Russian focus group, Moscow as a symbol of Russia was highlighted frequently by the Tatars—but always as something alien to Tatarstan. There were frequent associations of Russia with Moscow and Moscow with both Orthodoxy and empire, as in the following excerpt:

> D.: In my understanding, the capital city Moscow is associated with Russia, first of all. [It] is a fence […], a barrier.
>
> M.: Moscow is shielded.
>
> D.: Yes, well, that's one association. There's the Kremlin and the Orthodox church because mostly there are churches everywhere in Moscow. After all, that's the common association with Russia: churches all around, Orthodoxy, empire. (D., 37 years old, male; M., 32 years old, female covered Muslim)

It should be noted, however, that when describing the desired future for the country, all of the research participants—regardless of ethnicity and including Tatar nationalists—were more likely to prefer the preservation of Russia's integrity. Indeed, this may have been a consequence of preference falsification, or self-censorship, which is an inevitable phenomenon under illiberal rule. However, based on data from my other research with non-activists, there is a significant fear of inter-regional wars and violent instability rooted in communicative memories of the Russo-Chechen Wars. People living in ethnic republics are receptive to the Kremlin's long-lasting narrative about the West's will to disintegrate Russia and conquer it piece by piece.

"Extreme" Ethnic Nationalism in Tatarstan

Tatar nationalist movements in the republic exist in two main forms: official (authorized) and oppositional (repressed). In my opinion, however, these forms have minimal differences in terms of their essence and goals. The primary distinction lies with the degree to which they emphasize regional autonomy from the federal center. More 'extreme' organizations, which might once have advocated for separatism, have moderated their stance, as separatist claims have been criminalized. Tatar nationalists find it unproductive to put people in danger of criminal persecution by claiming separatists' goals. The officially supported by the regional government Tatar organizations like the

[3] URL: http://diplomaticdictionary.com/dictionary/политика-запада-деколонизация-россии/ accessed 8 November 2024.

World Forum of Tatar Youth and the World Congress of Tatars supervise Tatar diasporas within the country and around the world and put their attention on preserving the Tatar culture more than pursuing political goals of greater autonomy. There are also several informal oppositional organizations and marginal groups that are distinct from one another when it comes to their goals, ranging from promoting the idea of the total independence of Tatarstan to the idea of creating a union of Volga-Ural republics or implementing true federalization in Russia while keeping it together.

First of all, it should be noted that repressive legislation regarding the preservation of the country's integrity affects the formulation of their activities' goals and objectives as well as, apparently, the openness of research participants in interviews, as demonstrated by the following quotation:

> Naturally, the tightening of Russian legislation forces us, so to speak, to modify some goals; that is, we now do not directly say "independence," and so on—although it is implied and will be implied—i.e., the Tatars will never give up the idea of national independence. But now we say that the ideas of our organization are, first, the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of the Tatar people, that is, the protection of the Tatar language, that is, we demand the opening of national schools, television, the introduction of the Tatar language in all spheres of life in Tatarstan. The second is the protection of the rights and legitimate interests of Muslims, that is, we are Tatars—we are Muslims [...]. And third, naturally, we Tatars are part of the Turkish world, so we stand on the position that Turkish peoples unite culturally, economically, or otherwise, so we strive to unite and popularize Turkish unity. And not just Turkish unity; additionally, Finno-Ugric peoples live next to us: Mari, Udmurt, Mordva. Naturally, we should support them. Therefore, our organization sets the goal of support and solidarity for these people. At this stage, so to say, due to the difficult situation and the strongest repressions, the organization is mainly engaged in educational activities. (Ainur, journalist, 30 years old, Tatar)

Any public activity among extra-systemic Tatar nationalists (e.g., organizing congresses) is suppressed by local law enforcement either directly or indirectly with covert repressions (e.g., by suddenly cutting off electricity in the building) or individual threats by security services:

> One of the favorite measures is to kick people out of rented housing, for example. I had many experiences in which the landlords of apartments just abruptly said, "that's it, tomorrow you do not live here." And then, in private conversations, they confessed that they were asked to do this—by security services, in short. (Ainur, 30 years old, Tatar)

A representative of one social media outreach project (aimed at developing political literacy among the local population) and a volunteer for an official Tatar organization noted the growing interest of young people in Tatar, referencing the organization's activities:

> We even have such a motto: "We make Tatar fashionable, and we make fashion a la Tatar" […] There is a great interest among young people to get new knowledge in a relevant format in the Tatar language. (Almaz, 28 years old, Tatar)

The same research participant notes the limitations of legislation in political activities, emphasizing the inability to create political parties on local grounds:

> We will grow into something more […] While there is a legislative obstacle to grow into something bigger […], we believe that the subjects of the Russian Federation should be given the right to create political parties […] this possibility existed in the 1990s. These are parties that will be closer to the voters and the local agenda. As international practice shows, this does not necessarily lead to secession. I think that if we restrict by law that the party's goals do not promote the idea of secession, this possibility to create political parties on ethnic grounds will benefit both the provinces and the federation itself. (Almaz, 28 years old, Tatar).

In general, in their narratives, Tatar activists avoided talking about Russia as a whole. When asked about their goals, they first made reservations about the repressive nature of Russian legislation, and only then replied with elaborations on the desirable prospects of their region. They seemingly viewed the legislative liberalization and federalization of state governance as a prerequisite for their political career but were modest when it came to the prospect of total independence from Moscow.

Conclusion

Overall, while the research participants from a Tatar ethnic background are indeed more critical toward the dependence of Tatarstan from Moscow, the general tendency seems to be that all Tatarstani residents are prouder of their region than of Russia as a whole. This points to a potential willingness among them to pursue greater autonomy from Moscow in the future, regardless of their ethnic identification. However, the pursuit of total independence is unlikely for two reasons: the fear of inter-regional violent instability and the long-lasting habit of imagination of Russia as a point of reference for national identity. Due to significant repression, Tatar nationalism plays a minimal role in shaping agendas for the political future of the region that would be received well by the majority of its population.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

The Art of Maximizing Political Benefit: Kadyrov, Chechnya and the Russia-Ukraine War

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Throughout his time in power, Chechen ruler Ramzan Kadyrov fortified his position to a degree that is unimaginable for other Russian regional governors. He quelled armed resistance, eliminated potential political rivals, and even established his own personal army, known as the *Kadyrovtsy* ("Kadyrovites"). With the onset of the Ukraine war, however, the very source of his power became the primary threat to his political security: Russian President Vladimir Putin. Since then, Kadyrov has seized every opportunity to reaffirm his loyalty to the Russian leader.

The war effectively become a test for Kadyrov—one that he nearly failed. Despite early struggles, his position now looks as strong as ever. To analyze Kadyrov's efforts to boost his political stock at the expense of the Chechens sent off to war, this memo relies on my interviews with residents of Chechnya and information sourced from several Telegram channels, including KHASAN_KHALITOV, Niyso, 1Adat, Abu Saddam Shishani, and Kadyrov's own Kadyrov_95. I have been conducting this research for almost three years, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Kadyrov Just as Vulnerable as Everyone Else

Kadyrov's expressions of loyalty to Putin, driven by the fear of losing his patron's favor, have become legendary. He calls the Russian president his idol and refers to himself as "Putin's foot soldier." He consistently states that he is ready to die for Putin and willing to fulfill any order given by him.

Putin has never put a stop to Kadyrov's public self-humiliation, much like how a tsar would not get in the way of a faithful but not-so-clever servant. This stance of his patron convinced Kadyrov of his own political invincibility to such an extent that, in 2022, the Chechen leader even made the risky PR move to hint at potential

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retirement. As expected, the local Chechen population "pleaded" with him not to go, as Kadyrov explained later in a speech. Ultimately, he clarified that he would stay for as long as Putin needed him in his post—and that seemed like forever.

The blow to Kadyrov's position came unexpectedly. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 likely began without Kadyrov being informed in advance. Suddenly, he no longer felt like a privileged governor with a direct line to the president to consult on important decisions. Instead, he had come to be an ordinary regional politician, his service neither needed, nor directly advocated by the Kremlin. This unofficial reduction in status signaled that he could be removed from power as easily as any other Russian governor. The shock of this revelation was so great that Kadyrov, known for being eager for publicity, remained silent on social media for several days. Then, he began to act swiftly.

Kadyrov gathered his personal troops and, alongside his teenage sons and members of the government in full military attire (except for the mufti, who wore civilian clothes), delivered a victorious speech. He promised to defeat Ukraine and, if necessary, to "conquer it and go beyond." He then dispatched his troops to join the Russian offensive as quickly as possible, determined to contribute to the victory he had promised.

However, this victory has yet to materialize. The commanders of the Akhmat battalions, realizing that their leader's priority was self-promotion, began posting videos on TikTok of "heroic battles" against imaginary enemies. These videos were short-lived: The practice ended after the Kadyrovtsy—once widely feared—earned the nickname "TikTok warriors" and became the object of ridicule.

Nonetheless, the pejorative label stuck as the Kadyrovtsy proved determined to avoid the actual battlefield. In their view, being known as "TikTok warriors" was certainly better than dying for Kadyrov's career and Russian imperialism.

Their lack of motivation to fight for Russia's and Kadyrov's interests became particularly apparent when Ukraine launched its counteroffensive into Russian territory in August 2024. Some Kadyrovtsy willingly surrendered, behavior traditionally considered shameful for Chechens. Their standing took a further hit from their hazing of Russian comrades-in-arms, who, in turn, began reporting Kadyrovtsy positions to Ukrainian troops.

In short, the Kadyrovtsy have lost their reputation as fearsome warriors. It has become clear that they are neither motivated to fight in Ukraine nor trained to withstand the hardships of war. Evidently, the Kadyrovtsy are nothing more than a police force for suppressing internal dissent. The fact that this is their primary purpose also explains why Kadyrov himself has been keen to preserve his troops and avoid heavy losses, as they are critical to the stability of his power at home.

Efforts to Reinforce His Own Position

Ukraine's resistance, which made a quick and decisive Russian victory impossible, put Kadyrov between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he did not want to sacrifice all his troops in the war (they were equally unwilling to sacrifice themselves); on the other hand, he could not afford to lose face with the Kremlin. His boasting about the capabilities of the Akhmat battalions, together with his personal determination to defeat Ukraine, made it unfeasible for him to simply ignore the deteriorating reputation of his personal army. Thus, to boost his fighting force's capabilities and mitigate the impact of inevitable losses, he opted to rely on volunteers, who could be sacrificed with no regrets.

No more than three months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kadyrov launched a recruitment campaign. First, he appeared on local TV and appealed to the traditional obligation of Chechen men to defend their homeland: "Those who do not want to take part in this war, those who do not volunteer for it, are lacking faith… I believe it is a great jihad, and those who take part in it are lucky. They are real Muslims and real Chechens." Salah Mezhiyev, the mufti of Chechnya, was keen to echo his boss and neatly explained why Russia's war in Ukraine constitutes a jihad.

This attempt to stir up patriotism through appeals to Chechen ethnic and religious identity proved rather unsuccessful. This became clear when Kadyrov recorded another video, expressing surprise that Chechens had not yet formed long lines at recruitment centers. To promote volunteering and counter criticism that men from his own family were not in a rush to sign up for the war, he sent his underage sons to Ukraine. They returned triumphant: In a now-familiar fashion, they recorded a video showing "personally captured Ukrainian soldiers," whom they brought "as a gift" to their father.

This feat still failed to inspire the general population. The number of Chechen volunteers remained very low, even though in May 2024 Kadyrov boasted that as many as 18,000 had served in Ukraine. In fact, most of these volunteers were recruits from other Russian regions who signed contracts with the Akhmat battalions for four months in exchange for $2,000 per month in compensation, two weeks of training, and full equipment—all at Grozny's expense. Opening-up the Akhmat battalions for anyone to join, through a recruiting center at the Russian Special Forces University (RUS) in Gudermes (Chechnya), proved a very effective move. It concealed the low level of Chechen "patriotism" by mixing a few volunteers from Chechnya with a large body of volunteers from the rest of Russia. Regular dispatches of the volunteer units to the front line in Ukraine are diligently posted on Kadyrov's Telegram channel, Kadyrov_95. All the volunteers are counted as "Chechens."

Another move that reinforced Kadyrov's importance was the incorporation of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC). Since the PMC was disbanded following Yevgeny Prigozhin's infamous failed

mutiny in the summer of 2023 and his subsequent death, the Russian Ministry of Defense and politicians have wrestled with the problem of what to do with Wagner Group mercenaries. Kadyrov was quick to offer a solution: Through the commander of the all the Kadyrovtsy forces in Ukraine, Apti Alaudinov, he invited the mercenaries to join the Akhmat battalions. After negotiations with the remaining leaders of the PMC, Alaudinov announced that up to 3,000 men would join the Chechen forces. He shared this expectation after a well-known Wagner commander, known by his nom de guerre "Ratibor," invited his comrades to join Akhmat, promising that "everything will be as it was before [under Prigozhin]."

Although it seems that the expected 3,000 men have yet to materialize, Kadyrov's attempt to solve the Wagner issue was likely assessed positively by the Kremlin.

Profiling the Chechens Volunteering to Fight in Ukraine

Judging by the biographies of Chechens who were killed in action posted by the Chechen opposition Telegram channel run by bloggers Khasan Khalitov and Tumso Abdurakhmanov, as well as human rights activist Ibragim Yangulbayev, it seems that most of the actual Chechen volunteers are men who had struggled to fit into civilian life after the Russo-Chechen wars. They either lacked intelligence and motivation or sufficient connections and money, or both, to start their own business or secure decent jobs in the region, for example. For them, the war was a chance to make money and give some purpose to their otherwise purposeless lives or to leave this world for a better one. This conclusion is supported by the qualitative data that your author has collected through interviews with Chechens who live in Chechnya (18 semi-structured interviews in total from March 2022 to June 2024). Both abovementioned sources also confirm that Kadyrov is filling the ranks of Akhmat with those suspected of disloyalty to the regime. This group comprises four categories of Chechens: a) those who avoided partial mobilization in the summer of 2022; b) those who are forced or coerced to volunteer; c) those who previously sided with the regime but now express disloyalty; and d) those who returned to Chechnya from abroad (primarily the West) to visit relatives.

The first category consists of those who are eligible for military service but are trying to avoid it. In the beginning, the hunt for draft dodgers was not particularly intense in Chechnya. Faced with uncharacteristic protests by mothers whose sons had been mobilized, Kadyrov quickly retreated, declaring that Chechnya had not only fulfilled its mobilization requirement but exceeded it by 254%. Nonetheless, recruits are still being hunted, mobilized, and sent to Ukraine. Men who return from unsuccessful attempts to seek refuge in the West are especially vulnerable.

The second category includes men aged between 20 and 50 who have attracted the attention of Chechen law enforcement, including: those who have committed petty crimes; followers of Salafi Islam, which has been synonymized with terrorism since the Second Russo-Chechen War (1999–2009); participants in public protests

inside and outside of the republic's borders; and vocal critics of the government or its policies on social media. They are usually given a choice: go to war or face imprisonment. As in other Russian regions, Chechen law enforcement has an incentive—even an obligation—to deliver people for the war.

The third category includes members of the Kadyrovtsy who were punished for disloyalty, disrespect, or concealing extra income. One telling example is the story of Alaudinov, who himself was sent to the battlefield for allegedly showing disrespect to Kadyrov. For years, he had been considered a loyal member of Kadyrov's team, with many believing he would one day become the republic's minister of internal affairs. Indeed, he was one of Kadyrov's closest associates. Things changed, however, when he jokingly slapped a portrait of his boss. Soon after, he was relieved of his official position, stripped of his privileges, and sent to Ukraine to win back Kadyrov's favor or die trying. Although this fate has befallen several other members of Kadyrov's team, Alaudinov stands out for having risen to become the leader of one of the Chechen units and, eventually, the entire contingent. Following the inclusion of many Russian (Orthodox Christian) volunteers in Akhmat, Alaudinov began referring to his troops as the "army of Christ" fighting against evil. His talent for propaganda on social media did not go unnoticed by the Kremlin: In 2024, Putin appointed him deputy head of the Main Military-Political Directorate in the Ministry of Defense.

The fourth and final category includes men detained in Chechnya after returning home to visit their families from abroad. Young men coming back from the West are not only subject to mobilization due to their age and Russian citizenship; they are also targeted for having lived in countries that are now ideological enemies of the Russian state. The regime never misses an opportunity to punish those who live in the West, which makes them traitors by default.

Conclusion: Kadyrov Still on Top

By and large, Kadyrov's project to raise a generation of Chechens loyal to the Russian state has failed. Throughout his time in power, he has worked hard to make that happen, but Chechens, as I have shown, still do not consider Russia to be their homeland and have no interest in dying for it. Statistics published by the BBC with an interactive map indicate that Chechen losses in the Ukraine war are among the smallest of all Russian regions. Chechnya is reported to have lost only 265 men at the time of this writing, compared with over 500 for neighboring North Ossetia (which has a population half the size of Chechnya's) and more than 1,600 for heavily hit Buryatia (with a population two thirds the size of Chechnya's).

Despite failing to "conquer Ukraine" (as promised) or significantly contribute to the war effort, Kadyrov has retained Putin's favor. The sudden and unexpected visit of the Russian president to Chechnya in August 2024 confirmed this. Kadyrov is still deemed necessary to keep the Chechen population calm—the last thing

Moscow needs right now is a rebellion that would further destabilize an already weakened state. Had the "special operation" gone as planned and succeeded, Kadyrov would have needed to put in much more effort to convince the Kremlin of his continuing personal utility. Its failure still has the potential to deliver unexpected and unwanted surprises for Kadyrov and his rule.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

Shifting Monument Landscapes in Russia's Regions

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 925
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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian authorities and pro-regime members of civil society have been removing or damaging monuments that no longer align with the contemporary image of Russia's national identity painted by both national and local elites. At the same time, new ones that better fit the shifting boundaries of permissible national identification have been designed and constructed. Shifts in those who are considered national friends or enemies—heroes or villains—are reflected in these changes to Russia's monuments.

Some of these changes are taking place in Moscow, as demonstrated by the newly constructed monuments to Felix Dzerzhinsky (2023), Fidel Castro (2022), and Nelson Mandela (2024) in the city. These additions highlight Russian foreign policy's emphasis on building global partnerships in support of its war and its challenge to the liberal world order and, in the case of Dzerzhinsky, a return to the glorification of repressive strength. The Castro and Mandela monuments were both erected by the Russian Military Historical Society with support from the city and national governments, suggesting a clear connection with Russia's military actions. At the same time, many changes are taking place across Russia's diverse regions. By looking beyond Moscow and comparing regional monument-(de)construction efforts, we can bolster our understanding of how Russia's symbolic landscape is shifting and what that means for the ability of Russian nationalism to legitimize the Putin regime and its actions across the country at large. Tailoring monument actions to local contexts, such as by redefining local relationships with international actors and emphasizing local soldiers who have died in the Russo-Ukrainian War, can make monuments more effective tools for disseminating the state-approved national narrative.

Comparing Monuments Across Three Ethnic Republics

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In *Legitimating Nationalism: Political Identity in Russia's Ethnic Republics* (2024), I compare what nation building looks like in three of Russia's ethnic republics—Buryatia, Karelia, and Tatarstan—and its ability to generate legitimacy for the regime. Though nation building seeks to create a state-wide political community, much of its implementation takes place at the local level, where local elites have varying incentives to either stick to the central script or interject regional characteristics into the national narrative. The regionalization of nation building, when it doesn't challenge the dominant identity, has the potential to strengthen nation building's effectiveness when it comes to uniting diverse communities across a large territory. Through a combination of fieldwork (2014, 2015–2016) and original survey data (2016), I analyze the variation in nation-building strategies across the three republics as well as the extent to which they complement or compete with nation-building efforts from the center.

One of the four nation-building tactics that I examine in the book entails monuments in these republics' capital cities. I created a database to catalog the monuments in each city, including who or what they commemorate, the historical era that the depicted figure or event is from, and the theme of the commemoration (e.g., war, politics, culture). A comparison of these symbolic landscapes reveals important similarities and differences. In terms of similarities, all three of the considered cities have monuments depicting Lenin, Pushkin, and Kirov (a Communist Party leader assassinated in 1934). Additionally, approximately half of the three cities' monuments commemorate war, and each has a monument to victims of political repression. More specifically, WWII monuments are the most prevalent across the three cities. While they share similar forms, including eternal flames, busts depicting Heroes of the Soviet Union, tall pillars, and victory parks, they regionalize the remembrance of the Great Patriotic War. Local heroes are etched into the landscape, and people today can see their ethnicity and language represented in some of these monuments. These differences can complement—rather than compete with—the focus on all-Russian greatness by increasing the resonance of messaging linking the memory of WWII to Russian nationalism and its current war.

However, other differences can compete with the central national identity, particularly when monuments highlight regional figures and events that challenged Russian integration or emphasized regional identity over the all-Russian identity. Notably, Kazan has a higher percentage of monuments representing cultural figures than the other cities. These figures are predominantly tied to Tatarstan and Tatars, emphasizing regional and ethnic identities. While some of these figures, such as Tukay, are also incorporated into the broader Russian national identity through monuments in Moscow and the education system, the overall composition of Kazan's monuments presents a distinctive regional identity.

One way to examine the impact of monuments is to assess what new monuments people would like to add to their city and whether their proposals would complement the current symbolic landscape. In my survey, I included the following question: "Today, there is much discussion of monuments in Russia. If it were up to you, to which historic figure would you establish a monument in your town first of all?" I analyzed the responses of those who live in the capitals of the three republics. While there are some similarities among their responses, such as in the emphasis on imperial figures and war, there are also important variations. There are more calls for the representation of local figures in Ulan-Ude and Kazan and wide differences in demand for figures already represented versus those who have yet to be represented. For example, of those who named figures to memorialize, 75% in Ulan-Ude called for new objects of commemoration, primarily Peter I, Putin, Genghis Khan, and Stalin.

This examination of monuments at the regional level reveals that there are some symbols that are present across diverse settings and consistency in the regionalization of remembrance but divergence in the extent to which local monuments deviate from Moscow's symbolic landscape and the centrally promoted national narrative. While monuments are relatively sticky features of nation building, often lasting long beyond their creation, the monument landscape can and does change through the removal of old monuments and the erection of new ones, something that we are currently seeing across Russia.

Regional Monument Construction and Deconstruction Since 2022

The recent shifts in the monument landscape following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine also take on regional characteristics that are suited to the different histories and identities of each region. For example, the representation of former international ties with entities that have since become problematic is changed through various methods.

For example, in the northwest of Russia, monuments involving Finland have come to constitute a focus of local authorities and actors. In Priozersk, a town close to the Finnish border, a monument installed relatively recently in 2019 went missing in September 2023, with local authorities stating that they had no knowledge of its whereabouts. The monument marked the burial spot of Finnish soldiers who died during World War II. This removal illustrates the shifting portrayal of national enemies. The monument's installation and unveiling ceremony highlighted a positive relationship between Finland and Russia, with some of the funding coming from Finland and those involved highlighting opportunities for continued cooperation and friendship between the two countries. Just four years later, the local administration denied responsibility for the monument's care, illustrating the end of prospects for this bilateral partnership.

In Karelia, an ethnic republic bordering Finland, depictions of Finland have evolved from those of a friend to those of a foe, even predating 2022. Recently, the

Karelia Supreme Court ruled that Finland committed genocide over the course of its occupation of the region during World War II. Karelia Head Artur Parfenchikov stated during the trial that this matter is of particular importance now because "the question of creating a Greater Finland on our historical and sacred territory is being raised again." No longer a partner in economic, cultural, ecological, and other matters, Finland is actively being painted as a potential invader. This shift has also been apparent through Karelia's monuments. Prior to this ruling, in December 2023, local authorities erected a new monument "To the victims of the repressions of 1937–1939 and the victims of the Finnish occupation during the Great Patriotic War," muddying the focus of the site that had previously only memorialized victims of Stalin's purges.

In addition to this local monument work focused on region-specific identities and relationships, there are also points of similarity across the regions, especially when it comes to the removal of monuments memorializing victims of political repression and the addition of monuments commemorating those who died in the so-called "special military operation."

The similarity and ubiquity of new monuments to soldiers from the Russo-Ukrainian War are similar to monuments depicting soldiers from the Great Patriotic War. The new monuments take a common form and purpose across the country but regionalize the remembrance by focusing on local people who have died—and continue to die—in the war. Since war monuments and memorials, particularly WWII ones, are already common features of the symbolic landscape across most of Russia, these new monuments align with people's experiences of how war is remembered and marked on their streets. In this manner, they solidify the connection between victory over the Nazis in 1945 and the current war against Ukraine.

In contrast to the obelisks, busts, and eternal flames that are often used to commemorate the Great Patriotic War, some of the new monuments are taking a more straightforward form, depicting a standing soldier in full battle gear, holding or pointing a weapon. Just this year, several such monuments were erected in Russia's western regions, including in Anapa, Khlevnoe, Kursk, Lovozero, and Sochi. While these soldier statues are more commonly popping up in Russia's west closer to the battle lines, they are appearing across Russia as well. For example, one is soon to be unveiled in the town of Sokoch in the Far East. As these monuments are being erected during a conflict—as opposed to the more common practice of memorializing wars and their associated losses following their conclusion—the more active portrayal of soldiers reflects the ongoing action and the need to remain on war footing.

A Consistently Changing Monument Landscape

As the Russian government continues to pursue support for the war—or at the very least eliminate visible opposition to it—these new monuments, erected amid

an ongoing conflict, serve as everyday reminders to those who walk past them of their connection to the war and duty as Russians. These monuments, taking the form of soldiers, serve as models of how good Russian patriots should contribute to the protection of their nation. Similar efforts in the construction and removal of monuments across Russia's many diverse regions indicate that the Putin regime is successfully controlling the war narrative and the way in which it is linked to Russian identity.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

The Role of Cossack Hosts in Russia and Their Future in Occupied Ukraine

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Who are the Cossacks in modern Russia, and how do they shape our understanding of the country's regional diversity? The group remains understudied, even now as debates around "decolonizing" Russia gain momentum. Perhaps this is because the Cossacks present a paradox: both a minority group and key agents of colonization. Their role in Russia's past and present is complex.

Scholars debate whether the Cossacks are a militarized social estate (*soslovie*) or an ethnic group (*ethnos*), the former arguing that one becomes a Cossack through state service and the latter that one is born a Cossack. Indeed, modern Cossacks often blur the lines between ethnic identity and military tradition, while, in the modern articulation, there is a high degree of ethnic similarity between "Russian" and "Cossack." In this memo, however, we shall put aside the debate, defining a Cossack as anyone who self-identifies as one. Interestingly, today's Cossack movement includes many without Cossack heritage, sometimes called "asphalt Cossacks."

The origins of the Cossacks are also up for debate. Some claim they are descendants of the Khazars, a nomadic Turkic people that once inhabited the North Caucasus and Black Sea regions. Historically, the first distinct Cossack communities emerged around the Don and Dnieper rivers (and for this reason the Cossack is an important image in Ukrainian nationalism too), but the name was used by groups living as far away as Siberia. This could have been due to the Russian Empire's practice of using Cossacks to guard its borders, or perhaps these communities sought to emulate the renowned Cossack warriors of the lower Eurasian Plain. The commandeering of ethnic, as well as the creation of pseudo-

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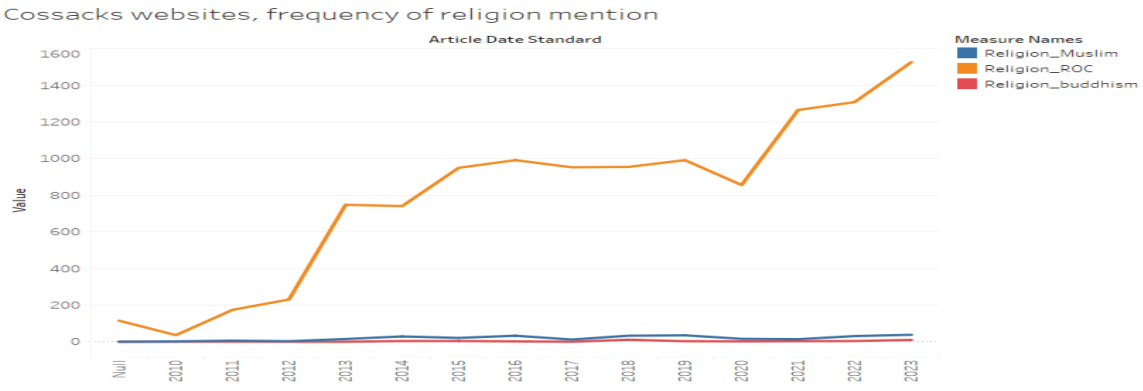
ethnic, Cossack societies across Russian territory is a tried-and-true Kremlin approach to maintaining control over its dominion, one that is again playing out in Ukraine today.

Cossacks as 'Orthodox Paladins'; State Attempts to Centralize the Movement

Most Cossacks identify with the Russian Orthodox Church, an impression the current political regime in Moscow has sought to cultivate and entrench, including in the war zone in Ukraine. Historically, the Cossacks were an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous people, coming from Muslim, Buddhist, and even Jewish backgrounds. This tradition carries on today, with some Cossacks from the North Caucasus, for example, identifying as both Muslim and Cossack, although, to be sure, they are a minority. Orthodox priests, meanwhile, accompany Cossack units on the front lines in Ukraine (Buddhist monks do so too, albeit less frequently). It is a matter of debate how authentic modern Cossacks are, with many of the movements seeming kitsch reconstructions of an imagined past. Recent developments suggest the regime is trying to strengthen the position of the Cossacks as a unifier of different faiths and ethnicities in Russia. Many associations of regional Cossack groups maintain connections with local Orthodox churches and proudly carry Christian relics onto the battlefield, such as a "Cossack cross." Figure 1 illustrates the predominance of Orthodox associations, showing the number of mentions of Orthodoxy, Islam, and Buddhism on Cossack official websites in 2010-2023.



As can be seen in Figure 1, Russian Orthodoxy is by far the most popular religion in the registered Cossack movement. Central to this is that the Russian Orthodox Church maintains a Department for Cossack Relations, itself part of a Kremlin initiative to centralize and thus direct the Cossack movement and its development. Other centralizing mechanisms include the establishment in 2018 of the All-Russian Cossack Movement (*Vserossiyskoye kazach'ye obshchestvo*, known by its Russian acronym, VsKO), which provides some coordination of and control over the movement, as well as the website Kazachestvo.ru ("Cossackdom.ru"), whose task is to unite the 156,000 registered and several million ethnic Cossacks

throughout the country. Both mechanisms are apparently having some success in the context of the Ukraine war, with 50,000 Cossacks having rotated through the war zone and some 15,635 currently on the front lines. Despite indications that the Kremlin wants to make the Cossack movement national—partly due to dislocations involved in modernity—Cossack identity is more widespread and stronger in certain regions.

Cossack Groups Promoting Regional Patriotism

These regions have always maintained a connection with the Cossack image, which enriches our understanding of Russia beyond its big cities. In general, they are the regions on the borders of the empire that Russia constructed in the 19th century, and the names of regional hosts (*voiska*) evidence this, given for landmarks like rivers rather than following modern administrative units (although the two do sometimes overlap). These hosts are: Don (including Rostov and other parts of the North Caucasus), Kuban (Krasnodar), Terek (Stavropol), Black Sea (Crimea), Orenburg, Volga, Central (Moscow and surrounding regions), Siberian, Trans-Baikal, Irkutsk, Far Eastern, and Yenisey. There are currently plans to develop new Cossack hosts in northwest Russia, as well as occupied Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Donetsk.

One of the most common activities of the Cossack movement in Russia has been encouraging regional patriotism, around the idea of *malaya rodina* (literally "little motherland"). Cossack schools and social movements teach about the history of their regions (*krayevedeniye*) and celebrate local Cossack and imperial heroes. For example, in the city of Mikhaylovsk, Stavropol Region, there is a bust of Stepan Nikolaev, a Cossack general of the North Caucasus Line who fought against the French in the war of 1812; in Zlatoust, Chelyabinsk Region, a summer festival about "Cossacks in the Service of the Fatherland" highlights the contributions of local Cossacks to various wars fought by Russia; and an exhibit showcasing the prowess of Don Cossacks in World War I was recently opened in Volgograd. The focus is thus on how the Cossacks of each region have contributed to national events, which is a common theme across Cossack hosts and weaves them into a national narrative. The following sections offer an overview of the four largest hosts.

The Don Cossacks

Representing Rostov Region and parts of Astrakhan, Volgograd, Kalmykia, and Luhansk regions, the Don Cossack Host is perhaps the stereotypical image of the Russian Cossack. Indeed, it provides the backdrop for Mikhail Sholokhov's famous novel depicting Cossack life, *And Quiet Flows the Don*. The area is home to one of the two main centers of Cossack culture that existed before colonization by Russia (the other being Zaporizhzhia). One theory about the origins of this

Cossack group is that they are descendants of runaway serfs who fled to the "Wild Fields" to be free.

The notion that Rostov is a Cossack region was supported by the 1992 census, when approximately a fifth of the region's five million residents registered their ethnicity as "Cossack," after which the government removed the option from later censuses. Following the Soviet collapse, the Cossacks in Rostov were quite restive initially, and in 1993 Ataman (chief) Nikolai Kozitsyn signed a friendship agreement between the Don Cossacks and Chechen separatists. Just as with the current ruling clan in Chechnya, however, Kozitsyn later turned on his erstwhile allies and sided with the Russian state. Since then, the Don Cossacks and Moscow have worked hand in glove, and the Don Cossack past is celebrated in regional cultural festivals and children's events (such as the competitions and games reported on here by the Cossack authorities).

In terms of the Ukraine conflict, Rostov is on the front line, and it has provided plenty of troops and humanitarian support for families facing hard times due to the war. This also includes preparing children to go and fight. The Don host has one of the most developed Cossack educational systems in the country, as well as what is widely believed to be the spiritual home of Cossackdom in Russia, the city of Novocherkassk and the Ascension Cathedral there.

The Kuban Cossacks

Krasnodar (also known as Kuban, after the river) is another Russian region strongly associated with the Cossacks and where the regional authorities have strived to institutionalize Cossack identity. In contrast to the Don Cossacks, however, the region and the host lands overlap. In the late 18th century, Empress Catherine II razed the Zaporizhzhian Sich (*sich* meaning "palisade") on the Dnieper River island of Khortytsia, made famous by Nikolai Gogol's novel *Taras Bul'ba*, and relocated the Cossack host that had lived there to the frontier lands of Krasnodar. There, the Cossacks fought against the Circassians, taking part in what today Circassian activists remember as a genocide of their people. This controversy reignited during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, when the Kremlin presented the Cossacks, rather than the Circassians, as the indigenes of the region, and on the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Circassians being driven from their homes, no less. When the Soviet Union fell, there were discussions among the Kuban Cossacks as to whether Ukraine or Russia was their motherland, reflecting their origins along the Black Sea littoral. The regional authorities in Krasnodar have embraced this legacy and erected statues to commemorate Catherine's decree granting the Cossacks possession of the land between the Kuban River and the Sea of Azov (indeed, the former name of the regional capital is Ekaterinodar, or "Catherine's gift").

Kuban is perhaps the model host for today's VsKO. It is certainly the most influential, as the first ataman of the organization, Nikolai Doluda, had previously led the Kuban Cossacks. Every summer, there are weekly parades of Cossacks in Krasnodar, and the regional choir has performed at important cultural events for the Russian state. As indicated above, the Kuban Cossacks have a history of ethnic intolerance and were particularly prominent in harassing the Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks, many of whom were resettled to the United States in 2004. In addition, they were instrumental in the annexation of Crimea, taking advantage of their geographical proximity to the peninsula.

There is evidence that the Kuban Cossacks have provided a disproportionate number of troops for the war in Ukraine. At the end of July 2023, regional authorities claimed (note: Site only accessible with a Russian VPN) that 5,800 troops from the host were fighting in the war, roughly a quarter of the total number of 23,000 Cossack troops at the time. Projecting that ratio onto today's 50,000 Cossack troops in Ukraine would put the number of Kuban Cossacks at 12,500. This is reflected in the fact that Krasnodar, along with Bashkortostan, consistently has the highest total number of casualties among Russia's regions, as reported by Mediazona.

The Terek Cossacks

The Terek Cossacks trace their lineage to the Greben Cossacks and the North Caucasus Line, while the current host originated in 1997. Claiming jurisdiction over much of the North and East Caucasus (including parts of Chechnya), the group historically had its capital in Vladikavkaz; today, it lies in Stavropol. With the dominant trend in the North Caucasus being the exodus of ethnic Russians, the Cossacks have emerged as self-appointed protectors of the Russian population and an anchor for continued Russian influence in the region. The current ataman of the VsKO, Vitaly Kuznetsov, is a former Terek Cossack. The region appears to have provided a significant number of troops for the war in Ukraine.

The Black Sea Cossacks

The Black Sea Cossacks, as the Crimean host is known, existed as an ethnic and cultural institution in the 1990s, well before the current war between Russia and Ukraine. Although Catherine II resettled many Cossacks from the Zaporizhzhian Sich to Kuban in the 18th century, memories of the Cossack nature of the region, and thus the Black Sea Cossacks themselves, have endured on the peninsula. A 1787 decree created the "Host of Loyal Cossacks," who quickly acquired the name the "Black Sea Cossack Host." Their "rebirth" was made official on November 24, 2018, when the Cossacks of Crimea and Sevastopol "made the fateful historic decision to resurrect the indigenous Black Sea Cossack Host." It officially joined the VsKO in 2021, having de facto been a member since 2018. The Black Sea Cossacks have sent two battalions of troops to fight in their erstwhile homeland.

Other Cossack Groups

As the only major Cossack region outside of the North Caucasus broadly defined, the Orenburg host is notable for its influence. It covers more than Orenburg Region, including Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Kurgan regions. At one time called the Yaik host (after the river, also known as the Ural, that flows through Yekaterinburg), the Orenburg host was created in the middle of the 18th century. The Orenburg Cossacks, despite having enemies on their borders, always sent troops for Muscovy's European wars and especially for those against Turkey in the 19th century. Like the other Cossack groups, their modern rebirth is considered to have taken place after the Soviet collapse, while the Orenburg host has an element of cultural distinction relative to other Cossack regions, and not a little flair. They have provided a sizeable contingent for the war in Ukraine, numbering 7,800 men as of June 2024 (about a fifth of all Cossacks fighting there), including their own battalion called "Forshtadt," the old name for the city of Orenburg.

The other Cossack hosts are beyond the scope of this memo. Although they are generally smaller, they are distinct, featuring their own regional heroes and myths about their contribution to the imperial project of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Kremlin Expanding Cossackdom to Occupied Regions to Cement Its Control

Moscow started establishing new Cossack societies in central Russia in 2007, supposedly for Cossacks displaced by industrialization, followed by Crimea in 2015. In addition, a new "Northwestern Cossack Host" has been created to "unite the Cossacks of 11 regions," including the enclave of Kaliningrad. Meanwhile, the "new regions" in Ukraine occupied by Russia—namely Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Luhansk, and Donetsk—seem perfect for new Cossack hosts, which indeed appears to be the intent of the authorities. They have an objective history of Cossack roots, while the creation of Kremlin-aligned hosts there is likely supposed to consolidate Moscow's control. Russian MP Viktor Vodolatsky has spoken at length about such plans.

Indeed, one potential option is that at least some of these lands could be united and administered in the future as an ethnic "Cossack republic," with a similar idea having been pushed in the 1990s and early 2000s by activists, who saw the entity's center in either Rostov or Stavropol. It is certainly true that the Russian authorities are exploiting the Cossack identity of the occupied regions. It is used to mobilize new soldiers: In Kherson Region, for example, all males are reportedly required to register as Cossacks, since this makes them eligible to be drafted. Likewise, public sites are being created to stamp Cossack identity onto the regions, such as a Cossack chapel in Donetsk. However the war ends, the energy the regime has put

into the Cossack movement and Cossack regions is sure to have a lasting effect and challenge Moscow-centric visions about Russia's complex society.

PONARS Eurasia
NEW APPROACHES TO RESEARCH AND SECURITY IN EURASIA

An Agenda for the Embodied Knowledge About Russia's Social Minorities

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 927
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In his 2021 American Sociological Association presidential address Aldon D. Morris, a former chair of sociology at Northwestern University, made a bold claim that "mainstream sociology failed to sufficiently analyze the lived experiences of subalterns." Moreover, he argued that both classical and contemporary sociological theories have ignored and suppressed the issues of white supremacy, racial hierarchies, and colonization, thus failing to address how these systems shape the modern world of global white supremacy. The cultural blind spots that are apparent in the works of the foundational sociological trinity—Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber—persist in writings of many other American sociologists. In contrast, Morris advocated for an alternative view of modernity advanced by W. E. B. Du Bois, the pioneering black sociologist who focused on the color line as central to modernity, shaping identities and selfhood for subaltern people of color as well the dominant whites.

These general insights about mainstream sociology also apply to sociological research on Russia. Only recently have scholars begun to question the invisibility of racial hierarchies in Russia and the displacement of the term race with notions of xenophobia, migrantophobia, and ethnic discrimination. Russian and Western scholars alike have long operated under the assumption that racial prejudices do not exist in Russia; as Marina Yusupova argues, "race" is typically replaced with such signifiers as "culture", "ethnicity", and "background." However, the ethnic hierarchies in Russia are rooted in the distinctions between Europeans and non-Europeans, as well as white and non-white bodies, thereby replicating the racial divisions that emerged in the process of European colonialist expansion. Russia's own experience of colonization has followed the same patterns of white supremacy that was characteristic of the European empires.

It is not surprising that the lived experiences of Russian racial, ethnic, and religious minorities are rarely accounted for, as Moscow-centric and Russo-

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centric research has long dominated various academic fields (Hendl et al., 2019, Yusupova 2024). Russia's war against Ukraine, motivated and underpinned by the Kremlin's refusal to recognize Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, and autonomous foreign policy choices, has brought to the forefront the ambiguous nature of the Russian state, caught between national and imperial aspirations.

What is clear, however, is that the ethnic and racial diversity and inequality in Russia represent a fundamental societal background to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Furthermore, one of the unintended consequences of this war is the increasing pressure on the already unsteady life of Russia's diverse ethnic and local communities which are disproportionately affected by the war and the accompanying male mortality. Yet, there is very little research on these local experiences. The war-related challenges with fieldwork further exacerbate these difficulties creating a void in our understanding of the social, economic, and cultural processes at work in Russia's vast and diverse periphery.

The new agenda we are advancing, further elaborated in the upcoming edited volume from the University of Wisconsin Press, explores the bottom-up resources, practices, and beliefs that enable and foster the development and reproduction of diverse meanings and cultural expressions in everyday life in peripheral Russia. We focus particularly on material facets and natural surroundings of local life, interrogating the role of nature and environment in the ongoing local and ethnic identity construction, in the reproduction of the local sense of belonging, as well as in the revitalized spiritual practices and faith. These identity construction practices exemplify counter-discourses, in the sense evoked by Michel Foucault, that challenge ideologies framing minorities within a narrative created by and for others in the context of exclusion and repression.

A grounded understanding of communal life and selfhood construction during such a precarious moment—with all its challenges, problems, and also hopes and breakthroughs, whether symbolic or material—is helpful and necessary. From the social sciences perspective, it can help us assess the future scenarios of development; from the human sciences perspective, this can advance our understanding of communities' creative expression of frustration, resilience, and hope associated with the present and future trajectories of development.

Our view of subjecthood formation and continuing diversity reproduction in Russia's localities builds on the appreciation of sensory and affective aspects of life and recognition of many ways in which "words, feelings, things, environments, and bodies intermingle." The various patterns of such intermingling create more intimate communities of belonging and self-identification. This thinking builds on the recognition of interconnectedness of the natural and human worlds and is sometimes captured using the terms *natureculture* and *ecosocial*. This model of *ecological selfhood* and identity formation supplements the more common scholarly attention to institutions and ideologies; it recognizes the enfleshed human subject that takes shape and creates meaning through bodily encounters with the surrounding matter.

Epp Annus investigated such an alternative model of selfhood through exploring the critical voices of two Estonian writers Alberts Bels's and Kaan

Kaplinski's who, in the late Soviet period developed the vision of a multiscale self that involved: "(1) the scale of intimacy and the formation of the self through the affective and ideational relation to the surrounding environment; (2) care and reverence for life as the grounding attunement; (3) the tangled unity of the local and the intimate, the global and the planetary." (Ibid, 407) Their writings contained deep concern for the surrounding environment as well as the planet Earth motivated by the appreciation of the intimate role the surrounding nature plays in individual's life from childhood to old age.

Based on these writings Annus highlights the main building blocks in the formation of the self, all drawing on encounters with the surrounding world: "(1) direct sensory contact, such as touch or vision, a material connection with things physically at hand—everyday objects, nearby environments, family, friends. These are entangled with (2) ideas, values, dreams, and imaginaries, and are colored by (3) affects, attunements, and emotions—awe, wonder, reverence, anxiety, fear, love, pain, loss, and longing" (Ibid, 409). In this framework, the self is not a set of fixed characteristics; rather, it is defined by multiple relationships and fluidity that is determined by the changing environment.

We rely on this naturecultural model of selfhood, which challenges Russia's hegemonic discourse, to explore the everyday life experiences of Russia's minorities. This analytical frame allows for some degree of optimism in relation to local and ethnic communities because it diverts attention from Russia's autocratic governance structures, discourses, and narratives of central domination. It reveals that there is ongoing social and cultural work on reproducing and reasserting localized identities that exist as an alternative or an addition to the national-level, state-mandated narratives and notions. The naturecultural approach brings attention to the fact that the sources of diversity are in the lived experiences and interactions with the surroundings. Landscapes people live with are entwined with personal memories and intimate stories. Local places and surroundings are therefore both personal and political.

Additionally, by bringing attention to the local ecosystems of living and nonliving matter, this model makes environmental state and damage the central concern for local communities because relations with nature are crucial for creating these intimate and sensory worlds of belonging. By bringing the environmental issues to the forefront, it promotes an alternative political agenda that recognizes that preserving diversity, community and a sense of belonging requires a politics of care for the surrounding environment. As such, this approach builds on and resonates with the global post-humanist concern for interdependence between human and non-human worlds and between ethnocultural diversity and the environment. It also illuminates micro-politics of care for the local communities and cultures intertwined with the surrounding environment as an alternative to the geopolitics of greatness and revanchism that is playing out in the present moment in Russia at the larger scale.

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