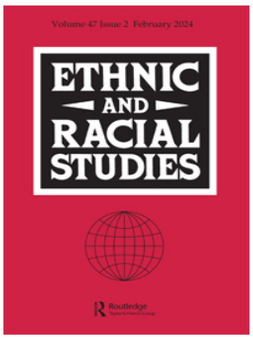

Routledge
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Ethnic and Racial Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rers20

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To cite this article: Anne Le Huérou & Aude Merlin (2024) Dealing with a violent past and its remnants in the present: the challenges of remembering the wars in Chechnya in the Chechen Diaspora in the EU, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 47:2, 411-434, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2023.2261290

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2261290

ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES
2024, VOL. 47, NO. 2, 411–434
https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2261290

Dealing with a violent past and its remnants in the present: the challenges of remembering the wars in Chechnya in the Chechen Diaspora in the EU

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how memories of a violent past are interpreted by different generations of exiles, particularly when the primary feature of memory in their homeland is forgetfulness. This occurs when the echoes of political and institutional violence from "home" perpetually reverberate in the diaspora, and when host societies have constructed a securitization framework that progressively redefines Chechens from victims to perceived threats. Based on the case of the Chechens living in the EU since the early 2000s and grounded in field observations and semi-structured interviews conducted from 2015 to 2022, this paper delves into a "conflict-generated diaspora" in formation. Our aim is to understand the intricate interplay of factors and dynamics that contribute to the construction of individual and collective memories of a violent past within the Chechen diaspora. We also consider the impact of transgenerational memory transmission and generational divides.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 12 December 2022; Accepted 1 September 2023

KEYWORDS Conflict generated diaspora; Chechen wars; war memories; Chechen diaspora; securitization

> Sometimes my fingers shiver. My endocrino system is broken; when I start to remember, my nerves suffer. *Abdu*, born in 1959[1]

Introduction

"Until now, we managed to blend in".[2] In the weeks and months following the dramatic assassination of the French high school history teacher Samuel Paty by a young Chechen refugee in October 2020, a wave of panic swept over many Chechens living in France. This dramatic event preceded a few

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months prior by violent incidents in Dijon (Le Huérou and Merlin 2020), has given new visibility to the fate of the Chechens who took the road of exile after the war led by the Russian authorities against the Chechen Republic resumed in 1999. It shed light on the sharp contrast with the early 2000s, when the first Chechens were easily granted asylum and the Russian Forces' brutal human rights violations were highlighted and condemned (European Parliament 2000; FIDH 2000; Le Huérou and Regamey 2016; PACE 2000).

What do we see if we take a step back from the overexposed events mentioned above? The tens of thousands of Chechens who left the Russian territory since the beginning of the second Chechen war (1999–2009) and sought asylum in Europe have now settled, for the most part permanently, in countries of the European Union (Sugaipova and Wilhelmsen 2021; Vatchagaev 2016). A new generation was born and/or raised in exile.

Thus, we consider it relevant to speak of the Chechens living in the European Union as a *conflict generated diaspora in the making*. Contemporary literature on *diaspora* has defined after Safran (1991) the main features of diaspora as "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined relationship" (Clifford 1994, 305). The classical definition of diaspora has been broadened to include a variety of experiences pertaining to living abroad (Dufoix 2011), with connections to literature on transnational or postcolonial issues (Clifford 1994; Sheffer 2003). Several authors have highlighted the role of political mobilization (Geisser and Beaugrand 2016; Grojean 2015), particularly in contexts of war or post-war environments (Demmers 2007; Koinova 2011).

Focusing on the Chechen case, a handful of studies have examined the potential for political mobilization within the diaspora during the 2000s war (Vinatier 2013), as well as issues surrounding integration into host countries (Ilyasov 2021; Szczepanikova 2014). A recent investigation into legal pluralism among Chechens in Norway (Sugaipova and Wilhelmsen 2021) has introduced nuance to the typical view of conflict-generated diasporas as either "peace-makers" or "peace-wreckers". It suggests a variety of attitudes towards the political future, complementing previous works which demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of conflict-generated diasporas in terms of mobilization contexts, including their contribution to transitional justice (Koinova and Karabegovic 2019).

Methodology

This research draws from extensive field observations of the diaspora and twenty-one semi-structured interviews conducted with Chechens residing

in various EU countries, including France, Belgium, Germany, and Austria, collected between 2015 and 2022. For the purpose of this study, we primarily utilized the interviews conducted in France and Belgium.[3]

We endeavored to diversify our sample of interviewees, although our aim was not to achieve a representative sample in quantitative terms. The individuals interviewed can be broadly categorized as follows:

- "Generation 1" is a distinct generation of individuals who experienced the periods of "independence" and war as adults. They are between the ages of 45 and 70 (at the time of the interviews, having been born between the early 1950s and 1970s). Some of them were born in post-1944 deportation Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Often, these individuals were active participants in the Chechen pro-independence movement and the "Ichkerian" period following 1991, having fled Chechnya in the early 2000s. We will sometimes refer to them as "Ichkeriitsy"[4] or as Generation 1. They are probably over-represented in our sample, since their willingness to speak out and to gain political visibility make them easier to access.
- The second generation is more varied, diverse, and fragmented, no longer aligning closely with the ideologies of the first. While they often express criticism of the Ramzan Kadyrov regime through platforms like blogs or Telegram channels, their collective identities are formed around different axes, where political and religious aspects are frequently intertwined. The period of *de facto* independence from 1991 to 1994 is not a primary consideration for this group. Additionally, individual trajectories, such as educational attainment, career progression, and social mobility, significantly influence their subjective perceptions. Within our sample, this generation includes individuals from 16 to their late twenties: students (both male and female), young professionals, and a few teenagers, all born between the 1980s and 1990*s*.

In the subsequent sections, we will refer to these groups as "Generation 1" or "Generation 2" based on the interviews we collected. We approach the concept of "generation" from a political sociology perspective, considering the phenomenon not only in terms of age but also in terms of distinct attributes that can shape a group in terms of political socialization, family context, and shared experiences (Boumaza 2009). However, we understand that this is a rather rough distinction and that it may be useful to go further down the generational scale, in particular to distinguish among the youngest between those who were born in exile and those who left Chechnya as children, as pointed out by J. Paul who is using the 1.5 generation for Bosnians in exile (Paul 2023).

The quotation featured earlier underscores the sensitive nature of testifying, even years following the war experience. It also underscores for scholars

the need to consider issues like war, post-war trauma, and security due to the tangible political and social divides among Chechens living abroad. This is further highlighted by several recent assassinations of Chechens in Europe (Peisakhova and Coalson 2020).

In the first part of this paper, we examine how individual memories are formed by Chechens living in exile against a backdrop of multiple constraints and challenges, how these memories clash, and whether they facilitate or impede the process of intergenerational transmission. Like other contributions in this volume we aim at "exploring the transnational and transgenerational effects of violence" (Müller-Suleymanova 2023a) to understand how the memory of the past and its potential for transmission to younger generations (or lack thereof) shape particular perceptions, attitudes, and responses to contemporary events in Chechnya, specifically Ramzan Kadyrov's policies and the official narrative on Chechnya.

In the second part, we reflect on how the "securitization trope" (Féron and Lefort 2019) has been applied to the Chechen diaspora in a manner that significantly influences the process of memory formation. While literature on "peace wrecker" diasporas typically focuses on how these diasporas mobilize to reintroduce conflict or violence into their homeland, we aim to demonstrate that the securitization frame has originated from both home and host countries. Therefore, we strive to illustrate how the dominant securitization framework – whether in the homeland or in the settlement countries – has skewed the political and memory agendas.

Statement of Ethics: *The research design for this study has been conducted in line with the applicable guidelines for data protection and principles of good scientific practice. There was no formal approval because at the time of research there was no ethics committee in our institutions. Research participants were informed of the goal of the research and that their quotes would be included in the published article, anonymously*.

Building a collective memory from within the diaspora: an impossible challenge?

Memory transmission across a long-lasting history of violence

The history of the Chechen people is a prolonged colonial experience punctuated by large-scale traumas (Gammer 2005). At the end of the eighteenth century, the expansion of the Russian Tsarist Empire towards the Caucasus was met with resistance, led by Sheikh Mansur, a Sufi Chechen leader. The subsequent Great Caucasian War, which lasted from 1818 until 1864, resulted in lasting trauma. As attested by Adolphe Bergé, an ethnographer of the Russian Army (Berzhe 1859), the Chechen population shrunk drastically from 200,000 at the beginning of the war, to 96,000 by 1859, when Imam Shamil surrendered.

During the Soviet period, Chechens experienced another collective trauma that is still deeply etched in their memory. On 23 February 1944, the entire Chechen population was deported to Central Asia, falsely accused of massively collaborating with the Nazis (Werth 2006). The high mortality rate during the transfer and the first year of settlement, compounded by the stigma of being considered "traitors", represents a pivotal historical episode in twentieth century Chechen memory, leading to strong resentment, intensified by the marginalization they faced upon their return after Stalin's death. While memories of the deportation remained vivid individually and within family circles, they were silenced and prohibited in the public sphere.

The explicit reference to the 1944 deportation only became possible during the period of perestroika accompanied by the growing pro-independence sentiment during the "parade of sovereignties" in the late 1980s (Campana 2012). In the wake of the failed coup in August 1991, which led to the declaration of independence by the 15 former Union republics, the Chechens opted to secede from the newly formed Russian Federation. Their newly elected President Dzhokhar Dudayev declared the independence of Chechnya-*Ichkeria* from Russia.

During three years of de facto independence, memorialization of 1944 deportation was initiated (Williams 2000) but those first steps were swept away when power struggles culminated in a full-scale war between December 1994 and August 1996. Despite a cease-fire and a peace agreement signed with Russian authorities in 1996 and 1997, new President Aslan Maskhadov's attempts to build state institutions and to regulate its relationship with the Russian Federation were undermined by internal divisions and the unwillingness of the Russian state. In 1999, the Russian Army initiated an "anti-terrorist" operation in Chechnya (Le Huérou et al. 2014). This swiftly escalated into a full-scale invasion of Chechen territory (the Second Chechen War) and led to the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians.

Simultaneously, at the dawn of the 2000s, a political process aimed at "legalizing" Chechnya's reintegration into the Russian Federation was put in motion by Moscow. Akhmad-Khadzhi Kadyrov, a Chechen figure supportive of the Kremlin, was "elected" as the official Chechen President in 2003. This move effectively obliterated the Ichkerian narrative, with Maskhadov consistently portrayed as a terrorist in the public discourse.

Step by step, Moscow delegated control of the violent operations to pro-Kremlin Chechen law enforcement forces. These groups implemented torture and committed human rights violations (FIDH 2003) against individuals labeled as "terrorists". In 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov ascended to the position of Chechen President and has since ruled the Republic with an iron grip.

His administration has established a comprehensive system of terror that ruthlessly suppresses dissenting voices (Halbach 2018; Wilhelmsen 2018).

The challenge of creating a cohesive memory narrative about the two post-Soviet wars among the diaspora directly correlates with the policy of forgetting implemented by the Chechen authorities in Chechnya. Their official narrative conveniently erases attempts to memorialize the two post-Soviet wars and the considerable civilian casualties that ensued (Caucasian Knot 2019). This memory regime (Merlin 2021) produces a policy of oblivion while simultaneously perpetuating a distorted portrayal of the past and including a "state-sponsored amnesia" (Müller-Suleymanova 2023a), as is also described in this volume for the case of Lebanon or the Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska (Lefort 2023; Paul 2023).

The narrative propagated in the public space doesn't commemorate the hardships faced by civilians during the large-scale wars – events marked by widespread bombings, mopping up operations, forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture (FIDH 2000; HRW 2001). Instead, the narrative aligns with the federal official version which reframes the war as an anti-terrorist operation and emphasizes the glorification of law enforcement bodies.

This has led to a dichotomous approach to the past, resulting in individuals, who remained in Chechnya throughout both wars, either forgetting or reinterpreting their experiences. The pervasive official discourse denigrates both Ichkerian presidents – Dzhokhar Dudayev and Aslan Maskhadov – and the Ichkerian periods, leading to a blurring of collective memories, a phenomenon we observed in the field.

In terms of public space, it is dominated by a pervasive presence, via portraits, images, and quotes, of Ramzan Kadyrov, his late father Akhmat-Khadzhi Kadyrov, and Vladimir Putin. The authorities choose not to honor the civilian victims or fallen pro-independence combatants. Instead, their homage goes to local administration chiefs and other law enforcement members who showed loyalty to the pro-Kremlin authorities and fell victim to the so-called "terrorist actions". A monument in the center of Grozny stands as a testament to the "victims of the anti-terrorist operation".[5]

This approach is emblematic of the erasure of the realities of the wars and the authentic memories that individuals harbor privately. The memory regime has been thoroughly analyzed in the context of Chechnya (Garin 2017; Kloker 2018; Merlin 2014; 2021). These studies reveal how the Chechen narrative aligns with the federal discourse on the anti-terror operation. Simultaneously, it also fits within the historical narrative of World War II, particularly the victory against German fascism during the "Great Patriotic War" of 1941–1945.

Consequently, the memory regime in Chechnya perpetuates the denial of the nature of the post-Soviet colonial conflict and the historical narrative on the 1940s, both of which are central to the Kremlin's claim to legitimacy. It

results in peculiar juxtapositions, such as the heroic portrayal of Ramzan Kadyrov's father on par with Chechen veterans of World War II who fought against Nazi Germany. The situation is even more disconcerting when these veterans are compelled to lay flowers in memory of Akhmad-Khadzhi Kadyrov. This amalgamation of references has shaped an official pseudo-collective memory that is broadcast in an authoritarian context.

How a young conflict-generated diaspora can cope with such a difficult context to appropriate intimate individual memory of the war trauma and can build on the violent recent past?

War(s) memory as a dividing rationale between two generations

> My first remembering as a child: war planes in Chechnya. Hava, born 1992 (2021).
>
> I remember that we were protecting ourselves in a bunker. And when Ichkerians took Grozny, I felt very excited. Liberation, liberation. End of occupation. I was 7 years old. Timur, student, born 1989 (2016).

As we conducted interviews within the Chechen diaspora, a myriad of individual memories emerged, similar to those outlined above. Evidently, memory is engrained within individuals at various levels, consciously or unconsciously. However, after over two decades of observing the Chechen diaspora, it is clear that memorializing the recent wars is a complex task. So what does the memory of war look like within the diaspora? And why does this collective elaboration present a challenge?

The memory of war and the perception of the conflict's true nature are areas where generational differences are pronounced. People from "Generation 1", born between 1950 and the early 1970s, experienced the war in one way or another – either as political activists advocating for independence, as fighters, or simply as survivors of war. Meanwhile, "Generation 2" finds themselves in a peculiar situation. Those born in the 1980s–1990s experienced the war as children and retained vivid memories but did not fully comprehend the events at the time. Their perception differs from how the war impacted the previous generation: it is shaped by life in exile and the narratives they hear from their parents or other elders.

For Generation 1, memories of the prewar, war, and interwar periods are extremely vivid. They mostly perceive the first war (1994–1996) as a "fight for freedom", where the necessity "to defend our land" and the decision to engage in armed resistance was an "inevitable choice". The interpretation of the engagement's significance and political objective also seems unquestionable. The people we interviewed insist that they waged a non-religious war. The generation of *Ichkeriitsy* was raised in the Soviet secular paradigm and embraced the predominantly secular pro-independence national movement. While Islam was undoubtedly seen as a component of Chechen

identity, building an Islamist State was not a priority for the majority (Wilhelmsen 2005).

Members of "Generation 1", who largely view their struggle as a fight for decolonization, carry the weight of an acknowledged military defeat – especially pronounced from the second war (Le Huérou & predom al., 2014). This acknowledged defeat becomes a recurring burden in their subsequent lives abroad, inducing a sense of memory isolation. This feeling is further amplified as this issue receives scant attention in public discourse in Europe. The bitterness about the unsuccessful attempts in the 2000s and the perceived derailment or loss of "independence" (Akhmadov and Lanskoy 2010; Sokirianskaya 2014) is conspicuous, albeit seldom discussed in detail:

> Today, of course, I wouldn't want that … you know … somehow … in the first war somehow … there was some, maybe, a hope, a spark, a hope that we would get this … independence. Apti, born 1959 (2016)

For "Generation 2", interviews reveal a complex array of feelings. Within this group, we observed a prevailing sense of understanding and respect towards their parents and older relatives for their dedication to constructing an independent state. This sentiment is particularly evident when listening to Rizvan, who speaks as though he was part of the story, despite being born only two years before 1991 – the year when Chechnya gained de facto independence. Rizvan underscores the secular orientation of the Ichkerian state-building project.

> We were building a state. Religion exists without it. But the "bearded" already emerged (…). I learned about Shiites and Sunnis only while being in France. I learned about the existence of halal here. Rizvan, born 1989 (2019)

At the same time, there's a discernible shift and, in some cases, a loss of meaning among Chechens living in exile. This change in perspective is somewhat correlated with generational differences. A shared sentiment of encountering a politically stagnant situation is apparent. There's a clear understanding of the nature of the political regime in Kadyrov's Chechnya and the lack of space for dissent. The assassinations of Chechen opponents in exile – notably Khangoshvili in Germany and Umarov in Austria in 2020 – serve as stark reminders of the extent of political control, both "at home" in Chechnya and in the diaspora, given the high level of surveillance among exiled Chechens. Simultaneously, Chechens in exile recognize the increasing polarization between the harshly repressive political regime in Chechnya under Kadyrov and the growing islamization of the opposition.

There are two discernible trends differentiating the attitudes of the two generations we have examined. Among the first generation's interviewees, particularly the "Ichkerians", there seems to be a frozen-in-time perception. Their understanding of the political situation is deeply influenced by the

experiences they've endured. Having left Chechnya mostly in the early 2000s, when it was in ruins and under Russian assault, they hold onto an image of a "classical" anti-colonial war, marked by a clear-cut opposition between the Russian occupiers and the pro-independence national struggle. Through this lens, Chechnya is viewed as an occupied land. This narrative has been underscored by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and further emphasized when the Ukrainian Parliament recognized Ichkeria as occupied territory in October 2022. For these first-generation interviewees, the pro-independence project remains the only legitimate and conceivable political trajectory. To a certain degree, among the first-generation of Ichkerians in exile, there's a tendency to idealize the periods of de facto independent Chechnya (1991–1994; 1996–1999), with few showing a genuine willingness to examine and analyze the missteps or anomalies of these periods. As time passes, this romanticized view of the periods of independence contributes to the creation of a myth, which serves as a beacon of hope for a future for Chechnya and provides a narrative framework for their exile. Within this context, they see Kadyrov's regime as a continuation of Russian occupation of Chechnya, with Ramzan Kadyrov viewed as Moscow's puppet implementing colonial policy on the ground (Wilhelmsen 2017).

Regarding "Generation 2", we observe significant differences: the Ichkerian period is discussed and referenced with their parents and other "Generation 1" members, but it is not adopted as a political goal, nor as a key narrative. Even though we can detect in the interviews a clear respect for their parents' commitment to defend their land, the younger generation has a different perspective on the political issues in Chechnya. On one hand, they are cognizant of the severe repressive regime in Chechnya. Simultaneously, their assessment incorporates other parameters, such as the economy. They take into account aspects like the monopolization of a large portion of Chechnya's job market by segments of society closely aligned with the Republic's chief, the rampant corruption, and the vast social inequalities (ICG 2016). These elements factor into their analysis just as much as the political control and pressure.

The primary objective of the younger generation is not necessarily to label the political regime of Chechnya. Their perception might be more nuanced and is based on a more pragmatic approach, which is less influenced by the divide between pro-independence and pro-Kadyrov stances. Ideology is less of a driving force in their assessment, even though they are acutely aware that fear is a governing tool in Chechnya. Thus, the way memory is conveyed impacts the perceptions of the generations in exile. Generation 1 remains profoundly affected by the period they lived through: the euphoria of the struggle for independence and the belief that independence would be achieved. At the same time, they witnessed the large-scale destruction and

experienced the high levels of violence wielded by the Russian federal forces and subsequently by the Kadyrov-led Chechen forces. Some endured torture and "zachistki", these traumas leaving indelible marks on their bodies.

Remembering in diaspora

The complex and somewhat ambiguous feelings towards war memory reflect in the way it is communicated within the diaspora. As we have previously discussed, the enforced silence and deception in Chechnya concerning history and memory do not contribute to the development of free memorialization within the diaspora. Moreover, political divisions within the diaspora, coupled with the pervasive mistrust among Chechens in exile – unless there is some assurance about the other's reliability – prevent any collective understanding from emerging. Questions remain unanswered: how to interpret a "zachistka"? How to unify people with diverse backgrounds, from different villages, with differing histories, who may even be divided in their loyalties to authorities, whether Ichkerian or otherwise?

Two factors appear to intertwine here. First, the pain and memories are still very acute and recent – some parents prefer not to recount their sufferings to their children. This significant factor, extensively studied in other instances of widespread and mass violence – like the Armenian Genocide (Gasparyan and Saroyan 2019) and the Holocaust (Weintrater 2003) – showcases the trend of silence enforced on the subsequent generation following the victims'. From this perspective, many Chechens prefer to try to forget or, at the very least, not to burden their children with the explicit transmission of trauma, as Ruslan's testimony exemplifies:

> I don't want my children to be overloaded with this kind of pictures. I don't want them to be bothered. Ruslan, father of adult children, born 1976 (2021)

Others, like Shamil, struggle for years to come to terms with the violence they have endured, a trauma that is imprinted in their memory and etched onto their bodies:

> When I walk in the night, immediately I realize that I did not get used to this freedom, to the fact that I can freely circulate anytime in the night. These checkpoints. It is still in my memory. Shamil, born 1992 (2016)

Second, the fragmentation of Chechen society within the diaspora, compounded with deep-seated mistrust, plays a significant role in the lack of collective memorialization.

However, one could discern a distinction between the recollections of Chechens living in their homeland and those in the diaspora. This distinction particularly pertains to a pivotal event in Chechen history – the 1944 deportation of the Chechen people, which is an integral part of the Chechens'

collective memory. In 2000, with no way of predicting how memory regimes would develop, the researcher B.G. Williams wrote

> Just as the present will recall the Russian invasion of 1994–1996 and the more recent invasion of 1999. New monuments to Dudaev and gazis (holy warriors) who sacrificed their lives in the war against Russia have been erected throughout Chechnya. (Williams 2000, 117)

In his article, Williams elaborately discussed the role the 1944 deportation played in shaping the collective memory of the Chechen nation. Two decades later, it can be observed that the erasure of this memory on the ground has occurred in tandem with the exerted pressure on attempts to memorialize the 1944 deportation. The Kutaev case is a stark example of this (Caucasian Knot 2017).

Yet in the diaspora, February 23 has become a unifying date and appears to be the only consensual reference commemorated. It symbolizes the recurring life in exile, a repetition that has manifested itself once again in the post-Soviet period due to war. Each year on February 23, memorials are held extensively in cities like Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Warsaw. Members of the diaspora draw upon this shared history – which appears to be less controversial to alert European public opinion about the trauma the Chechen people have endured. In this respect, the European Parliament's 2004 recognition of the 1944 deportation of Chechens as an "act of genocide" symbolizes this intersection between history, memory, and ongoing traumatic events. In the diaspora, the 1944 deportation emerges as a minimal, shared, and consensual platform of memory.

Many scholarly works on diaspora and memory refer to the notion of *past-presencing* (Macdonald 2013) which is, as Elise Féron recalls in this special issue, "the process through which the past is performed and experienced in the present" (Féron 2023). It appears relevant for the study of the nexus between diaspora, memory, and violent past, and is illustrated by several case studies in this special issue (Baser and Toivanen 2023; Féron 2023). However the Chechen case may slip out of this model in at least two ways: first, as already mentioned the oblivion of the two recent wars in the official memory process both at home and abroad while they are the direct cause of the Chechen exile. Second, the saturation of *violence in the present*, in the home country but also transported abroad does not provide the terrain for a more peaceful elaboration of the past. The case of Kurdish diaspora (Baser and Toivanen 2023) shows in this volume that violence perpetrated in the present does not prevent the elaboration of a memory by a very pro-active and well-structured diaspora. In the Chechen case, a repressive domestic regime denying violence is clearly an impediment.

A local and distant securitization frame as a memory wrecking factor?

As highlighted in the introduction, diasporas born out of conflict are often portrayed as potential peacemakers and/or peace wreckers (Féron and Lefort 2019). In this section, relying on our empirical observations, we aim to examine how the securitization frame applied to Chechens in Europe – and directed at their activities in their host countries – has become the dominant lens through which host societies and authorities perceive them. Furthermore, we explore how this framing affects the process of memorializing war.

We propose the hypothesis that two securitization processes have mutually reinforced each other: one stems from the narratives and practices in their homeland, characterized by the Russian counter-terrorism discourse since the early 2000s and later supplemented by the Kadyrov regime's stigmatization of the Chechen opposition in diaspora. The other process emerged in host countries towards Chechens throughout the 2010s, related to the perceived threat of jihadist terrorism.

Post war(s) violence and securitization policies in Chechnya and their impact on the diaspora

While refugees from Generation 1 largely share direct memories of war, ongoing violence in the Chechen Republic is a key experience shared by both generations of Chechens living in EU countries.

Researchers employing a critical lens (Snetkov 2014; Wilhelmsen 2017) have persuasively analyzed the securitization processes targeting the Chechen insurgency and the Chechen Republic as a whole, as well as securitization policies in Russia. A. Snetkov (2014) posits a multi-tiered, step-by-step process of *de-securitization*, at least in terms of a narrative of political and economic normalization promoted by Moscow. However, the ongoing systemic and institutionalized violence occurring in the Chechen Republic beyond the war (HRW 2016; ICG 2016; Le Huérou 2014) provides a nuanced perspective on this claim.

This view becomes even more evident when we shift our perspective to observe what is occurring within the diaspora. Living abroad is not an automatic shield from the effects of violence in one's home country. The literature on "connected migrants" (Diminescu 2010) has aptly described the phenomenon of simultaneously existing "here" and "there", but in the case of Chechnya, this permanent connection primarily links to violence and brutality, the psychological, social, and political impacts of which cannot be ignored.

Rather, ongoing communication with relatives and friends has increased throughout the 2010s, facilitated by the extensive use of social networks

and instant text and video messaging services. These platforms foster an immediate sense of proximity and a multiplier effect that can even amplify the feeling of constant threat. Testimonies of violence and brutality, videos of mopping-up operations, and public "repentance" ceremonies organized by the regime are extensively shared and discussed, fueling resentment and fear towards Chechen Republic authorities, primarily Kadyrov and his closest associates.

The feeling of insecurity is also experienced by those who regularly return to Chechnya for holidays or to visit relatives, carrying these feelings back to their host countries:

> The fear is there. I was in Chechnya 5 years ago. I was shocked. I knew what the Soviet Union was. I saw such a regime in Chechnya. I have seen fear in people. Fear of talking. Fear of the neighbors. Anzor, born 1997 (2019)

The second notable and visible component is the way Chechen authorities themselves have securitized their nationals living abroad through policies of control and repression.

Some interviewees' reluctance to identify themselves as members of the diaspora, or even to use the term, exemplifies this feeling. This sentiment appears tied to the official Grozny policy towards "compatriots" who are coercively, if not threateningly, urged to return home. In this context, the diaspora appears to be a vague concept molded by Soviet-era practices of managing and controlling national minorities, which is still employed to characterize supervisory structures of labor migrant communities in Russia. Consequently, being associated with the Chechen "diaspora" in the current situation could be equated to being a loyal citizen of Kadyrov's regime.

Chechen authorities have gone far beyond persuasive rhetoric to encourage people to return home, implementing a direct policy of targeted assassinations. These practices either target former combatants who have spoken out against the regime's repressive nature – as in the cases of Umar Israilov in Vienna in 2009 and Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin in August 2019 – or opposition bloggers such as Imran Aliev in Lille in February 2020, Anzor Umarov in Vienna on 4 July 4 2020, and Tumso Abdurakhmanov in Sweden, who survived several assassination attempts, the most recent one in early December 2022. In January 2022, R. Kadyrov even called on the entire Chechen diaspora to directly take action and eliminate members of the "treacherous Yangulbaev family" living in the European Union.[6]

Collectively, these factors paint a picture dominated by fear, fostering a desire for discretion among many Chechens living in Europe. However, this is only one facet of the securitization narrative affecting Chechens residing in Europe. Indeed, the collective perception has shifted, transforming them from victims of a brutal Russian state to potential terrorists, radicalized Salafi Muslims, or troublemakers.

The weight of securitization policies in the countries of settlement: how Chechens in EU countries cope with a "bad reputation"

If we examine the literature on securitization and diaspora, it often focuses on the concept of "peace-wreckers", portraying diaspora groups from conflict areas as continuing to fuel the conflict in their home countries. However, it is important to note that diasporas originating from conflict zones are also often suspected of "importing" these conflicts into their countries of residence and engaging in destabilizing activities through transnational underground networks. This indiscriminate suspicion extends to entire communities (Féron and Lefort 2019).

The securitization of Chechens in European Union (EU) countries during the 2010s takes this discourse a step further. Chechens have been subject to counterterrorism and counter-radicalization policies that directly relate to the domestic issues of the host countries, not just the issues of their country of origin. In fact, European public authorities can simultaneously hold a critical stance against the Kadyrov regime and condemn Russia's human rights violations, while still deporting Chechens to the Russian Federation due to perceived national security threats.

In the early 2000s, Chechens were relatively easily granted political asylum in Western European countries, indicating that they were primarily seen as victims of a brutal Russian state. The absence of an existing diaspora also meant that Chechens were newcomers, relatively unknown prior to their arrival. This lack of familiarity blurred the geographical and cultural perceptions of Chechens: were they "people from the East" or "people from the South", considering that the latter is a more recognizable category to describe migrants or refugees? Despite this, there has been a modest but persistent mobilization of journalists and intellectuals that has contributed to a relatively positive framing of the Chechen diaspora.

Over time, the initial perception of Chechens as victims diminished due to a series of terrorist attacks in Russia, such as the 2002 incident at the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow and the 2004 Beslan school siege. In the early 2010s, Chechens became increasingly associated with issues of Muslim youth radicalization and the terrorist threat. From 2013 onwards, the activities of law enforcement and security services regarding Chechens living in Europe, particularly their potential involvement in conflicts in Syria or Iraq, have significantly impacted the image and reputation of many Chechens. This has made the previous benevolent attitude towards them appear as an anomaly.

While geopolitical factors may have influenced attitudes towards Chechens based on their relationship with Russia, the securitization of Chechens in diaspora seems to have become dissociated from foreign policy

considerations. This dissociation has persisted even with the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022.

Law enforcement and security service activities targeting Chechens in Europe, whether due to their alleged association with ISIS or direct threats to national security, have greatly affected the image and reputation of many Chechens, particularly among the younger generation. This securitization frame has widened the intergenerational divide, making it increasingly difficult to develop and transmit the memory of recent wars, especially among the younger individuals who have experienced a reversal in the perception of Chechens within their host societies. They have transitioned from being perceived as collective victims to being regarded as a potential or actual suspect community.

During our fieldwork, we had the opportunity to engage in a collective conversation in a small provincial city in an EU country.[7] One interviewee shared their perspective on a possible reminiscence of a discriminated social condition within the USSR, whether it be at the university or in the workplace. This discrimination was particularly evident in regions where Chechens were employed as temporary workers in the building industry or agriculture, commonly referred to as "shabashka".

> There is a lot of discrimination in Russia. There you are a newcomer (…) they don't see that you work from dawn to dawn, (…) they see how much you get and you are still the envy of the Soviet Union. (…). And also you live there, they are sure to quarrel with you.(…) They pester you, they will demand to buy vodka for them, give you money, something else. I1, from collective interview, born 1970 (2019)

This rings similarly to the words of a young man who evokes discrimination in his workplace in a EU-country in the 2010s:

> Between [the native] and the others, you can feel it without words, I don't know (…), For them such prejudices are completely natural (…) And with their looks and behavior they tell you from the morning that you are taking their work away from them. I4, from collective interview, born 1997 (2019)

These two quotes, representing seemingly parallel experiences but distant in time and space, highlight a potential continuity between two generations of Chechens. However, there is a distinct difference in the form of resentment towards the host country observed in interviews with some younger Chechens, which contrasts with the perception of the older generation who view the host country solely as a safe haven provided through asylum.

This disparity becomes particularly evident when discussing the relationship with law enforcement bodies. It is important to delve into this topic in detail as the mixed feelings expressed by respondents from different generations shed light on their respective self-perception within the host society. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that this issue is sensitive and

lacks consensus within the context of a collective and intergenerational discussion. While the older generation, having endured negative experiences with police attitudes in Russia, praises the professionalism of law enforcement agents in Europe, the younger generation harbors a different perspective. – "Here, if a police car stops, they check and everything is fine" (Interviewee 1)-, younger Chechens depict what they consider to be discriminatory controls:

> Yes, it was recently. They came in (…) and completely searched 10 people out of 200 people. Me too. I don't drink, I don't smoke … Just by my appearance here. Not that it was discrimination, but still. (…). I don't like it. He came in, then he wanted to provoke me. I don't pay attention to him. He just looks at you like that. I put the key in my pocket, he yells: "take your hands out!", he's drawing attention on purpose. Interviewee 2, from collective interview, born 1995 (24 years, 2019)

The violent events in Dijon in June 2020 (Le Huérou and Merlin 2020) and, more significantly, the murder of French teacher Samuel Paty in October 2020, marked a culmination in the ongoing narrative that portrayed Chechens as perpetrators of violence. In France, a leading politician said "there is a problem with the Chechens".[8] Beyond political and mediatized stances, the reinforcement of securitization practices became evident in the weeks following the murder of Samuel Paty. These practices included the open labeling of detained young individuals as "Chechens" by the police, even when they were subsequently released without any charges. State regional authorities issued internal memos to local bodies, requesting them to verify businesses and shops operated by "Chechens" (Perrotin 2020). Additionally, the French Minister of Internal Affairs visited Moscow to agree on regular expulsions of Chechens deemed to be a threat to national security in France, regardless of their official refugee status. In November 2022, a memo was written to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD 2022), holding French authorities accountable for these policies.

The impact of securitization is also visible at the individual level, with concerns about the potential radicalization of young individuals. Ruslan, for example, expresses his reluctance to "bother" the children, highlighting the heightened sensitivity and fear surrounding this issue:

> I don't know what could be the consequences for them. Ruslan, born 1976 (45 years, 2021)

The rising number of expulsions from French territory has heightened the sense of being "securitized" among the older generation, who had previously expressed gratitude towards the hosting states. In contrast, the younger generation now experiences resentment and unease due to policies that are perceived as creating an exclusively negative image of Chechens in the EU, particularly in France (Brahim and Statius 2020; Mandraud 2020; Minisini

2022), and also in Austria. These policies contribute to a growing perception of being targeted and marginalized within the host societies, fueling a sense of injustice and discrimination[9] (Cauquelin 2022). But contrary to the Kurdish young generation diaspora members depicted in Sweden (Baser and Toivanen 2023), the experience of discrimination in the host country does not seem to be a factor of collective mobilization.

However, more recently, the heightened securitization has sparked a growing awareness among organized segments of the diaspora. There is a growing recognition of the need to become more structured, responsive to the media, and inclusive of the diverse experiences and perspectives of Chechens living in Europe. This increased awareness aims to address the challenges posed by securitization and work towards creating a stronger and more united voice within the diaspora:

> We have to get out of the image of Chechens as "terrorism plus MMA". Ruslan, born 1976 (2021).

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to provide an "understanding of transnational and transgenerational effects of violence", to highlight the complex interplay of (non-)memorialization processes between the country of origin and the diaspora (Müller-Suleymanova 2023a) and to explore the factors that impact or hinder the process of memorializing the two recent Chechen wars (1994–1996; 1999–2009) in the Chechen diaspora. The memory regime established by Kadyrov in Chechnya effectively erases any public remembrance of the suffering endured by tens of thousands of civilians during the wars. Consequently, the absence of this foundation plays a significant role. However, various combined factors, connected to the violent past and different divisions, also impede the emergence of memorialization in the diaspora. The desire to forget and/or shield the younger generation from carrying the weight of such burdens, coupled with the influence of securitization narratives in host countries, contribute to the fragmentation of memories and the lack of public commemoration. In turn, the securitization frame has widened the intergenerational divide, making it increasingly difficult to develop and transmit the memory of recent wars, especially among the younger generation who have experienced a reversal in the perception of Chechens within host societies. They have transitioned from being perceived as collective victims to being regarded as a potential or actual suspect community.

Such a configuration leaves very little space for reflection and collective transformation that goes beyond the conflict. Only a small group of Chechen historians, journalists, and individuals from Western European and

Russian backgrounds are left to grapple with the public remembrance of the wars. They bear the responsibility of preserving and understanding the history of the conflict in the absence of broader collective engagement. While complaints to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) are seen as an important task, they are not widely publicized within the diaspora.

A single exception is maybe the Natalia Estemirova Documentation Center in Oslo[10] where or for which some Chechens from the diaspora have been working for years. The central concern arising from this situation is the extent to which Chechens residing in Europe, who have been unjustly associated with security concerns, can navigate a process of establishing cultural, social, or political structures that enable them to develop their own narratives and approaches to dealing with the violent history. Furthermore, it prompts the question of whether this transformation will occur through an internal progression across generations or be catalyzed by an external disruptive event?

> I was a baby when the war broke out in Chechnya. I arrived in Belgium as a child. It was as if I did not remember anything about war in Chechnya. I started integrating into my new life here. But when the war broke out in Ukraine last February, it was as if I remembered everything. I fell into a breakdown. Zalina, born 1999 (October 2022)

Like Zalina's account, interviews conducted after the onset of the widespread invasion of Ukraine reveal how the return of war reactivated traumas on an individual level. Has the eruption of a large-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022 ushered in a new era regarding the retrospective examination of recent history among Chechens living in exile on a collective level?

26 February 2022, a gathering of Ichkerian representatives, initially intended to commemorate the 1944 deportation, merged with a large demonstration in Brussels to show support for Ukraine. Chechen flags were prominently displayed during pro-Ukraine rallies across European cities. Then a conference in Belgium in November 2022 brought significant segments of the Chechen-Ichkerian diaspora together with Ukrainian speakers, including some members of the Ukrainian Parliament, shortly after its resolution from 18 October 18 2022, which recognized the independence of the Republic of Chechnya Ichkeria and deemed it under Russian occupation (Kyiv Post 2022). In March 2023, a "Forum of Youth of Ukraine and Free Chechen Ichkerian Republic" was organized to commemorate a "common tragedy, one struggle – one year of massive aggression on Ukraine – 79th anniversary of the deportation of Chechens and Ingush". Representatives of the Crimean Tatars were present, which directly connects to their own deportation experience (likewise in 1944), creating an echo of shared suffering and allowing the emergence of a shared narrative based on past and present hardships caused by Soviet and Russian military forces.

While assessing how the war in Ukraine triggers or reactivates attempts at memorialization remains challenging at the individual level, some initiatives illustrate efforts to express solidarity and promote an anti-colonial agenda rooted in history and memory, creating opportunities for cross-referencing and borrowing as stressed in this volume with the example of of the collaboration between Rwandese diaspora and Congolese and Burundian ones (Féron 2023). On one hand, the invasion of Ukraine has garnered international attention and generated sympathy globally and in the media, providing new opportunities for advocates of political projects seeking the liberation of Chechnya-Ichkeria within the Chechen diaspora. The creation of the Forum of Free Nations, which embodies a decolonial agenda for Russia's ethnic minorities (Coalson 2023), is a reminder of this.

It would be a misconception to assume that every individual living in exile from a particular region or country is concerned with the conflict and its associated political stance (Féron and Lefort 2019, 39). As shown by Zalina's testimony, evoking painful memories does not automatically lead to memorialization, neither does it lead one to identify as representatives of a conflict-generated diaspora (Müller-Suleymanova 2023b).

However, it shows how memory is a process in constant evolution and how a disruptive event like the full-scale invasion of Ukraine can allow an activation of the post-soviet "conflict cloud" and its "downloading" onto Chechen diaspora (Voytiv 2023), prompting a re-politicization and granting it agency. These developments could shape a new phase for Chechens living in Europe. As stressed in this issue on the example of the Ukrainian diaspora (Amiot 2023), it could allow a reconfiguration of Chechen "transnational imagined community".

Notes

1. All names have been anonymised. *See section on methodology*.
2. Isabelle Mandraud, « Jusqu'à maintenant on arrivait à se fondre dans la masse : le désarroi des Tchétchènes», *Le Monde*, December 9, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/12/09/jusqu-a-recemment-on-arrivait-a-se-fondre-dans-la-masse-le-desarroi-des-tchetchenes-de-france-face-au-brouillage-de-leur-image_6062680_3224.html.
3. This research has been carried out with the support of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for Research, Technological development and demonstration under grant agreeement N° 613354 - CASCADE "Exploring the Security Democracy Nexus in the Caucasus" and the FNRS (Fonds National pour la Recherche scientifique - Belgium), MIS (Mandat d'Impulsion Scientifique N° 33681713).
4. Though an exonym, Ichkeria was the toponym chosen by pro-independence Chechens to be the name of their Republic, referred to as Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (RCI).
5. Field observations, Grozny, 2012, 2017.

6. https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/02/russian-lawmaker-threatens-to-cut-the-heads-off-chechen-activists-family-a76227.
7. All the citations below in this section are from a collective interview conducted in November 2019.
8. Words of the leftist French political party *la France insoumise* leader J.-L. Mélenchon on a TV interview on October 18, 2020 a few days after the assassination of Samuel Paty in Conflans by a youngster originate from Chechnya. https://www.marianne.net/politique/melenchon/un-probleme-avec-la-communaute-tchetchene-pourquoi-les-propos-de-jean-luc-melenchon-interrogent.
9. Field observations, 2019.
10. The Center was established 2010 after Natalia Estemirova's murder in July 2009, by several international and Russia Human Rights organizations in order to ensure and secure the documentation of all HR violations and crimes committed during the wars https://www.nedc-nhc.org/en/general-information-eng/.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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