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

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Jean-François Ratelle,¹
University of Ottawa

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

¹ Jean-François Ratelle is an affiliated researcher and professor at the University of Ottawa.

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 Vypmel 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.