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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

RUSSIA'S VIOLENT ASSETS

CHECHEN ORGANIZED
CRIME GROUPS IN GERMANY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chechen organized crime in Germany – a phenomenon of increasing concern for German and European security – traces its roots to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's wars in Chechnya. They gave rise to informal economies, paramilitary structures and the rule of the Russian-controlled Kadyrov regime. Organized crime developed within the broader historical context of the Chechen nation's centuries-long and often bloody struggle for survival against powerful and aggressive adversaries: the Tsarist regime, the Soviet Union and Russia.

Large-scale migration since the 2010s transplanted and transformed these dynamics in diaspora contexts, particularly in Germany. Marginalization, group loyalty and transnational ties have shaped the development of increasingly professionalized, adaptable and extremely violent yet discreet criminal networks. Key actors, patterns of violence, and connections to state and semi-state actors in Russia have influenced the trajectory of these organized crime networks in Germany.

The groups' high cohesion and strategic use of violence underpin their German criminal activities, which include drug trafficking and extortion, supported by recruitment mechanisms, so-called honour codes, traditional or clan-based social norms, and the use of Islamist ideological framing.

Chechen organized crime poses several significant security threats in Germany, and this report discusses implications for security policy and offers recommendations for prevention, intelligence work and diaspora engagement.

Methodology

Chechen organized crime is underexplored in academic research and in-depth journalistic reporting, despite growing concern among civil society practitioners and security agencies. This lack of systematic investigation is due to several factors:

- **Limited data availability:** Many official reports by German and European security agencies are classified or only partly accessible. Publicly available information often lacks detail or analytical depth. At the same time, for historical and political reasons, the objectivity of reports and analyses from Russia is often called into question.
- **Difficult field access:** Direct research on the Chechen diaspora is hindered by a historical mistrust of outsiders. Investigating its criminal and clandestine environments is extremely difficult and often involves personal risk.

- **Media bias:** Public discourse on Chechen criminals tends to be shaped more by tabloid framing than by serious analysis. Sensational reporting often undermines nuanced, evidence-based understanding and can contribute to stereotyping of the broader diaspora.
- **Lack of insider perspectives:** Few individuals with first hand knowledge of Chechen organized crime are willing – or safe enough – to speak publicly or even confidentially. This limits the possibility of obtaining primary qualitative data.

Given these constraints, the findings and insights presented in this report are based on a triangulation of sources, including academic studies and scholarly literature on post-Soviet organized crime, war economies in the Caucasus, and diaspora dynamics; publicly available reports by security institutions in Germany and elsewhere; media reports; years of field experience working with the Chechen diaspora, including incarcerated Chechens; and informal conversations with law enforcement officials, social workers, and individuals with ties to the Chechen diaspora in Germany. Claims are contextualized and uncertainties are made explicit. Some information is derived from confidential and informal discussions with law enforcement investigators. To protect sources and operational sensitivities, these insights cannot be attributed to specific agencies or individuals, and are not documented in publicly available sources.

The analysis does not aim to offer definitive conclusions but to outline patterns, raise relevant questions and contribute to a broader understanding of Chechen organized crime in Germany.

Key points

- Over the past decade, Chechen organized crime networks have expanded, particularly in northern and eastern Germany, attracting German security attention and competition from other criminal groups.
- These groups are involved in a range of criminal activities, including drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, human trafficking and serious theft, but extortion remains their core business, with some evolving from violent criminal service providers into powerful players. Chechen organized crime groups in Germany strategically use violence and exploit notions of identity to enforce cohesion, legitimize authority, regulate markets and maintain reputation.
- Chechen organized crime groups are network-based and adaptive, benefiting from tight social cohesion, selective collaboration and transnational embeddedness.
- These groups often blur the line between organized crime and paradiplomacy, with key individuals holding dual roles and close ties to Chechen and Russian political and military leadership.



HOW PERSECUTION SHAPED CHECHEN SOCIETY

Since the early 1990s, Chechen organized crime groups have leveraged the strong solidarity within their ethnic communities – shaped by decades of political persecution and economic marginalization – to legitimize criminal activity by portraying themselves as ‘community providers’ and maintaining Chechen society’s dependency structures.

These groups, commonly referred to in the Russian-speaking world as the *Chechenskaya bratva* or *Chechenskaya obshchina* (Chechen brotherhood or Chechen community), are regarded as a ‘special case’, even when compared to other criminal actors from the Caucasus. Striking internal cohesion and readiness to use violence are frequently cited as their defining features.¹

The origins and development of Chechen organized crime, as well as its sense of identity, are deeply intertwined with the history of the Chechen people and political and socio-economic developments in the Soviet Union and later Russia. In particular, Moscow’s series of bloody persecutions of the Chechen population strengthened the role of tribal social structures and informal networks that sought to ensure survival as an ethnic and religious minority.

The use of physical violence to assert authority and tribal concepts of solidarity became central ideals that were widely practised. Traditional leaders such as tribal elders, who are respected as the custodians of customary law (*adat*), played a key role in regulating relationships.² The tolerance of internal violence to resolve issues and the existence of ‘intra-Chechen’ solidarity still influences Chechen organized crime groups, with respected figures being called upon for mediation or intervention.³

Experiences in Soviet penal camps also played a formative role. The systematic stigmatization of criminals by Soviet authorities, their isolation from society and their mass internment in labour camps fostered criminal groups that viewed themselves as existing outside state structures and belonging to an alternative social order.



FIGURE 1 Overview of locations in Germany where activities linked to Chechen organized crime have occurred, both historically and in the present.

When the 1944 deportation of the entire Chechen and Ingush populations to Central Asia and Siberia increased the number of Chechens in labour camps, they came into closer contact with emerging subcultural norms. Many Chechens found these norms resonant, as they had long been treated as outsiders by state institutions and much of Russian society. At the same time, deportation and life as a stigmatized, dispersed minority often forced Chechen families into dependence on criminal actors, contributing to the formation of their own criminal groups.

The dependencies established during exile persisted after Chechens were permitted to return in the late 1950s and resettled in the North Caucasus or major Russian urban centres. These intra-ethnic networks proved resilient, surviving the repatriation process and the post-Soviet transition. Grounded in shared ethnic origin, they evolved into durable transregional – and later transnational – structures that retained their cohesion beyond the collapse of the Soviet Union and continue to serve as an important organizational foundation for Chechen organized crime.⁴

Chechen organized crime groups in Russia

Since the mid-1980s, Chechen organized crime groups in Russia have been shaped by three core dynamics.

- **Reputation for violence:** The groups initially expanded beyond Chechnya into major cities such as Moscow and St Petersburg, gaining control over illicit markets including extortion, prostitution and currency fraud.⁵ Their reputation for extreme violence and reliability, reinforced by a strict honour code, enabled them to deter competitors and secure local dominance while limiting open confrontations.⁶
- **Nexus with quasi-state institutions:** The groups exploited weak quasi-state structures in Chechnya during the 1990s, establishing parasitic relationships with political actors that allowed them to access resources, smuggle oil and expand illicit operations.⁷ This nexus facilitated large-scale criminal financing, including of the first Russian–Chechen war, and blurred the lines between political and criminal actors, consolidating power for warlords and crime bosses alike.⁸
- **Transnational expansion:** From the 1990s, Chechen organized crime groups diversified into drugs, arms trafficking and economic crimes, developing transnational networks that extended into Belarus, Georgia and Western Europe.⁹ The restructuring of the regime led by Ramzan Kadyrov further integrated Chechen criminal groups across Russia and abroad, using diaspora communities as logistical and financial platforms to channel revenues back to Chechnya.¹⁰

Overall, Chechen organized crime groups evolved from regional actors into professional, transnational networks, leveraging a combination of violent reputation, political entanglement and diaspora infrastructure to maintain influence and profitability. ■

Despite their detention encounters with the ‘thieves-in-law’ subculture – a term describing the highest-ranking members of the underworld, professional thieves bound by a strict code of conduct – Chechen criminals rarely integrated into it and instead operated in independent groups, unlike other actors from the Caucasus region such as Armenian or Georgian criminals.¹¹ This observation indicates the pronounced significance of ethnic identity in Chechen criminal networks.

Another factor in the emergence of the Chechen ‘special case’ was the interplay between external criminalization (the systematic stereotyping of Chechens by Russian state and societal actors) and internal criminalization – the gradual appropriation and strategic use of these narratives by Chechen criminal groups.

Historically, persistent resistance to Russian imperial rule produced enduring portrayals of Chechens as inherently violent, uncivilized and predisposed to crime, framing them as the antithesis of Russian civilized cultural identity.¹² At the same time, prolonged conflict, displacement and state violence facilitated the rise of Chechen criminal groups who occasionally cooperated with armed resistance factions.¹³ This gave rise to narratives of Chechens being violent radicals, further contributing to their stigmatization in Russia.

Over time, some elements of Chechen folklore and cultural memory were selectively reinterpreted by certain criminal actors as symbolic resources or distorted to navigate power structures and assert autonomy. These distortions set the stage for tension between authentic ethical codes such as *nokhchalla* and their misuse in criminal society.

While the Chechen population at large suffered under these stereotypes, criminal Chechen groups simultaneously benefited from their reputation for violence and otherness. Some criminal networks weaponized this criminalization, adopting the reputation for violence as part of their brand and continually demonstrating it in practice. These dynamics persist, reflected in the glorification of criminals on Chechen-language social media, where violent confrontations with Russian security forces are celebrated as acts of defiance and proof of an alleged Chechen nature.

Nokhchalla

Nokhchalla is a widely recognized cultural concept associated with Chechen identity, frequently invoked in discussions of social norms, diaspora behaviour and community ethics.

Traditionally, it encompasses a set of virtues related to honour, dignity, responsibility, hospitality, humility, courage and the protection of the vulnerable. It forms part of the broader *vainakh* (our people) moral universe grounded in *adat*, the customary legal-ethical code governing interpersonal obligations, conflict resolution and communal life.¹⁴

Nokhchalla evolves in response to historical disruptions such as war, repression, deportation and migration, and although it is often associated with masculine conduct, its underlying values are rooted in restraint, moral discipline and self-control.¹⁵ Even so, it has frequently been misrepresented as a militant honour code or cultural script that predisposes Chechen men to retaliatory violence or coercive behaviour.¹⁶ In diaspora settings, selective reinterpretations by criminal actors may extract elements such as loyalty or solidarity while disregarding wider moral obligations.¹⁷

This pattern parallels developments in other migrant or post-conflict communities, where criminal networks selectively borrow cultural symbols to strengthen cohesion or present an image of legitimacy.¹⁸

Recognizing the distinction between the evolving cultural ethics of *nokhchalla* and its distortion by criminals is essential for interpreting Chechen social dynamics and avoiding analytical pitfalls in the study of Chechen organized crime in Germany. ■



THE EMERGENCE OF CHECHEN ORGANIZED CRIME IN GERMANY

The Chechen diaspora in Germany has grown steadily since the 1990s. The number of Chechens in the country is difficult to determine, however, because they may hold a different nationality (most often Russian) on arrival, or their registration after naturalization may not reflect their ethnic origin. Between 2010 and 2019, for example, 46 334 asylum-seekers indicated Chechen as their ethnicity – among them 45 502 holders of Russian citizenship and 832 holders of Georgian citizenship.¹⁹ The continued inflow of asylum applicants, births within the Chechen community and the absence of ethnicity-based population statistics mean that, in the absence of official figures, a conservative estimate for the Chechen population in Germany far exceeds 50 000.

Many Chechens who migrated to Germany in the 2010s were denied asylum but had their deportations suspended.²⁰ They remained in the country for years with a status of *Duldung* (tolerated stay). Even individuals from this group who became criminally liable often remained in Germany.²¹ Deportations to Russia were suspended after 2022.

The insecurity associated with *Duldung* status reinforces conditions that can indirectly benefit Chechen organized crime groups. Because *Duldung* limits access to formal employment, increases dependence on informal community structures and heightens fear of contact with authorities, affected individuals are less likely to report intimidation and more vulnerable to recruitment for low-level tasks or informal 'protection' arrangements. These structural constraints do not cause criminality but they create openings that organized crime actors can exploit within an already marginalized segment of the diaspora.

Over the past two decades, Germany's organized crime landscape has evolved into a complex, multi-ethnic environment in which networks originating from Germany, eastern Europe, southern Europe, the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus coexist and compete for influence. Within this ecosystem, Chechen groups have emerged as a distinct and increasingly visible component. Their rise is comparatively recent in contrast to the long-established outlaw motorcycle gangs and Turkish, Arab-Lebanese and western Balkan networks that have dominated certain illicit markets since the 1980s and 1990s.²²

German authorities initially classified Chechen organized crime groups in the broader category of Russian-Eurasian organized crime, and the media sometimes labels their activities as 'clan crime' due to the tribal social structure of the Chechen community. Both classifications are misleading. Chechen

organized crime groups have distinct structural and cultural characteristics and are clearly separate from other Russian-Eurasian organized crime groups; and the role of clan affiliation differs from family-based criminal networks typically associated with clan crime. Several analysts have argued that the autonomy of these groups may be overstated, as many operate within hierarchical networks dominated by Russian or transnational post-Soviet actors who capitalize on Chechens' reputation for loyalty and enforcement capacity.²³

Chechen organized crime groups tend to be ethnically cohesive and rely on trust networks rooted in family ties, wartime solidarity and religious affiliation.²⁴ Their reputation for discipline and physical resilience – shaped by displacement and the militarization of Chechen society during the armed conflicts of the 1990s – contribute to underworld perceptions of exceptional toughness.²⁵ These features help explain why Chechen actors are often perceived as highly capable and difficult to intimidate.

There is relatively little information on the activities of Chechen organized crime groups in Germany during the 1990s and early 2000s. Some reports suggest that Germany had already emerged as a significant operational hub for these groups during that period. According to these reports, Frankfurt was a hub for their financial criminal activities, while the numerous Russian-Eurasian organized crime networks active in Germany since the dissolution of the Soviet Union offered a crucial pool of clients for illicit services and exploitation.²⁶ Other reports from as early as 2008 highlight the groups' long-standing presence in the country.²⁷

Since the mid-2010s, German federal and state agencies have increasingly begun to mention Chechen groups specifically in their organized crime reports. Yet, in the official situation reports, organized crime continues to be largely treated in generalized terms under the umbrella of Russian-Eurasian organized crime. As a result, any indication of a gradual increase in the number and severity of cases involving individuals of Chechen origin – particularly violent offences, drug trafficking and cross-border cooperation with other Russian-speaking networks²⁸ – can only be inferred indirectly from these generalized reports. At the same time, a slow trend towards greater specificity is evident: investigators have increasingly produced internal analyses focusing on Chechen groups, and in some state police reports, such groups are now referred to occasionally within the sections on Russian-Eurasian organized crime.

In the late 2010s, several German security agencies – including the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA), nine state criminal police offices (Landeskriminalämter – LKAs), intelligence services, the customs authority, and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees – produced an analytical assessment, 'Borste', a classified examination of the activities of Chechen organized crime groups. According to *Der Spiegel*, the assessment identified about 200 key individuals, nearly one-third of whom maintained links to organized crime and extremist milieus. The report raised concerns that certain groups, granted security contracts to guard police facilities, may have exploited this access to covertly collect information on specialized police units.

Until the late 2010s, more formally organized groups were particularly prominent. Regime 95, which some media sources described as primarily a martial arts association, was active in and around Hamburg, Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, Berlin and Brandenburg. The group has been described by German law enforcement as linked to organized crime.²⁹ Guerilla Nation Vaynakh – an outlaw biker-style group – was active mainly in and around Berlin.³⁰ Members of these groups maintained a visible public presence and were at times used by leading organized crime figures – some of whom acted as proxies for the Kadyrov regime – to demonstrate power. Increased visibility, particularly due to distinctive group attire, corresponded with heightened law enforcement attention, ultimately prompting these groups to retreat from public view or dissolve.



The emblems of organized crime group Regime 95 (left), often described as a martial arts association, and Guerilla Nation Vaynakh (right). *Images: Instagram*

A 2017 shooting at a cafe in the Wedding district of Berlin, carried out by Guerilla Nation Vaynakh, marked a pivotal moment for German law enforcement. Executed in a military-style manner, the attack targeted individuals linked to the drug scene and demonstrated a strategic use of violence and reputational signalling. According to a 2019 report by the Police Union, the incident prompted intensified surveillance, closer inter-agency coordination and more targeted investigative measures against Chechen-led criminal networks.³¹ Raids in May 2019 in Berlin recovered drugs, cash, weapons and hand grenades, leading to prison sentences of several years for the two main suspects.³²

The Berlin LKA's annual organized crime situation reports from 2019 to 2023 provide insight into the activities of Chechen organized crime groups in the city. The 2019 report says Chechens were prominently represented among suspects: of 16 Russian nationals, 13 were Chechen, and they dominated three of the four organized crime cases led by Russian nationals.³³ In 2020, 21 out of 25 Russian nationals were of Chechen origin, and five of the six dismantled organized crime groups were led by Chechens.³⁴ In 2021, 17 of 19 Russian nationals were Chechen and four of six organized crime groups were Chechen-led.³⁵ In 2022, two of the six organized crime cases were primarily associated with individuals of Chechen origin.³⁶ By 2023, out of four Russian-Eurasian organized crime networks dominated by Russian nationals, two were led by Russians, and one by a suspect of Chechen ethnicity.³⁷

Among the North Caucasian organized crime groups identified in Germany, Chechen actors constitute the most prominent share. By 2019, German authorities had already observed that Chechen suspects were still frequently operating as criminal service providers for more established organized crime groups. At the same time, however, they were working to expand their influence and move into criminal markets with the intention of taking them over. The areas they targeted included protection racketeering and drug trafficking, where their insular structure, propensity for violence and strategic expansion into the door-security and private-security sectors facilitated their growing presence.³⁸

An escalating conflict between members of an Arabic-speaking group associated with clan-based organized crime and Chechen men in the Berlin districts of Neukölln and Gesundbrunnen made headlines in 2020 and put the police on high alert due to fears of retaliatory attacks and a potential spiral of violence.³⁹ To resolve the conflict, several meetings were held by self-proclaimed mediators. The key gathering also included Timur Dugazaev and Sajhan Agaev, prominent Chechens from Kiel and Hamburg, respectively. These meetings were described by many observers as instances of parallel justice and highlighted the influence of informal authorities in the organized crime sphere.

Some Chechen organized crime groups have moved on to more complex criminal activities. In 2021, police targeted a 12-member group in Brandenburg responsible for detonating ticket vending machines at train stations to steal cash.⁴⁰

The overlap with other security-relevant areas such as extremism or foreign-state influence, and the resulting hybrid character of some Chechen organized crime groups, has also brought them onto the radar of domestic intelligence services, although only a few state offices for the protection of the constitution are authorized to monitor organized crime. The 2022 Bremen intelligence report, for example, notes that there is 'an often close interconnection with structures of organized crime' among Islamist North Caucasian actors.⁴¹

Over the past decade, Chechen organized crime networks have become more visible on Germany's multi-ethnic organized crime landscape, where they are frequently described by law enforcement and analytical sources as cohesive, reputation-conscious and tightly embedded in transnational Russian-speaking settings, as well as being partly integrated into networks that maintain economic or political links to Russia and Chechnya.⁴² Their emergence must be understood in the context of the wider post-Soviet criminal environment and of power hierarchies emanating from Russia. War, displacement and the gradual co-opting of Chechen militias and elites by Russian state and criminal actors since the early 2000s have shaped the outward migration of Chechens and the way Chechen actors position themselves in Eurasian criminal systems.⁴³



FIGURE 2 Europe, showing Germany and Chechnya, located in the North Caucasus.

Unlike territorial mafia organizations, Chechen organized crime groups in Germany are network-based and adaptive, embedding themselves in illicit markets such as drug distribution, protection and extortion while leveraging diaspora connections that extend across Europe and into Russia.⁴⁴ This combination of tight social cohesion, selective collaboration and transnational embeddedness has made them a priority observation category for federal and state security institutions.⁴⁵

The groups occupy a strategically ambiguous position within Germany's organized crime landscape – distinct in their identity and cohesion, yet integrated to varying degrees into broader systems of post-Soviet criminal power in which influence from Russian state and underworld actors remains an important contextual factor.⁴⁶ The enduring personal and financial ties between certain diaspora figures and Chechnya's Kadyrov-aligned elites further blur the boundaries between independent criminal entrepreneurship and external influence.⁴⁷

In confidential interviews with investigators from German security agencies, a fundamental problem became evident. While criminal police units at the regional level, as well as specialized investigators, were often able at an early stage to attribute certain activities of Chechen offenders to organized crime structures and issued early warnings about their rise, political willingness to acknowledge these assessments and allocate adequate resources for investigation and countermeasures was low. In some cases, the existence of Chechen organized crime structures was explicitly denied.⁴⁸ As a result, the window of opportunity for effective prevention of their consolidation has largely closed.

The prolonged failure of political decision makers to recognize these organized crime structures – despite their severe impact in certain localities – has in some cases contributed to a deterioration of public security perceptions, particularly due to the groups' use of violence. This dynamic has further aggravated an already politically charged atmosphere in affected areas. The resulting uncertainty among local officeholders, combined with the absence of specialized investigative units and the prevalence of prejudiced attitudes toward Chechens in general, has engendered a widespread sense of helplessness in dealing with these groups.

The case of Prenzlau

In 2023, in response to escalating problems in the Brandenburg town of Prenzlau involving a small number of criminals of Chechen and non-Chechen origin – and the subsequent emergence of xenophobic protests – local authorities sent an open letter to the state government.

'Prenzlau is currently confronted with a wave of violence and unrest primarily from Chechen refugees, and we urgently require your support. The offences range from theft, extortion and property damage to threats, drug offences, street fights ... and even attempts of forced entry into apartments,' the letter read.⁴⁹

Subsequently, no comprehensive strategy for addressing these challenges has been developed and the situation has not been sustainably mitigated. Xenophobia and hostility towards Chechen communities have tended to increase.⁵⁰ ■

Despite the rise in the activity of Chechen organized crime groups, public awareness of the associated risks remains limited. The groups' criminal actions are occasionally reported in regional and local media, yet there is often little understanding or evidence linking these incidents to larger, more complex networks. This is due to lack of knowledge about the structure, modus operandi and internal dynamics of the groups.

Even highly visible events – such as confrontations with Arabic-speaking groups in Berlin in 2020 or shootings in Hamburg in 2025 – are selectively covered by national media, and sensationalist reporting can obscure the underlying context.⁵¹

While specialized analytical units and police officers with substantial investigative experience have a realistic understanding of the relevant dynamics, decision makers do not yet appear to have fully internalized these realities. So far, this has limited the implementation of strategic measures and the allocation of necessary resources.



WHAT CRIMES? WHICH PLACES?

Chechen organized crime groups in Germany engage in a broad spectrum of criminal activities. Extortion is a core activity, and informal discussions with investigators (who need to remain anonymous) suggest that police successes in tackling these cases probably represent only a fraction of the total.⁵² Extortion occurs in various sectors, including construction, and targets operators of businesses such as restaurants and gambling venues.⁵³

In several medium-sized urban centres in eastern Germany, Chechen criminal actors have attained a dominant position in key illicit markets, either through informally negotiated arrangements with established local criminals or by force. The city of Cottbus in the eastern state of Brandenburg exemplifies this development: Chechen offenders play a prominent role in the drug trade and engage in violent conduct, including extortion and physical assaults.⁵⁴ Even in this small city of about 100 000 inhabitants, criminal figures engage Chechen groups as specialized service providers to safeguard their operations and project a threatening presence toward competitors – a pattern historically known from Chechen groups in Russia.⁵⁵

In the early 2010s, Chechen and Armenian organized crime groups in the state of Thuringia were reported to be involved in illicit activities such as car theft and trade, money laundering, and trafficking crystal meth.⁵⁶

Chechen groups are also frequently involved in violent offences, the trafficking of drugs, humans and arms, theft, handling stolen goods, cigarette smuggling and robbery.⁵⁷ Another area of activity involves exploitation schemes in which people from countries outside the EU are lured to Germany with false promises and their labour is exploited, as documented by investigative reporting.⁵⁸ The groups have also detonated explosive devices to destroy ticket vending machines and engaged in debt collection and security services as criminal business activities.⁵⁹

The territorial presence of Chechen organized crime groups in Germany does not resemble the fixed, geographically bound domination characteristic of classical mafia organizations. Instead of claiming distinct neighbourhoods or exercising overt sovereignty over urban space, Chechen networks embed themselves in diaspora communities and specific criminal markets, exerting influence through social proximity, reputational authority and situational control. Their territorial imprint is therefore best understood as a layered combination of demographic concentration, informal community oversight, and selective occupation of profitable or strategic niches.⁶⁰

Chechen diaspora communities in Germany are dispersed, yet certain federal states display more pronounced concentrations. Chechen criminal networks are primarily concentrated in north-eastern parts of Germany, with key hubs in Berlin and especially Hamburg.⁶¹ In Berlin, the socially marginalized area of Märkisches Viertel and the Lichtenberg, Wedding and Gesundbrunnen districts; and in Hamburg the St Georg district, are considered particular hotspots. Elsewhere, Leipzig, Bremen, Dresden, Kiel, Erfurt and Cottbus – and smaller towns and medium-sized centres in Saxony, Thuringia, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania – are reported as areas of activity. Chechen groups are also active in Lower Saxony, Bavaria and North Rhine–Westphalia, with operational links to counterparts in neighbouring countries including France, the Benelux region and Austria.⁶²

These locations reflect historical migration trajectories and the availability of housing, welfare infrastructure and established community networks. Criminal formations do not control these areas in a formal sense; instead, they draw on the social density of diaspora spaces – mosques, cultural associations, refugee accommodation, cafés and informal meeting points – to maintain a discreet but stable operational presence. Within these environments, authority often depends less on explicit coercion than on symbolic capital derived from reputation, perceived combat experience and an ability to mobilize collective responses to external threats.

Influence is therefore situational rather than territorial. Chechen groups tend to establish leverage where social embeddedness and logistical capacity intersect – such as within diaspora businesses, informal money-transfer networks or mid-level drug distribution channels. Extortion and protection arrangements often rely on unspoken expectations framed in terms of communal obligation or respect, minimizing police visibility and reinforcing internal cohesion.⁶³

This model parallels patterns found in other post-Soviet and Caucasian criminal formations.⁶⁴ A group may not ‘own’ a neighbourhood but can nonetheless exercise decisive influence within micro-environments such as sports clubs, mosque communities and diaspora associations, or informal economies such as unregistered security provision or illicit moneylending. These territories are defined by social relationships, reputational dynamics and informal authority rather than geographic boundaries.

Periodic public incidents illustrate how situational influence can escalate into conflict. For example, police raids in Berlin and Brandenburg in 2021 targeted Arab and Chechen groups suspected of cooperating in weapons and drug trafficking, highlighting that territoriality is fluid and context dependent rather than static.⁶⁵ Likewise, the high-profile confrontation in the Neukölln borough of Berlin in 2020 between individuals associated with Chechen and Arab-Lebanese networks demonstrated how friction can emerge when boundaries of influence – particularly in drug markets – are perceived as crossed.⁶⁶ These incidents do not indicate stable territorial rivalries but reveal how relational and market-based positioning can produce intermittent, localized disputes.

NGO staff and other experts frequently observe subtler forms of situational control in community settings. These include steering youths away from particular gyms or social venues, influencing which intermediaries community members consult during disputes, or shaping informal authority in refugee housing facilities. Such micro-level interventions create a diffuse perception of influence without requiring explicit territorial claims.⁶⁷ For law enforcement agencies, this complicates detection and intervention: the absence of fixed territory reduces visibility while the dense social networks of diaspora life provide protective environments for criminal activity.

Patterns of cooperation

Like other criminal organizations, Chechen groups may rely on collaboration with other criminal actors. Such cooperation is not unusual among groups originating in the post-Soviet space. Historically, there have been instances in which Chechen groups collaborated with individuals of various nationalities in the same criminal operation. In 2008, for example, a criminal gang in Hamburg composed of individuals from Chechnya, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan was accused of a broad spectrum of illicit activities.⁶⁸

Another significant form of cooperation involves calling on intermediaries and informal community leaders to settle conflict and mediate disputes with rivals in the criminal environment. After 2014's violent clashes between Armenian and Chechen groups in Thuringia, intercepted phone calls revealed that an influential politician from the Russian North Caucasus republic of Dagestan travelled to Berlin and Erfurt to mediate. Subsequent negotiations in Belgium and Moscow reportedly resolved the conflicts through financial settlements, highlighting the transnational dimension of conflict management within these criminal networks.⁶⁹



For Chechen organized crime groups, such as Regime 95, violence is not only functional but also reputational. *Photo: Instagram*

Patterns of violence, intimidation and social control

Violence plays a central yet highly strategic role within Chechen organized crime groups in Germany. Contrary to public narratives that portray Chechen actors as uniquely or indiscriminately violent, available evidence suggests that violence is applied in a targeted manner. It functions as a regulatory mechanism rather than as an expression of spontaneous aggression. According to German authorities, the high propensity for violence among North Caucasian suspects is largely attributed to the combat experience many gained during the Russian–Chechen wars.⁷⁰

Functions of violence

Within Chechen groups, violence is used to enforce internal discipline, secure economic interests, deter rivals, and reinforce the authority of leaders and intermediaries. German law enforcement agencies frequently describe Chechen actors as highly willing to use violence, especially in connection with

extortion, personal disputes and debt collection.⁷¹ However, such violence is generally targeted: punitive beatings for unpaid debts, intimidation of defectors, or coercion within tightly knit diaspora networks. It is not aimed at asserting territorial control but at managing relationships and regulating access to markets.⁷²

Victims often belong to the same social circles as the perpetrators. Shared Chechen community environments – refugee housing, extended family networks and community associations – create situations in which social proximity amplifies the threat of retaliation and reduces the likelihood of reporting incidents to authorities.⁷³ Serious acts of violence, including the use of firearms, have likewise been reported among rival Chechen actors in Germany.⁷⁴

When violence is directed at outsiders, it is typically calibrated to maintain a reputation for reliability and toughness within broader criminal ecosystems.⁷⁵ This combination of internal discipline and external signalling reflects patterns common in other post-Soviet criminal formations, where coercion acts as a communicative tool.⁷⁶

The meaning of violence

Beyond its functional use, violence has significant symbolic and reputational meaning. Chechen groups cultivate an image of personal toughness and readiness to retaliate against disrespect, betrayal or perceived dishonour. This reputation is reinforced not only by violent acts but by the circulation of videos documenting beatings, forced apologies or public expressions of submission. Such practices mirror patterns observed in the North Caucasus and Russian prison culture, where the performative visibility of coercion contributes to status-building and social regulation.⁷⁷

Wartime narratives further enhance the symbolic weight of violence. Although not all diaspora members participated directly in the Russian–Chechen wars, references to combat experience – real or embellished – still resonate culturally. These narratives are sometimes used in criminal contexts to legitimize harsh measures or to portray someone as an enforcer of communal honour, even when such actions diverge sharply from mainstream community values.⁷⁸

Honour, masculinity and cultural codes

Honour-based norms help explain the social resonance of violence in Chechen organized crime groups. References to *nokhchalla* retain symbolic value in diaspora settings. In criminal contexts, selected elements of this code may be distorted to justify loyalty, retribution or silence. Analysts stress that this is a departure from the code's original meaning rather than an authentic continuation of Chechen tradition.⁷⁹

Masculinity also plays an important role. Many recruits emerge from environments marked by displacement, social exclusion and limited socio-economic mobility. In such contexts, physical toughness, a readiness for confrontation and refusal to cooperate with authorities become intertwined with personal status and identity. Combat sports communities – particularly mixed martial arts (MMA), wrestling and boxing – reinforce these values by providing physical training and highly masculinized social arenas.⁸⁰ Although most Chechen men in such settings are not involved in crime, these environments can become recruitment spaces where reputations and hierarchies are formed.⁸¹

Transnational violence and influence

Evidence from investigative reporting and security assessments suggests that in certain cases, violent retaliation or intimidation can extend beyond Germany's borders. Individuals who flee intra-diaspora conflicts or debts have occasionally been targeted in other European countries, raising the possibility

of transnational enforcement capabilities or cooperation with actors linked to pro-Kadyrov networks abroad.⁸² The boundaries between criminal violence, diaspora surveillance and political intimidation can blur in such cases.

The 2019 Tiergarten assassination in Berlin, in which a man of Chechen origin was killed by an assailant linked to Russian state structures, illustrates the entanglement between criminal and political forms of coercion. Although not representative of most Chechen organized crime activities, such high-profile incidents underline the broader ecosystem of violence in which diaspora actors may operate.⁸³

Silence, fear and social control in the diaspora

One of the most effective tools available to Chechen groups is the cultivation of silence. Victims of intimidation, extortion or internal community disputes rarely report incidents to German authorities. This reluctance reflects several factors: fear of retaliation, distrust of state institutions, concern about community stigma, and worries about potential repercussions for relatives in Chechnya, where political structures aligned with the Kadyrov regime maintain pervasive social control.⁸⁴ The threat of consequences 'back home', whether real or perceived, amplifies the coercive capacity of criminal actors in Germany.

Practitioners working with Chechen families frequently encounter situations in which victims explicitly ask that authorities not be involved due to fear of community isolation or transnational repercussions.⁸⁵ This form of silence differs from the secrecy typical of other organized crime traditions: it is reinforced by transnational pressures unique to the Chechen context and by concerns about family honour and diaspora cohesion.

Informal mediation mechanisms – community elders, religious figures or respected intermediaries – can further shield criminal actors from scrutiny. While these mechanisms contribute to community cohesion, they may also facilitate out-of-court settlements that undermine law enforcement efforts, echoing patterns found in other diaspora-based criminal networks.⁸⁶

Impact on the community and law enforcement

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is a diffuse climate of caution within Chechen communities in Germany. While most Chechens reject criminality, their ability to resist or challenge criminal actors is constrained by informal pressures, fears of social fragmentation and anxieties about being publicly associated with wrongdoing. For German authorities, the combination of high internal cohesion, readiness to use violence and strong diaspora-level norms of silence poses significant investigative challenges. Law enforcement agencies repeatedly emphasize difficulties in gathering reliable intelligence or recruiting informants in Chechen networks.⁸⁷ These factors contribute to the perception that the networks are difficult to access and highly adaptive. Analysts caution, however, that this perception must not lead to ethnic profiling or undifferentiated suspicion of the broader Chechen population.⁸⁸

Violence within Chechen groups in Germany functions as strategic, symbolic and relational capital. It reinforces internal hierarchies, regulates market interactions and sustains reputational standing within the wider criminal milieu. Cultural narratives, wartime memories and diaspora pressures amplify the effectiveness of coercion. For German authorities, understanding these dynamics is critical to navigating the complex interplay between organized crime, diaspora cohesion and transnational forms of intimidation.



HOW THE CHECHEN GROUPS OPERATE

The analysis of Chechen organized crime groups in Germany reveals a constellation of actors and organizational logics shaped by diasporic cohesion, wartime legacies and embeddedness in the broader post-Soviet criminal environment. These networks do not follow classical hierarchical mafia models; nor do they seek territorial domination in a conventional sense. Instead, they operate through highly cohesive, trust-based structures rooted in extended family ties, *teip* (clan) affiliations, shared experiences of displacement and selectively adapted cultural norms. These foundations facilitate internal discipline, enable rapid adaptation under law enforcement pressure and create organizational forms that are difficult to infiltrate or disrupt.⁸⁹

Across all levels – leadership figures, mid-level coordinators, operational cores and Chechen individuals of the peripheral milieu – identity is strategically instrumentalized. Wartime narratives, references to *adat* and *nokhchalla*, and selective expressions of religious devotion are mobilized to legitimize authority, justify coercion or bind individuals into obligations that underpin group cohesion. These cultural resources are rarely applied in their original ethical form; instead, they are reinterpreted in ways that support criminal objectives. Such symbolic strategies strengthen internal loyalty while limiting permeability to outsiders, including law enforcement agencies.

Patterns of violence reinforce this configuration. Violence is generally targeted and functional, deployed to maintain discipline, enforce agreements, deter challenges, and cultivate a reputation for reliability and toughness within the broader criminal milieu. Its symbolic dimensions – humiliation rituals, reputational signalling and the performative display of toughness – contribute to the groups' deterrent capacity while reinforcing internal hierarchies. The effectiveness of these coercive practices is magnified by diaspora-level norms of silence, fear of social fragmentation and concerns about transnational repercussions, which together impede reporting and complicate intelligence gathering.⁹⁰

At the same time, Chechen organized crime groups are not fully autonomous. They are embedded, to varying degrees, in Russian-speaking criminal ecosystems influenced by Soviet-era traditions and contemporary alignments between criminal entrepreneurs and political or security actors. For some actors, real or perceived ties to power structures in Russia and Chechnya, including individuals associated with the Kadyrov regime, shape expectations of loyalty and avenues of influence. These overlapping criminal and political dimensions do not define all Chechen networks but contribute to their strategic ambiguity and complicate the task of distinguishing ordinary organized crime from forms of activity with transnational political resonance.

The cumulative effect is an organized crime phenomenon marked by high cohesion, strong relational authority, low permeability to state institutions and significant adaptability. These characteristics help explain the persistence and resilience of Chechen organized crime groups within Germany's increasingly competitive criminal landscape. At the same time, they underscore the importance of avoiding ethnic or religious generalizations: the patterns described here pertain to a small subset of actors and should not be misidentified with the broader Chechen or Muslim population.

Understanding these structural and behavioural dynamics is essential for interpreting how Chechen organized crime groups position themselves in Germany's criminal markets, how they cooperate or compete with other groups, and how they navigate the intersecting pressures of diaspora life and transnational influence. The features identified in this study – actor roles, organizational logics, reputational mechanisms and embedded external linkages – form the foundation for analyzing their current and future participation in various illicit economies as well as their interactions with other criminal networks.

Organizational features

Groups are highly cohesive and work in a trust-based fashion, typically structured around extended family, regional origin or solidarity networks formed during the Russian–Chechen wars of the 1990s.⁹¹ Membership tends to be exclusively Chechen, with recruitment relying on kinship ties or demonstrated reliability within community network circles rather than formal initiation rituals.⁹² This exclusivity strengthens internal resilience but limits access to external resources, occasionally increasing dependence on patrons or allied actors within the wider criminal environment.⁹³

Operationally, groups favour a network-oriented structure of small, flexible cells (or 'operational cores') bound together by interpersonal trust rather than formal hierarchy. Their cohesion often draws on selectively reinterpreted cultural norms relating to honour, loyalty and mutual obligation. Traditional concepts such as *nokhchalla* are sometimes invoked to reinforce group discipline and solidarity. In criminal contexts, however, specific elements of this moral language may be used to justify loyalty, silence or retaliatory violence, even though their original meaning emphasizes integrity and mutual assistance.⁹⁴ These selective adaptations coexist with pragmatic influences from the wider Russian-speaking underworld, where norms are shaped by Soviet-era criminal traditions and contemporary post-Soviet power structures.⁹⁵

Culturally, Chechen organized crime groups often project an image of discipline, religious devotion and readiness to employ violence – qualities that reinforce their deterrent reputation in the criminal milieu. These traits, shaped by conflict, displacement and social marginalization, make them attractive collaborators or enforcers for larger post-Soviet networks, including actors with operational or political links to Russia and Chechnya.⁹⁶ As a result, Chechen groups in Germany occupy an ambivalent position: they operate as autonomous community-based formations while simultaneously functioning, in certain contexts, as components of broader transnational systems of criminal, political or symbolic authority.⁹⁷

The groups consist of overlapping circles of actors whose authority, roles and influence reflect internal community dynamics and the broader post-Soviet power structures in which they are embedded. Leadership rarely follows rigid, bureaucratic hierarchies. Instead, it emerges from a combination of personal reputation, wartime experience, family and *teip* affiliation, religious or moral standing within the community, and – crucially – transnational links to actors in Chechnya and the wider Russian-speaking underworld.⁹⁸

Structure and hierarchies

The groups' structures are shaped by a blend of diasporic social formations, conflict legacies and broader post-Soviet criminal cultures. Rather than adopting rigid vertical hierarchies, the groups operate through flexible, trust-based constellations built around family ties, regional origin and shared experiences of displacement. Their structures resemble cellular networks more than classic mafia-type organizations and rely on decentralized coordination rather than formal command chains. This configuration enhances adaptability, compartmentalization and resilience in the face of law enforcement pressure.⁹⁹

Most networks function as clusters of small operational units composed of a limited number of trusted individuals. Authority within these clusters is informal and relational. Individuals with reputational capital, strategic skills or access to resources act as coordinators who mediate communication, allocate tasks and manage disputes. This relational authority provides plausible deniability for higher-level actors and reduces exposure for the network.¹⁰⁰ While these structures can appear opaque or leaderless from the outside, internal coordination is facilitated by long-standing interpersonal trust, shared socialization experiences, and cultural norms of loyalty and discretion.

These clusters are embedded in broader community social structures. Extended families and *teips* serve as trust-building environments, though criminal formations do not strictly follow traditional kinship ties.¹⁰¹ Instead, kinship, regional origin and wartime connections provide templates for cooperation that are selectively adapted to migrant-community conditions. Individuals from different *teips* may collaborate if they share experiences of displacement, imprisonment or community-level marginalization. This flexibility mirrors patterns observed in Caucasian and post-Soviet organized crime more broadly, where familial and regional identities inform – but do not strictly determine – organizational boundaries. Overall, it is less their regional origin that serves as an identity marker than their national identity.¹⁰²

Communication practices balance operational security with cultural preferences for personal interaction. Encrypted messaging applications such as Telegram, Signal and WhatsApp are widely used for logistical coordination and transnational communication. Yet sensitive decisions or conflict-resolution processes often occur face-to-face in trusted community spaces – family gatherings, private apartments, informal community hubs, or commercial venues controlled by group associates. This reliance on direct communication reflects cultural norms and awareness of digital surveillance risks, complicating law enforcement efforts to infiltrate or map these networks.¹⁰³

Internal discipline and conflict resolution typically rely on a blend of moral language, social pressure and, when necessary, coercion. Cultural references to *adat* or *nokhchalla*, while traditionally linked to ethics of integrity, hospitality and mutual aid, may be selectively invoked to justify loyalty, silence or retribution within criminal contexts. Disputes are usually mediated through respected intermediaries with moral authority in the community, minimizing the need for open displays of internal violence. When disciplinary violence does occur, it is often swift and targeted, reinforcing group cohesion and signalling the costs of betrayal.¹⁰⁴ This equilibrium between informal moral reasoning and coercive enforcement helps sustain internal stability despite the absence of formalized hierarchies.

These organizational features must be understood within the broader post-Soviet criminal ecosystem influenced by the *vorovskoi mir* (thieves' world) tradition and by contemporary arrangements involving Russian-speaking criminal entrepreneurs and political actors. Chechen networks in Germany sometimes

collaborate with or operate alongside Russian-dominated structures for logistics, trafficking routes or dispute mediation. In cases involving individuals with ties to Kadyrov-affiliated circles, organizational loyalties may extend beyond immediate criminal cohorts to external patrons or political entities in Grozny or Moscow.¹⁰⁵ These transnational linkages shape not only operational capacities but also internal discipline, expectations of loyalty and the perceived consequences of defection.

Overall, the organizational structure of Chechen organized crime groups in Germany reflects a hybrid model: decentralized yet cohesive, informal yet highly disciplined, culturally grounded yet shaped by transnational political and criminal forces. This hybrid configuration enables adaptation, protects higher-level actors and complicates law enforcement intervention, making these groups difficult to penetrate and disrupt. Understanding these organizational logics is critical for interpreting how the groups position themselves in criminal markets, manage disputes, and maintain internal cohesion under conditions of migration, surveillance and external political influence.

De facto 'authorities'

Leadership legitimacy within the groups is rarely codified. Instead, it operates through reputation, relational networks and the ability to provide protection, resources or access. Combatant status and affiliation with prestigious families or *teips* are important sources of legitimacy, though these traditional structures are selectively reinterpreted under migration and criminalization. Elements of *adat* and ethical codes such as *nokhchalla* are sometimes invoked to justify loyalty, silence or retribution in criminal contexts.¹⁰⁶ This use of cultural references frequently diverges from broader community norms but persists because it reinforces internal cohesion and punishes dissent.

Religious narratives also play an ambivalent role. For many Chechens in Germany, increased religiosity – often influenced by Salafism, a fundamentalist strain of Sunni Islam – serves as a moral framework distancing individuals from crime, emphasizing piety, familial responsibility and non-cooperation with illicit activities.¹⁰⁷ Yet within criminal networks, outward displays of piety or reputations as 'proper' Muslims can be leveraged as additional sources of authority, reinforcing claims to moral superiority or justifying harsh disciplinary measures against rivals or defectors. This conditional mobilization of religious identity does not indicate that Islam drives criminal behaviour. Rather, religious language becomes one of several symbolic resources used to maintain status, regulate behaviour or delegitimize competitors.

These internal dynamics are embedded within broader Eurasian criminal and political ecosystems. Chechen actors in Germany operate within Russian-speaking criminal milieus shaped by the traditional *vorovskoi mir* and by contemporary arrangements between criminal entrepreneurs, business elites and elements of the Russian state.¹⁰⁸ In some instances, Chechen groups function as semi-autonomous partners or subcontracted enforcers within larger post-Soviet networks, valued for their discipline and perceived readiness to use violence. In other cases, individuals with links to Kadyrov-aligned structures occupy liminal spaces where criminal, political and security interests overlap, enabling them to act simultaneously as criminal entrepreneurs and informal intermediaries for Chechen or Russian authorities abroad.¹⁰⁹

This convergence of diasporic, criminal and political authority creates analytical uncertainty for German authorities. It complicates efforts to distinguish between traditional organized crime, transnational criminal collaboration, diaspora surveillance and potential foreign influence.¹¹⁰ At the same time, the ethnic and religious identity of the actors heightens public sensitivities, increasing the

risk of stigmatizing the wider Chechen and Muslim communities. Researchers and NGOs therefore stress the importance of differentiating a relatively small set of criminal actors from the broader diaspora.¹¹¹

In sum, leadership dynamics within Chechen organized crime groups in Germany emerge from a complex interplay of wartime capital, kinship and *teip* networks, symbolic and religious narratives, and embeddedness in Russian-dominated criminal and political hierarchies. These dynamics underline not only the internal logic of the groups but also their entanglement with transnational centres of authority in Grozny and Moscow. Understanding this architecture is essential for analyzing the groups' involvement in German criminal economies, their relationships with other organized crime groups, and the ways in which their activities intersect with political and security structures linked to Chechnya and Russia.

The individuals who fall into the category of de facto authorities are often described by law enforcement and journalistic sources as 'authorities' (*avtoritety*). They rarely engage in street-level criminality, and their influence stems from accumulated capital in several domains. Combat experience during the Russian–Chechen wars holds symbolic weight, particularly where it is associated with known commanders or reputable fighting units. Such wartime biographies, whether fully verifiable or partly reputational, operate as markers of courage, reliability and decisiveness – qualities that translate into criminal leadership roles.¹¹² Seniority within the community, including early arrival, established community roles or long-term mediation between Chechen migrants and German institutions, provides additional authority and access to information.¹¹³ Some reputed leaders claim or are believed to maintain connections to power brokers in Chechnya, including individuals aligned with the Kadyrov regime or embedded in its security apparatus.¹¹⁴ Whether fully substantiated or not, such associations function as symbolic resources: they signal potential protection, facilitate money movements, or imply the capacity to influence events 'back home'.

Timur Dugazaev



Timur Dugazaev in a 2019 interview for Chechnya Today. © Chechnyatoday.com

Timur Dugazaev, a former combat sportsman and boxing promoter formerly residing in the northern German Baltic city of Kiel, has been identified in German media as a prominent supporter of Ramzan Kadyrov and, in some accounts, as a self-declared representative of the Chechen leadership in Germany. Field research indicates that German security authorities monitored him for years due to his visibility in politically loyalist Chechen diaspora networks and his public alignment with the Chechen regime.¹¹⁵

Dugazaev was given asylum and later citizenship in Germany while simultaneously maintaining close relations with Kadyrov, organizing events in the Chechen leader's name. He continued to operate openly

as a supporter of Kadyrov despite benefiting from political refugee status.¹¹⁶ His social media activity further emphasized these ties, including posts praising Kadyrov, messages supportive of Russian and Chechen military actions in Ukraine, and evidence of meetings with senior Chechen officials.¹¹⁷

Reports in German and Russian-language media have linked Dugazaev to Chechen organized crime networks operating in Germany and other parts of Europe. A *Bild* investigation portrays him as a central figure in what it calls the 'Chechen mafia', characterizing him as one of the most influential Chechen actors in the country and noting allegations that individuals in his orbit have engaged in coercion, intimidation and violence against diaspora dissidents.¹¹⁸ Additional reporting says Dugazaev has been publicly associated with figures and settings marked by strong informal authority, hierarchical loyalties and enforcement practices common in Chechen criminal networks.¹¹⁹ These portrayals position him within a constellation of actors whose influence extends into diaspora governance and illicit spheres, reflecting the broader entanglement of regime-aligned intermediaries and organized crime dynamics.

According to information provided by the German Bundestag, Kadyrov awarded Dugazaev the Chechen Republic's highest honour – the Kadyrov Order – with the citation describing him as the 'foreign representative of the head of the Chechen Republic in Europe' and commending him for his efforts in protecting Russian interests in Europe.¹²⁰ Media appearances frequently depict him alongside Kadyrov, other government officials, and MMA fighters associated with the Akhmat Fight Club in Grozny. He has also reportedly admitted to monitoring Chechens in Germany and passing information to the Chechen leadership.¹²¹

In 2020, Dugazaev was sanctioned by the US Treasury under the Global Magnitsky Act – a law enabling targeted sanctions on foreign individuals and entities involved in serious human rights abuses or significant corruption – for acting on behalf of Kadyrov and supporting the Chechen regime in connection with human rights abuses.¹²²

Following intensified scrutiny of pro-Kadyrov figures in Germany after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, several reports indicated that Dugazaev left Germany in early 2022, though the circumstances and his destination are unclear.¹²³

Sajhan Agaev



Sajhan Agaev addresses the 2024 Congress of the People of the Chechen Republic, participating as a delegate and identified as a representative of the Chechen diaspora in Germany. Photo: Screengrab from VK Video, https://vkvideo.ru/video279938622_456244348

A *Tagesschau* report in September 2024 described Sajhan Agaev, legally known as Hussein Agaev, as Kadyrov's new representative in Germany and noted that German security authorities list him as a 'relevant person' – a designation for individuals considered public security risks.¹²⁴ The report quotes his lawyer, who denies that Agaev holds any political role without addressing the allegation that he is Kadyrov's representative in Germany.

Although Agaev presents himself as an apolitical former athlete and businessman, media reporting consistently situates him within a broader environment shaped by networks surrounding the Kadyrov regime, including structures that hold significance for diaspora influence and, in some contexts, for organized crime dynamics.

According to a *Der Spiegel* investigation in December 2025, German security authorities have reportedly shown increased interest in Agaev and view him as Dugazaev's successor, while simultaneously associating him with organized crime structures. The article also raises questions about possible entanglements in espionage-related activities and examines why Agaev, despite his high-level connections to Russia, was granted protection in Germany and not deported. Agaev's lawyer rejected all the allegations, denying any political or criminal involvement by his client.¹²⁵

Agaev lives in Hamburg and is highly visible on social media, frequently portraying himself alongside senior Chechen officials with established positions in Kadyrov's leadership circle. This curated image and the size of his online following contribute to his prominence within segments of the Chechen diaspora in Germany. His appearance at the 2024 Chechen People's Congress, where he praised Kadyrov and was presented as a representative of the diaspora, further underlined his role as a figure capable of shaping community signalling and cohesion.¹²⁶

In addition to these political-symbolic functions, reporting places Agaev in proximity to situations associated with clashes between organized crime groups.¹²⁷ During large-scale violent clashes between Chechen and Arab-origin groups in Berlin in 2020 – incidents viewed by security authorities as manifestations of escalating competition for territorial and economic influence – Agaev and Dugazaev reportedly participated in a mediation meeting led by a so-called 'peace judge'. These clashes occurred amid broader assessments that Chechen criminal groups had expanded their presence in Berlin, displaying high levels of cohesion, external visibility and violence, while seeking influence in protection markets, business takeovers and other illicit activities.

Hamzat Gastamirov (Sheikh Hamzat)



Hamzat Gastamirov, described as a prominent figure in the Chechen underworld. Photo: TikTok

Sheikh Hamzat, legally known as Hamzat Gastamirov, is portrayed in Russian and Azerbaijani-language media as a notable figure in the Chechen criminal milieu. Although the extent of his influence cannot be independently verified, several outlets describe him in terms commonly used for prominent underworld actors.¹²⁸ These reports place him in a transnational context and indicate that he has maintained a visible presence in Europe, including Berlin, though publicly available information provides limited detail on the structure or reach of his activities.



Gastamirov seated at a religious event behind Ramzan Kadyrov. Photo: Screengrab from YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sK776QPsskc>

Media narratives occasionally suggest that Gastamirov had gained recognition in criminal environments before his appearance in European reporting, but the available accounts are inconsistent and unsubstantiated.¹²⁹ References to associations with established criminal figures also appear in these reports, yet they vary widely and cannot be fully corroborated.

Gastamirov came to broader public attention in October 2017, when Dutch authorities arrested him near Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam on allegations involving a forged passport and illegal firearms. According to court-related reporting, investigators confiscated a pistol, a forged Bulgarian passport, bank cards, several mobile phones and other items, while additional weapons – including automatic rifles – were reportedly discovered among the individuals detained with him. Media coverage emphasized that he was travelling with a sizable entourage. He was later released on bail set at €3.6 million, an unusually large amount noted across several reports, and subsequently travelled to Germany.¹³⁰

After this episode, Gastamirov continued to be mentioned in Russian and Azerbaijani-language reporting, often in relation to disputes, reputation and symbolic standing within the broader criminal subculture.¹³¹ His public image is reinforced by the persistent use of the honorific ‘Sheikh’ and by online videos and tributes that depict him in a stylized and elevated manner characteristic of figures associated with the post-Soviet underworld.¹³²

In addition to these portrayals, photographs on social media depict Gastamirov alongside Kadyrov or members of his inner circle. The circulation of these images contributes to his broader symbolic presentation and reinforces the elevated status attributed to him in certain online narratives.

Double lives

It is often difficult to find evidence of the dual roles played by de facto authorities as the leaders of organized crime groups and representatives of Grozny and Moscow. The Berlin LKA 2021 report notes that within the Chechen diaspora, occasional contacts or acquaintances existed between actors in organized crime and state security contexts. However, no individuals were identified as being active in both spheres simultaneously.¹³³

Nonetheless, hybridity is a defining structural feature of key actors in this milieu. Analytical clarity requires acknowledging that command-and-control chains do not terminate in Grozny but extend into central echelons of Russian security institutions, notwithstanding sustained efforts by Moscow power brokers to obscure these connections.

To understand the complex phenomenon of Chechen de facto authorities – and, by extension, key Chechen criminal actors in Germany – it is essential to account for their role in informal para-diplomacy, or regime brokerage, as only through this lens can the political dimension of their position and their strategic use by Russia be adequately understood. Part of this role may involve acting as unofficial representatives of the Kadyrov regime as part of a broader strategy aimed at surveillance, control and the systematic erosion of opposition forces within the diaspora.

This does not imply formal state representation but refers to extra-institutional influence exercised by officially non-state actors whose authority rests on personal, political or reputational ties to power centres in Chechnya and Russia. Their influence derives not from legal mandate but from perceived access, proximity to regime-aligned structures, and the symbolic capital attached to these connections.

Within segments of the North Caucasian diaspora, such actors function as de facto intermediaries between community members and authorities 'back home'. In a diaspora shaped by repression, surveillance and collective punishment, awareness of these ties carries tangible consequences. Even in the absence of explicit threats, the knowledge that certain individuals maintain access to regime-linked networks is sufficient to produce silence, compliance or strategic deference. Authority, in this context, is exercised primarily through anticipatory self-restraint.

Chechen figures positioned at the intersection of criminal networks, community authority and regime-aligned structures frequently have hybrid roles that extend beyond criminal markets. Agaev exemplifies this pattern through his visible community positioning, business activities, and appearances in contexts linked to conflict mediation and security environments. A similar mix characterized the earlier presence of Dugazaev, whose activities in Germany were marked by high visibility, political signalling, and proximity to networks associated with informal authority and enforcement practices. Although no longer active in Germany, Dugazaev's previous prominence, his cultivation of regime-linked loyalties, and even his earlier membership of the Christian Democratic Union, a major German political party, are examples of the strategic adaptability demonstrated within these circles.¹³⁴ By contrast, Gastamirov maintains a notably discreet posture in Germany. Although foreign-language reporting portrays him as a high-status criminal authority with symbolic ties to Kadyrov's circle, his engagement with diaspora networks appears more controlled and selectively expressed than overtly political.

These examples highlight how regime-loyal intermediaries, community-level brokers and actors with reputational capital in criminal milieus often operate in overlapping social spaces. Combat-sports clubs, cultural associations, security enterprises and informal mediation forums can simultaneously function as instruments of community influence, social discipline, and access points to protection markets or illicit revenue flows. In such settings, displays of toughness and associations with prominent underworld figures can be converted into symbolic or political resources. They enable individuals to project authority and decisiveness in ways that resonate with power centres in Grozny and Moscow, while appealing to segments of German political life that valorize hierarchy and assertive rhetoric. De facto authorities' capacity to move between community leadership, enforcement roles and political messaging underscores a key analytical point: these individuals operate as hybrid political-criminal entrepreneurs rather than as actors operating solely within criminal markets.

These dynamics blur the boundaries between organized crime, community authority and informal diplomacy. Chechen de facto authorities do not merely coordinate criminal activity; they mediate disputes, transmit expectations from external power centres and shape behavioural norms in diaspora settings. In this sense, they function as hybrid political-criminal brokers whose activities intersect with, but are not reducible to, conventional organized crime.

Coordinators

Beneath these actors is a stratum of coordinators who connect leadership circles with operational cadres. This group often includes German-speaking, second-generation Chechens or long-settled migrants who navigate German institutions more effectively than older community members. They manage day-to-day logistics, oversee community-embedded extortion or protection schemes, coordinate access to drug markets and negotiate arrangements with non-Chechen criminal groups. Their influence is less formal than functional: they translate higher-level directives into practical action while relaying grievances, opportunities and tensions back up the chain.¹³⁵

Many such intermediaries acquire authority through demonstrated reliability and discretion in everyday community interactions, acting as cultural and linguistic brokers capable of moving between worlds without attracting attention.¹³⁶ Mid-level coordinators are central figures in Chechen organized crime structures in Germany and in some cases can be regarded as trusted enforcers and representatives of their leadership figures. In some cases, coordinators are the sons of senior figures and Chechen de facto authorities; in others, they are long-standing confidants – personal drivers, close aides or individuals bound to the leadership through deeply rooted relationships of trust.

Operational cores

Among Chechen organized crime groups, distinct structural elements are their operational cores. These clusters of men operate partly independently, yet may be linked to coordinators and positioned within the sphere of influence of key leadership figures. Operational cores usually consist of between two and six individuals who act as central facilitators of criminal activity. They plan, organize and partly execute operations, manage logistics, and deploy personnel from the peripheral milieu as needed. They may also cooperate with individuals from other operational cores of the same ethnicity.¹³⁷

It is reasonable to assume that members of these operational cores rely on Chechen de facto authorities to secure the proceeds of their criminal activities – for instance through the transfer of assets abroad, including to Chechnya – or to obtain other essential services, such as mediating after violent clashes with rival criminal groups.

Peripheral actors

Considered in isolation, the Chechen groups' peripheral milieu does not constitute organized crime. In the broader context, however, it is a key component and a personnel reservoir for criminal activity, as well as a growing public safety concern. It consists of a criminal contingent of individual offenders and youth gangs, often local, sometimes ethnically mixed, and increasingly including minors.

At the operational level, Chechen groups rely on foot soldiers and enforcers tasked with violence, intimidation, debt collection and low-level trafficking. These individuals are repeatedly used by operational cores to carry out criminal acts (predominantly violent crimes) – whether to assert dominance, support complex operations or provide manpower for security companies run by higher-ranking individuals.

Recruitment often takes place in settings marked by marginalization and limited socio-economic mobility: prison environments, refugee accommodation centres, youth networks on the margins of Chechen community life, and in MMA and wrestling clubs.¹³⁸ These environments provide social cohesion and opportunities to demonstrate toughness, loyalty and readiness for confrontation – traits that have cultural resonance and align with the functional needs of the networks. These spaces foster tight-knit social relations and provide opportunities to demonstrate valued qualities such as physical competence, loyalty and resilience. Combat sports communities, while not inherently linked to criminal behaviour, function as social arenas where reputations are formed, hierarchies tested and trust networks consolidated.¹³⁹

Only a small fraction of individuals in these settings become involved in organized crime, yet for those who do participation can offer belonging, protection and avenues for upward mobility otherwise perceived as inaccessible.¹⁴⁰ In this way, the peripheral milieu also serves as a source of future operational core members, either through proven ability or family connections.

Drawing on numerous advisory engagements in municipal settings and work with young Chechen offenders in detention, two groups of Chechen boys have emerged as being particularly vulnerable to being drawn into peripheral criminal milieus. The first consists of youths from families in which fathers were either absent or unable to fulfil the roles socially ascribed to them within the community. In these cases, the eldest sons often attempted to fill the vacuum but frequently failed to assume the roles of protector, provider and head of the family, compensating for this failure through the use of violence – often also within the family. In many cases, the mothers of these youths sought assistance from civil society organizations and state institutions in an effort to prevent their sons from slipping into crime. However, language barriers, a limited understanding of the needs and dynamics of these communities, the near absence of Chechen community organizations, as well as stigmatization and targeted recruitment strategies employed by organized crime actors – such as outreach through combat sports – constituted significant obstacles.¹⁴¹

The second group comprises youths from families in which criminal behaviour has already been normalized, including fathers, uncles or older brothers with criminal records and social environments in which offending is largely accepted.

Individuals from both groups are particularly susceptible to recruitment by organized crime structures offering promises of quick financial gain, status, recognition and a sense of belonging, while presenting their internal rules as a traditional value system. However, interviews with incarcerated Chechen offenders clearly indicated that most had no substantive historical, cultural or religious knowledge. The value code they described as authentically Chechen instead constituted a hybrid of various subcultural influences, strongly driven by materialism and characterized by several justifications for the use of violence against outsiders for purposes of enrichment and power accumulation.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Chechen organized crime groups in Germany emerge from a combination of diaspora dynamics, historical legacies and embeddedness within wider Russian-speaking, post-Soviet criminal ecosystems. These networks do not operate as isolated ethnic formations but function as cohesive, mobile and adaptive structures that, in some cases, intersect with political or security-linked actors in Chechnya and Russia.

Effective policy responses must therefore address the domestic manifestations of these networks across different criminal economies; the transnational connections that shape their organizational behaviour and resilience; and ensure coordinated action across research, law enforcement, social policy and judicial practice, with sustained attention to proportionality and the protection of the wider diaspora from undue suspicion.

Policy must balance security concerns with social cohesion. Strengthening investigative capacity and early-warning mechanisms is essential, but so too is investing in community-level trust, targeted prevention and institutional literacy. By adopting an approach that is analytically precise, operationally coordinated and socially responsible, German authorities will be better positioned to manage the evolving risks associated with Chechen organized crime groups while safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of the broader Chechen population.

The following recommendations aim to strengthen European and Germany's institutional capacity to understand, monitor and respond to Chechen organized crime groups in a proportionate and evidence-based manner.

Prioritize lawful and proportionate removal of key actors

Where legally permissible and consistent with constitutional safeguards, priority should be given to the removal or deportation of individuals who occupy leadership roles or who can be identified as mid-level coordinators or members of an operational core. Because many Chechen organized crime actors derive authority from external patronage or transnational ties, disrupting these nodes can have disproportionate preventive effects – provided such measures strictly adhere to non-refoulement obligations and proportionality requirements.

Establish cross-state investigative task forces

The mobility and decentralized network structures characteristic of post-Soviet criminal milieus mean single-state investigations are often insufficient. Joint investigative platforms would facilitate intelligence sharing, reduce fragmentation and improve the ability to map network linkages that extend across federal states and into neighbouring countries.

Expand intelligence-led monitoring of structural and transnational developments

Chechen organized crime groups should be analyzed within the wider context of Russian-speaking criminal ecosystems and, where relevant, possible influence from state or semi-state actors in Chechnya or Russia. Intelligence-led approaches should focus on early detection of structural shifts, cross-border flows, and indicators of political or security-linked interference.

Develop targeted prevention and social integration programmes

Many individuals vulnerable to recruitment are young men in precarious social positions, including those navigating migration stress, limited opportunities or community marginalization. Tailored prevention programmes – mentorship, education, mental health support and structured reintegration pathways – can reduce recruitment risks and help create alternatives to the social capital offered by criminal networks.

Enhance institutional awareness and specialized training

Courts, prosecutors, police leadership, municipal authorities and sports associations should be trained to recognize the organizational patterns, intimidation practices and post-Soviet cultural codes characteristic of these groups. Greater institutional literacy will improve risk assessment, enhance the handling of intimidation cases, and help avoid underreaction and overgeneralization towards the broader Chechen diaspora.

Strengthen research and analytical monitoring capacities

Federal and state authorities should invest in sustained analytical work on Chechen and other post-Soviet organized crime groups, including their recruitment patterns, cross-border linkages and interactions with Russian-speaking criminal structures. Deepened analytical capacity will improve situational awareness and ensure that policy decisions are grounded in an accurate understanding of how these networks operate within the broader post-Soviet criminal landscape in Germany and other European countries.



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