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**The Authoritarian Shortcut:  
Russia's Unorthodox Population-Centric  
Counterinsurgency during the Second Chechen War  
and Strategic Implications for Western Military  
Planners.**

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## **Abstract**

For authoritarian incumbents, waging counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare is often a wantonly cruel, yet remarkably successful business. While previous research has shown that authoritarian regimes employ a wide array of kinetic and non-kinetic techniques to suppress insurgency, the authoritarian model of COIN warfare remains heavily under-theorised. This study proposes a novel theoretical framework expounding the logic of authoritarian COIN operations and empirically examines its mechanisms by looking at Russia's COIN experience during the Second Chechen War. In investigating the strategic rationale underpinning the authoritarian toolkit of COIN measures, this research aims at establishing whether authoritarian counterinsurgents can effectively deliver mission success. Drawing upon a large pool of secondary sources and primary data collected during face-to-face interviews with eyewitnesses of the Chechen conflict, this study demonstrates that Moscow prevailed against the rebels by resorting to a sophisticated combination of heavy-handed intelligence, information, military, political, and economic measures. Although victimising civilian populations in wartime constitutes an ethically controversial practice, Russia's COIN experience demonstrates to a Western audience that the calibrated use of coercion can contribute to minimise and deter pro-insurgent popular mobilisation. Future research is warranted to determine whether a combination of coercive and persuasive measures could assist democratic states in further improving their strategic blueprints for COIN warfare.

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“We used tough methods to show what’s wrong and what’s right. Against those who didn’t understand, we led a tough and even cruel struggle.”

—Ramzan Kadyrov, Head of the Chechen Republic  
(quoted in Stack 2008)

## 1 Introduction

According to Western military doctrines, promoting good governance and winning the population’s support constitute the hallmarks of a perfect counterinsurgency (COIN): “dollars and ballots may have more important effects than bombs and bullets” (U.S. Gov. 2014: 7-2). Yet, this “infallible” theory of COIN warfare centred on minimising the use of force and creating a secure environment for the population has often failed to deliver impressive results. For instance, the peace agreement signed on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2020, between the United States (U.S.) and the Afghan Taliban represents the latest attempt of a fatigued nation to put an end to America’s longest war. While the U.S. was “seizing the best opportunity for peace” by striking a deal with an insurgency that it has been unsuccessfully fighting for over 18 years, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was pursuing, with the support of his foreign allies, an effective campaign of indiscriminate bombing against the last territories still controlled by rebel forces (U.S. Gov 2020; McKernan 2020). On his way to success in Syria’s inhumane civil war, Assad followed a strategic blueprint for COIN operations that could not be more inimical to the one proposed in Western military textbooks: the regime imposed starvation sieges on insurgent-controlled areas, tortured and blackmailed people to collect intelligence, and allegedly used chemical weapons to spread death and havoc amongst the population living under the opponent’s rule (Hjelmgaard & Shesgreen 2020; Martínez & Eng 2018).

How is it possible for an incumbent to suppress a rebellion in spite of—or thanks to—its complete disregard for the most fundamental tenets of COIN warfare? If prevailing against insurgency is contingent upon the strict adherence to the guidelines advanced in democratic military doctrines, then it is hard to explain the trail of successes achieved by authoritarian counterinsurgents (Zhukov 2008, 2011). In an effort to shed light on the heavily under-researched authoritarian model, this study advances and tests “the authoritarian shortcut”—a novel theoretical framework expounding the logic underpinning the coercion-intensive COIN blueprints developed by authoritarian regimes. Drawing upon an in-depth analysis of the tenets underpinning

Western COIN doctrines, this study finds that the authoritarian shortcut diverges from the democratic model in the completion of intelligence, information, military, political, and economic activities. In contrast to their democratic counterparts, authoritarian regimes terrorise the population to gather intelligence, disseminate propaganda to dehumanise the insurgents, victimise civilians to deter non-compliance, co-opt local elites to engender legitimacy, and weaponize economic incentives to dissuade pro-insurgent activity. By circumventing the restrictions on the use of force and altering the complex procedural requirements advanced in Western COIN manuals, the authoritarian shortcut enables non-democratic states to capitalise on their military prowess to quash insurgency and seize control over the local population. In applying the authoritarian shortcut's mechanisms to the COIN operations performed by Russia during the Second Chechen War, the study demonstrates that authoritarian counterinsurgents can deliver mission success *despite* their deviation from the strategic guidelines utilised by democratic states.

This study contributes to the literature on COIN operations under several aspects. First, the authoritarian shortcut explicitly roots the authoritarian model in the wider population-centric COIN paradigm. In doing so, the study complements the work carried out by Byman (2016) and Ucko (2016) on the authoritarian toolkit of COIN measures by expounding how authoritarian incumbents plan intelligence, psychological, military, political, and economic activities according to a precise strategic rationale. Second, the authoritarian shortcut challenges the conventional view of civilian victimisation as a fundamentally counter-productive strategy of warfare (Kalyvas 2004; Hultquist 2017; Pampinella 2015). In authoritarian COIN operations, not only the incumbent selectively targets insurgents and civilian supporters to deter pro-insurgent collective action, but also recurs to randomised attacks in the early stages of the COIN effort to break the population's will of resistance and rapidly seize territorial control over rebel-held areas. As with the case of Russia in Chechnya, the highly rationalised use of civilian victimisation allowed the incumbent to rapidly dismantle the insurgency's support network and deter the population from engaging in further pro-insurgent activity. Third, empirically, this study contributes to the literature on the Second Chechen War by drawing its findings upon an extensive overview of secondary sources and primary data generated during interviews carried out with several Chechen civilians and two former insurgents. As the population constitutes the "centre of gravity" of population-centric COIN operations (U.S. Gov. 2014a: 7-6),

evaluating the outcomes of these military endeavours requires an in-depth understanding of the population's attitudes towards the authority (Taarnby 2013). Lastly, this study distils from the analysis of the Chechen case a list of five takeaways for Western military planners interested in improving their blueprints for COIN warfare. In looking at the experience of authoritarian counterinsurgents to propose new solutions for the problems faced by democratic states, this study contends that considering the authoritarian paradigm as inadequate for imparting lessons to Western practitioners constitutes an assumption with no validity.

The remainder of this study proceeds as follows. After introducing the key traits of (counter)insurgency warfare, Chapter 2 provides a detailed overview of the ongoing debate on democratic and authoritarian approaches to COIN warfare, focusing on the under-researched authoritarian paradigm to identify the gap addressed in this study. Chapter 3 theoretically outlines the authoritarian shortcut's mechanisms and provides the metrics necessary to assess the degree of effectiveness achieved by incumbents waging population-centric COIN warfare. The methodological aspects of this research, as well as the limitations of this study, are discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, the authoritarian shortcut is applied to the COIN operations performed by Russia during the Second Chechen War. Drawing upon the parameters of success provided in the theoretical sections, the empirical chapter critically evaluates the results achieved by Moscow in Chechnya and provides several lessons learned for democratic counterinsurgents. The concluding chapter summarises the study's main findings and identifies several implications for scholars of strategic studies and practitioners of COIN warfare.

## **2 Literature Review:**

### **Unravelling the Population-Centric Counterinsurgency Knot**

#### ***2.1 Introduction to Insurgency and Counterinsurgency Warfare***

In the field manuals issued to Western soldiers deployed in theatres of asymmetric warfare, insurgency is defined as “an organised, violent and politically motivated activity conducted by non-state actors, sustained over a protracted period of time,” and performed to “seize, nullify, or challenge the political control of a region” (Australian

Gov. 2008: xx; U.S. Gov. 2018a: GL-5). Because the primary objective of rebel movements is to rule over a territory by overthrowing its established authority, insurgent warfare can be understood as “a process of alternative state-building” in which violence is utilised to catalyse the government’s downfall and facilitate the establishment of a clandestine, insurgent-controlled political entity (Jones 2017: 8; Carter 2016: 136). This conceptualisation of insurgent warfare is echoed in the works of some of the most influential insurgent thinkers. Whilst Che Guevara contends that protracting insurgent violence deprives the government of its credibility as a resilient, capable authority (Guevara 1964: 2; Payne 2011: 126), revolutionary leader Marighella argues that “the rebellion of the urban guerrilla...is the best way of ensuring public support for the cause” (1971: 40). All successful insurgencies, such as the Vietcong insurgency in South Vietnam (1954-1976) and the Mujahideen insurgency in Afghanistan (1978-1992), realised that “people are the lifeblood of rebellion” and systematically incited the population to defy the government in the prospect of regime change (Jardine 2012: 264). To confront, repress, and defeat insurgency, states perfected a vast selection of techniques known as Counterinsurgency (COIN) strategies.

According to the U.S. Department of Defence (DoD), COIN warfare can be defined as “comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency” (U.S. Gov. 2019: 55). As the terminological broadness of this definition suggests, COIN constitutes an umbrella term for a wider spectrum of procedures that states utilise to suppress and countervail rebellion. To coherently select from this list of techniques their preferred strategic options, counterinsurgents dispose of two main philosophies that can provide guidance during the planification and execution of COIN operations, conventionally known in military circles as the enemy-centric and population-centric paradigms.

The leading thesis of the enemy-centric approach as described by population-centric sceptics such as Luttwak (2007), Collier (2010), and Gentile (2010; 2013a) is that COIN warfare abides by the same laws and principles modulating conventional warfare. Enemy-centric subscribers maintain that kinetically based strategies aimed at annihilating the enemy’s fighting force can permanently incapacitate the insurgency and prevent local grassroots uprisings from turning into full-scale national rebellions (Plakoudas 2015: 132). Despite military strategists frequently resuming to enemy-centric approaches when combat units are confronted by large enemy forces (Springer



2012), contemporary counterinsurgents largely abandoned enemy-centric notions in favour of more versatile population-centric dogmas.

The fundamental presupposition of the population-centric paradigm is the dismissal of the Clausewitzian axiom considering “the destruction of the enemy’s physical force” as the linchpin for success (Clausewitz 1984: 71). Because the population constitutes the “centre of gravity” from which insurgents derive their moral and physical strength, population-centric promoters theorise that insurgent groups will remain undefeated, regardless of the amount of casualties suffered, as long as they extract from the population enough resources and manpower to keep fighting against the government (U.S. Gov. 2014a: 7-6; Mansoor & Ulrich 2007: 21). Instead of advocating for killing the enemy at any cost, population-centric doctrines attest that re-establishing the government’s exclusive control over the population asphyxiates the rebellion and severs the insurgents from their principal lifelines (Costa 2006: 7; Shy & Collier 1986: 820). Although these conceptual foundations guide the vast majority of contemporary COIN operations, the composition of a given military toolkit is intrinsically associated with the regime type of its user, with the consequence that COIN warfare cannot be fully grasped without taking into account the political nature of the states participating in the military effort.

## ***2.2 Democratic and Authoritarian Approaches to Counterinsurgency Warfare***

The notion that regime type influences the conduct of warfare is firmly entrenched in the COIN literature. Acknowledging that different systems of governance influence the way in which states perform combat operations, studies conducted on national military practices underscored that democratic and authoritarian regimes bred two contrasting strategic variants of COIN warfare (Engelhardt 1992; Lyall 2010a).

According to the democratic model, during periods of social unrest the population falls prey of armed movements that subvert the public space to undermine the government and legitimise anti-incumbent political narratives (Posen 1993). Because insurgents exacerbate social grievances to rally local supporters (CIA 2012: 2), democratic COIN guidelines assert that alleviating the population’s discontent by implementing socio-economic paternalistic measures interrupts the cycle of violence and facilitates the restoration of legitimacy for the established authority (U.S. Gov. 2018a: 1-3). Drawing upon the experience of the British Empire in its overseas

territories (Ucko 2019; Dixon 2009), democratic counterinsurgents maintain that prevailing against insurgency requires “shifting popular attitudes (and) sympathies... away from the insurgents and towards the government” (Findley and Young 2007: 381). Referred to by Western practitioners as the battle for the population’s “hearts and minds,” the struggle for acquiring the population’s enthusiastic support constitutes the essence of a COIN endeavour focused on convincing people that “their best interests are served by COIN success...and that resisting is pointless” (U.S. Gov. 2006: A-5).

If establishing security for the civilian populace is “the cornerstone” of the democratic paradigm (Ibid: 1-23), the extensive use of coercive measures constitutes the centrepiece of the authoritarian approach. Instead of attempting to debilitate the insurgency by winning over the population’s favour, authoritarian counterinsurgents consider local communities as military targets and maintain that cowing people into submission accelerates the attainment of territorial control at the expense of the rebels’ ability to garner popular support (Reis & Oliveira 2012: 92). Best interpreted by the literature framing individuals as rational economic actors (Merari 1993; Waldron 2004; Kalyvas 2004), this strategic approach entails the usage of coercive measures to deter people from supporting the insurgents and raise to an unacceptable level the costs of engaging in anti-incumbent activity (Long 2006). As remarked by Luttwak (2007), authoritarian counterinsurgents discard the democratic fixation for winning hearts and minds as a “military malpractice” and, rather than securing the population’s wholehearted support, utilise the regime’s repressive apparatus to instil amongst the population the fear of the government’s draconian retribution.

Although these contrasting strategic procedures attest that democratic and authoritarian regimes developed two mutually incompatible approaches to COIN warfare, a minority of commentators problematised this dichotomy and, on the basis of historical data, argued that democratic counterinsurgents have only seldomly refrained from utilising repression and exemplary punishments against civilian populations. According to this scholarship, considering the COIN experience of Western nations as a kinder, gentler warfare is nothing more than a “strategic illusion” resting on false premises and superficial narratives of military effectiveness (Etzioni 2015). In their revisionist work carried out on the British COIN in Malaya, French (2011) and Miller (2012) argued that, behind a rhetorical façade centred on winning “hearts and minds,” this ideal-type of democratic COIN was actually characterised by the use of coercive practices such as mass arrests, torture, forcible population resettlements, and food

denial operations. Following this revisionist agenda, Gurman sustained that the U.S. troops deployed in South Vietnam resorted to similar repressive techniques, claiming that the hearts and minds propagandistic narrative concealed a “schizophrenic” COIN characterised by the “tendency for the carrot to become a stick” (2013: 160).

Despite these studies underscoring that the democratic model’s theoretical foundations were extrapolated out of “mythologised” interpretations of the past, such accounts do not deny that that lessons learned from misdirected narratives ended up creating a contemporary repertoire of “gentler” COIN practices (Porch 2011). This recent, but enduring shift from coercive to concessive COIN customs is itself criticised by researchers contending that the embrace of “distinctively liberal, humanistic values” is atrophying the liberal democracies’ ability to effectively wage warfare (Cohen 2010: 75). Constrained by what Gentile (2010) defined as a strategic “straitjacket,” contemporary democracies have discarded coercion as incompatible with the moral requirements of military operations that consider the “human terrain” as the decisive operational battleground.

The challenges advanced against the historical accuracy of narratives proposed by hearts and minds advocates stimulated a much-needed re-conceptualisation of the Western ways of warfare. Nevertheless, this literature’s arguments necessarily rest upon the acceptance that nowadays Western counterinsurgents depend on strategic formulas radically different from the modalities chosen by authoritarian regimes, which were never forced into wearing a straitjacket designed to make COIN a more “humane” endeavour. By confirming that liberal democracies largely abandoned coercion-intensive approaches to COIN, these works indicate that considering democratic and authoritarian strategies as diametrically opposed and mutually incompatible does not raise the risk of incurring into “false dichotomy” narratives. On the contrary, this project advances the argument that failing to categorise different modalities of COIN warfare according to the regime type of a given COIN force would oversimplify reality and misinterpret the strategic approaches that Western democracies have been developing and perfecting throughout almost two decades of uninterrupted COIN operations.

### ***2.3 The Authoritarian Model as an Under-Researched Paradigm***

Once relegated to the realm of military history, the study of COIN warfare experienced an intense intellectual renaissance following the Western democracies’ involvement in

the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq (Hussain 2010). Captivated by the opportunity of devising and refining the doctrinal foundations of a 21<sup>st</sup> century model of asymmetric warfare, the scholarship oriented its efforts towards outlining sets of “best COIN practices” customised for Western counterinsurgents, sentencing the authoritarian model to receive marginal scrutiny and being profiled as a checklist of “bad” COIN procedures (Sepp 2005; Paul & Clarke 2016: 3). From an overview of the available literature, it is possible to organise the debate on democratic and authoritarian approaches around two schools of thought.

Exponents of the “distinctively liberal” Western narrative consider the democratic COIN toolkit as inherently superior to its ruthless authoritarian counterpart. In line with Nagl’s (2007) conceptualisation of the “American way of COIN” as the most effective pathway to confront insurgency, Findley and Young asserted that “the hearts and minds strategy consistently outperforms the (authoritarian) attrition approach” (2007: 379). Echoing Abrahms’s (2007) article discussing the effectiveness of democratic COIN operations, Patterson further underscored that brutalising the civilian population is tantamount to a self-defeating endeavour, and that democratic counterinsurgents should rather enact schemes aimed at winning the local population’s outright support (2016: 23). Shared by the majority of the scholarship expounding the logic of population-centric COIN measures, this intellectual viewpoint dismisses as detrimental any strategic approach conflicting with the ones endorsed by Western doctrines.

In contrast with these observers, critics of the democratic approach to COIN, such as Luttwak (2007), Porch (2013), and Gentile (2013b), maintain that Western military circles are suffering from a severe case of “strategic myopia.” In sustaining that self-inflicted restrictions on the use of force and the obsession for securing the population’s approval are depleting the range of strategic options available to democratic counterinsurgents, these authors warn Western practitioners against being bogged down in strategic precepts that display no historical record of success (Gentile 2013b: 36). Despite the criticism advanced against the democratic model, this pool of researchers has equally failed to scrutinise the authoritarian toolkit, plausibly because the COIN experience of authoritarian regimes is assumed as inappropriate to generate useful lessons for democratic counterinsurgents (Miroiu 2015: 179).

Although the vast majority of the scholarship has turned a blind eye to the study of authoritarian COIN practices, a handful of researchers recently started cataloguing

the strategic repertoire utilised by authoritarian regimes to quell rebellions and crush insurgents. This emerging interest for the authoritarian approach was initially stimulated by provocative works conducted on the alleged (in)effectiveness of democratic COIN operations, of which Merom's monograph titled "*How Democracies Lose Small Wars*" constitutes the most vivid example. Tracing the causes of COIN failure in societal processes occurring in the counterinsurgent's domestic political realm, Merom concluded that, because "brutality pays" when countering guerrillas, morally driven democracies are ill-positioned to fight intrinsically vicious asymmetric conflicts (2003: 47).

Elaborating on Merom's arguments and utilising his theorisations to dissect the COIN experience of several authoritarian regimes, Zhukov (2007; 2011) produced the first publications in which the authoritarian model featured as a standalone paradigm in the field of COIN studies. While Zhukov pioneered this stream of research by introducing a baseline conceptualisation of authoritarian COIN, his studies only marginally discussed non-kinetic means, with the consequence that several strategic components of authoritarian COIN efforts remained largely unexplored. Substantial progress in the research conducted on the authoritarian paradigm occurred only recently, when Byman and Ucko submitted in 2016 the two most complete, up-to-date studies centred on critically analysing the toolkit of COIN techniques developed by non-democratic regimes. In juxtaposing the repertoire of authoritarian measures with the theories of COIN warfare as formulated by Western strategists, Byman and Ucko expanded Zhukov's interpretation of the authoritarian model, demonstrating that these COIN endeavours entail much more than "just" sheer force and blind terror.

Despite these studies constituting a major breakthrough for the scholarship interested in expounding the logic of unconventional COIN strategies, both authors failed to realise that authoritarian counterinsurgents follow precise precepts of COIN warfare attributable to population-centric COIN guidelines. Lacking this theoretical framework necessary to organise and process empirical evidence, Byman and Ucko systematised their analyses without considering that waging COIN warfare requires authoritarian incumbents to coordinate and simultaneously perform intelligence, psychological, security, political, and economic operations (Cox & Brusino 2011). Deprived of a rigorous conceptual model of population-centric COIN on which to delineate the authoritarian paradigm, the two studies ended up proposing unbalanced accounts, with Byman's work excessively focused on illustrating the applications of

large-scale coercion and Ucko's piece presenting a largely unstructured scrutiny of post-conflict stabilisation efforts. Building on Byman and Ucko's work, the present study enriches this under-developed research area by rooting the authoritarian model in the wider-encompassing population-centric paradigm. In attempting to fill this gap in the COIN literature, this study advances and empirically tests a novel theoretical framework for the analysis of authoritarian COIN campaigns.

### **3 The Authoritarian Shortcut: A Theoretical Framework**

#### ***3.1 Introduction to the Authoritarian Shortcut***

According to the proponents of the democratic model, authoritarian regimes are destined to remain second-class counterinsurgents. Yet, quantitative studies carried out on the duration and effectiveness of COIN campaigns found no evidence in support of the claim that authoritarian ventures are flawed by design. Utilising a dataset of 168 asymmetric wars fought between 1945 and 2005, Lyall found no statistically significant differences between the average duration of authoritarian and democratic COIN operations, further specifying that considering authoritarian regimes as doomed to suffer "higher and swifter rates of defeat" constitutes a fallacious assumption unsupported by reliable evidence (2010a: 185-188). These conclusions were confirmed by Zhukov, who elaborated on Lyall's dataset and discovered that authoritarian incumbents defeated rebel movements in 42.8% of the COIN engagements analysed, in comparison to the 29.7% success rate scored by their democratic counterparts (2010: 12). Despite other authors pointed out that statistical differences become "irrelevant" when controlled for macro-historical, political, and environmental variables, these figures indicate that autocracies might be as proficient as democracies at waging COIN warfare (Getmansky 2013: 726; Johnston & Urlacher 2011).

Such findings result puzzling because, according to Western COIN manuals, the unlawful use of excessive force, the deliberate targeting of innocent civilians, and the uninterest in building bottom-up legitimacy should constitute the perfect recipe for an irreversible mission failure (U.S. Gov. 2006: 1-29). The incongruences between the "orthodox" theory of COIN warfare as advanced in Western military doctrines and the evidence emerging from the military experience of non-democratic states suggest that

authoritarian counterinsurgents follow an alternative, but nonetheless equally valid pathway to success. Developed to bypass the complex operational and moral constraints regulating the conduct of democratic military engagements, this “unorthodox” variant of population-centric COIN allows authoritarian regimes to fully exploit their coercive potential to suppress insurgency and cow the population into passive acquiescence. In other words, authoritarian counterinsurgents realised that the orthodox model of population-centric COIN contains procedural elements, attributable to democratic practices, that can be circumvented, altered, or removed with little to no repercussions for the overall military effort.

Because this variant of population-centric COIN is built upon the premise that certain democratic guidelines are either excessively restrictive or unnecessarily intricate, the authoritarian model can be visualised as following a “shortcut” pattern in its execution. In proposing this original conceptualisation of the authoritarian paradigm, this study re-elaborates the work introduced by David Galula (2006) in “*Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*,” by many considered as the volume that laid the theoretical foundations of population-centric COIN engagements (Cohen 2012). In cataloguing the sets of tactics that insurgents employ to wage warfare, Galula identified two principal strategic outlooks, defined as “orthodox” and “shortcut” variants, and demonstrated that the “shortcut” configuration sidesteps several “orthodox” practices in its effort to achieve victory (2006: 30-41). In transplanting Galula’s interpretation of the pathways of rebel warfare to the study of COIN operations, this study introduces the “authoritarian shortcut” to population-centric COIN warfare and outlines its principal mechanisms.

As the authoritarian shortcut rests upon population-centric COIN tenets, its principal features must be identified in relation to the fundamental components underpinning population-centric blueprints. To provide solid conceptual foundations to the authoritarian shortcut, this study adopts the theoretical framework proposed by former U.S. Counterinsurgency advisor David Kilcullen (2006) in the article “Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency.” Synthesized from the “eight steps model” of population-centric COIN operations proposed by Galula in “*Counterinsurgency Warfare*” (2006: 75), Kilcullen’s framework holds paramount importance in the field of COIN studies, as its design provided the basis on which the “*Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24*” (*FM 3-24*) issued to the U.S. Armed Forces was formulated upon (U.S. Gov. 2006: 5-3). As Figure 1 shows, Kilcullen identified three equally important pillars of

population-centric COIN that, alongside intelligence and information operations, constitute the lines of action for achieving mission success, interpreted by the author as the marginalisation of the insurgents and the attainment of uncontested ascendancy over the local population.

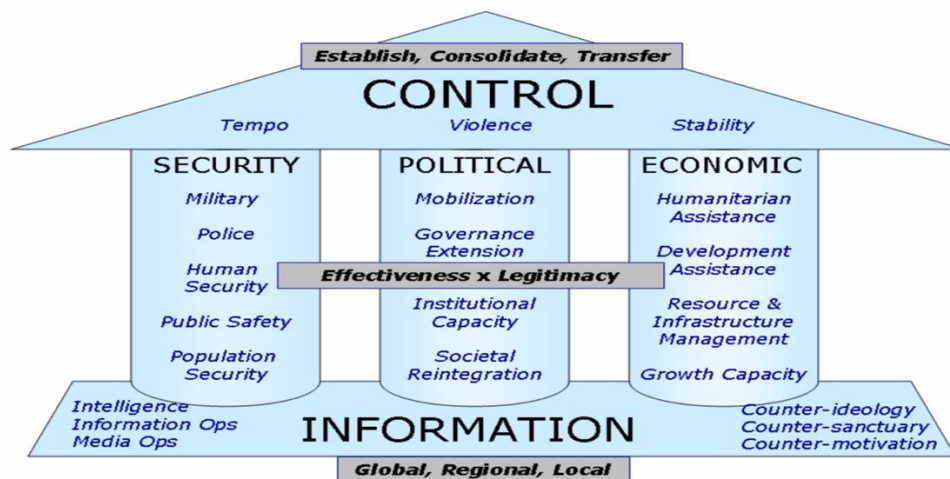


Figure 1: Kilcullen's Counterinsurgency framework (2006)

Although this framework was designed to accommodate Western military blueprints, its main precepts can be equally applied to the authoritarian shortcut, as an additional proof of the fact that the two models find common theoretical ground. Just as democratic counterinsurgents rely on the guidelines identified by Kilcullen to plan cohesive COIN operations, so the authoritarian shortcut anchors its guiding principles in the pillars constituting the foundations of population-centric COIN endeavours. Following Kilcullen's conceptual structure, the rest of this chapter outlines the intelligence, information, military, political, and economic mechanisms on which the authoritarian shortcut rests upon. To enhance the intelligibility and analytical rigour of this theoretical chapter, each section builds upon the dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian models of COIN warfare as described earlier in this study. The rationale supporting this choice is twofold. First, delineating a shortcut pattern of COIN warfare without comparing and contrasting it with its orthodox counterpart would fail to highlight the principal differences between the two models. Deprived of a solid benchmark on which to depict its unique features, the authoritarian shortcut would not emerge as a standalone model of population-centric COIN, and this research would incur in the same methodological pitfalls affecting previous studies conducted on the



authoritarian paradigm. Second, selecting a comparative methodological approach allows this chapter to evidence that, even though the orthodox and shortcut patterns exhibit incompatible procedural traits, both democratic and authoritarian regimes derived their strategic approaches from commonly shared theoretical foundations. By structuring the analysis around a clear-cut differentiation between democratic and authoritarian strategic outlooks, this chapter provides additional confirmation to Byman's intuition that democratic states articulated "a model for counterinsurgency, but they should not believe it is the *only* model for success" (2016: 87).

### ***3.2 Support Base: Intelligence Penetration and Information Operations***

At its essence, COIN warfare is an intelligence-driven endeavour in which the information submitted by indigenous informants constitutes a war-winning asset (U.S. Gov. 2019: 115). Because guerrilla warfare is waged "amongst the people" (Smith 2007), counterinsurgents discriminate rebel combatants from innocent civilians only when local human sources (HUMINT) submit information on the rebels' identities and whereabouts (Jackson 2007: 74). Although both democratic and authoritarian counterinsurgents consider the collection of reliable intelligence as their "absolute highest priority" (Smith 2006), their intelligence-gathering methods diverge according to their perception of the population as either a partner to coax or a target to strike.

According to the democratic paradigm, high-quality HUMINT is retrieved only when counterinsurgents protect their informants from the rebels' violent retaliation. Underscored by scholars such as Nagl (2005), Flynn (2010), Duyvesteyn (2011), and Spear (2018), this "hearts and minds" template suggests that people voluntarily collaborate with the incumbent only when persuaded that the rebels have been permanently removed from a given locality. This principle of action directly reflects Galula's understanding of intelligence operations as successful only when counterinsurgents protect the residents of an area affected by insurgent violence, as "the population will not talk unless it feels safe, and it does not feel safe until the insurgents' power has been broken" (2006: 50). Nevertheless, achieving this objective requires the consolidation of trust-networks with the population and the continuous provision of physical security to local communities, both exhausting activities that produce noticeable results predominantly on a long-term basis (González 2018; Lamb et al. 2013).

While democratic counterinsurgents strive to forge mutual interdependencies with local informants as a way to detect and neutralise irreconcilable rebels, authoritarian regimes resort to their coercive potential to overcome conditions of “information starvation” and gather the intelligence required for the COIN effort (Lyll & Wilson 2009: 75). One of the most comprehensive analyses of the authoritarian approach to intelligence penetration has been proposed by Byman, who observed that popular goodwill is only one of the possible ways to generate HUMINT. In accordance with Blank’s (2016) analysis of the Soviet Union’s experience against the 1940s’ borderlands insurgencies and with Miroiu’s (2010) outline of the Romanian government’s counter-guerrilla practices during the Communist period, Byman demonstrated that “blackmail, vendettas, bribes, and other less savoury forms” of deep intelligence penetration can produce abundant streams of high-quality information (2016: 76). This viewpoint reasons with the literature exploring the *modus operandi* of non-democratic intelligence agencies. Elaborating on Arendt’s commentary of Nazi Germany’s repressive secret services (1962), Ucko (2016: 46) confirmed that authoritarian regimes frequently set up “all-seeing, all-hearing” police apparatuses to swiftly detect and wipe out incipient insurgent activity. By weaponizing fear against the population, authoritarian counterinsurgents bypass the operational restrictions imposed by democratic regimes on their intelligence services without jeopardising the collection of reliable HUMINT. In addition to coercive intelligence techniques, the authoritarian shortcut avails of Information Operations (IO) to seize control over the population and deprive the rebels of active popular support.

Defined by the DoD as the integrated deployment of “information-related capabilities...to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries,” IO are particularly suited to sabotage the insurgents’ propaganda and promote pro-government political narratives (U.S. Gov. 2014b: Glossary-3). As with intelligence penetration, the nature of the counterinsurgent’s political regime markedly affects the planification and execution of IO.

From a democratic standpoint, IO constitute a “soft power” instrument that counterinsurgents utilise to promote pro-incumbent political narratives “through attraction and persuasion rather than (with) threats of coercion” (Joseph 2016: 2; Nye 2017: 1). As specified in the COIN guidelines written by Generals McChrystal and Petraeus for the Coalition troops deployed in Afghanistan, turning the population’s perceptions “from fear and uncertainty to trust and confidence” requires the

counterinsurgent to “stay true to his (democratic) values” of compassion and empathy when performing COIN operations (NATO 2010a: 4; NATO 2010b: 3). Because democratic soldiers are forbidden from engaging in unlawful or morally unacceptable activities as a way to discredit the enemy’s propaganda, the orthodox pattern of COIN warfare can be construed as following a “qualitative approach” to IO. As Armistead underscored in his analysis of the IO performed by the U.S. forces in Yugoslavia, democratic counterinsurgents put their credibility “on the line” when disseminating messages centred on values of compassion, peace, and cooperation, which would sound meaningless to the population if the COIN force would not abide by strict behavioural and ethical prescriptions (2004: 101).

Although the mainstream scholarship, agreeing with Armistead, considers IO narratives informed by hearts and minds precepts as excellent force multipliers (U.S. Gov. 2009a: C-7; Roca 2008: 34), qualitative IO can give rise to significant backlashes if the counterinsurgent fails to honour the promises made to the population (Collings & Rohozinski 2005: ix). This potential drawback does not affect the authoritarian IO formula, which departs from the democratic interpretation of IO as a painless war instrument to embrace a strategic approach that Van Herpen defined as “hard power in a velvet glove” (2016: 40). Conceptualising IO as an extension of military might, authoritarian counterinsurgents expose the population to aggressive propaganda campaigns designed to suffocate the rebels’ political machine and depict the insurgents as the sole actor responsible for the country’s descent into lawlessness (Copeland and Potter 2008). As demonstrated by Robinson (2010) in his analysis of the Soviet IO in Afghanistan and by Thornton (2015) in his scrutiny of Russia’s information warfare in Ukraine, authoritarian regimes can proficiently employ their massive propaganda networks to asphyxiate the enemy’s mass-media infrastructure and saturate the operative environment with pro-government indoctrination material. Distinctive of the shortcut pattern, this “quantitative approach” to IO circumvents the democratic planning’s complexity by bombarding the population with aggressive, brainwashing messages. Applied in concert with well-coordinated military, political, and economic measures, aggressive intelligence techniques and invasive IO provide a powerful support base on which the authoritarian shortcut rests upon.

### *3.3 First Pillar: Use of Force*

Of the many axioms utilised by the *FM 3-24* to describe the fundamentals of population-centric COIN warfare, prominent is the one regulating the use of lethal force against the rebels and their subterranean network of civilian supporters. Incorporating the British COIN principle of “minimum necessary force” (U.K. Gov. 2009: 3-13), the latest U.S. COIN doctrine contends that “the more force is used, the less effective it is” (U.S. Gov. 2014a: 7-2). The strategic significance of self-imposed restrictions on the use of firepower has been championed by a voluminous research conducted on the democratic paradigm of COIN warfare.

A dominant view within the democratic camp is that indiscriminate violence—best defined by Lyall as “the collective targeting of a population without credible effort to distinguish between combatants and civilians” (2009: 358)—is “at best ineffective and at worst counterproductive” (Kalyvas 2004: 112). Because strategies of blind civilian victimisation target individuals irrespectively of their non-collaboration with the opponent, many scholars sustain that random violence has an “inflammatory” effect on rebel activity (Zhukov 2014, Crenshaw 1981). As individuals fearing to fall victims of the government’s randomised attacks do not gain benefits from complying with the incumbent’s requests, a regime of wanton state terror incentivises people to increase their chances of survival by seeking the protection of the opponent’s camp (Kalyvas 1999: 251). While strategies of blind violence supposedly decrease rather than magnify the “societal costs of continued resistance” (Jones 2017: 47), scholars expounding the causes of pro-insurgent mobilisation maintained that non-combatants are often persuaded to join insurgent groups out of the desire to avenge their relatives unjustly killed by the security forces. As demonstrated by Kilcullen, neutral bystanders can turn into resolute guerrillas overnight and fight alongside hard-core rebels to seek vengeance for the incumbent’s wrongdoings (2009: 38). Although these considerations brought many experts to define civilian victimisation as categorically ineffective (Valentino et al. 2004; Hultquist 2017; Pechenkina et al. 2019), the same scholarship has also failed to examine in details how indiscriminate force is deployed in contexts of COIN warfare, with the consequence that the strategic approaches chosen by authoritarian counterinsurgents are often misinterpreted as raw displays of blind savagery.

Yet, in-depth studies conducted on the logic of indiscriminate violence showed that strategies of civilian victimisation can actually reach high degrees of rational

sophistication. As remarked by Downes (2006), the use of random violence against civilians is often the prelude—not the mainstay—of authoritarian COIN operations. Utilised as a strategy of “early resort” against populations openly hostile to the incumbent, the extensive use of randomised violence in the early stages of the COIN effort allows counterinsurgents to establish a footprint on enemy territory when “there is little or no possibility” of gaining support from the local population (Ibid.: 168). Because at the very start of a COIN campaign information is scarce and therefore insufficient to carry out more pinpointed strikes, harming the population—a readily accessible target—provides “immediate military and political dividends” to the incumbent (Ibid.). Underscored in the literature produced by 20<sup>th</sup> century strategists such as Douhet (1983) and Liddell Hart (2007), the extensive use of random violence in the early stages of the military effort has profoundly demoralising effects on the enemy’s population, as “spreading terror and havoc” across the country contributes to rapidly shatter the population’s will to resist the incumbent (Douhet 1983: 27). Ranging from Cesar’s ferocious campaign against the Gallic tribes (Caesar 1919: 203) to Nazi Germany’s mass-killings of civilians in the “Bloodlands” of Central Europe (Snyder 2011: 263), to the Chinese government’s vicious shutdown of the 1950s’ peasants unrests (Shichor 2016: 106), empirical evidence confirms “scorched earth” tactics as effective COIN measures of early resort.

As soon as the population has been terrorised into submission and better-quality intelligence becomes available, authoritarian counterinsurgents discard random brutalisation in favour of more discriminate forms of violence aimed at dissuading people from engaging in anti-incumbent actions. Defined by scholars of strategic studies as “deterrence by punishment,” this approach to civilian victimisation leverages on the incumbent’s capability of accomplishing acts of personalised retribution to minimise the insurgents’ potential for collective action (Snyder 1960). In authoritarian COIN operations, civilian victimisation falling under the deterrence paradigm assumes two different configurations. A first form of selective deterrence specifically targets potential insurgents and civilian supporters. Entailing what Kalyvas defined as the “personalisation” of retribution, such strategy presupposes “an intention to ascertain individual guilt” made possible by the availability of information submitted by local agents and civilian collaborators (Kalyvas 2006: 142). Under a regime of discriminate violence, the incumbent magnifies the individual costs of rebellion whilst increasing the societal benefits of compliance, as “civilians can be relatively certain that

cooperation can be exchanged for the right to survive” (Weinstein 2007: 18). By promising to the traumatised population that the incumbent will stop brutalising innocents and start targeting opponents selectively, authoritarian counterinsurgents provide individuals with a transparent normative system that incentivises compliance in return for survival (Downes 2007).

The strategy of selective violence is complemented and reinforced by the practice of targeting groups of people that share a personal connection with individual non-compliers according to a “guilt by association” logic (Kalyvas & Kocher 2007: 188). Addressed in the literature on civil war as a “retributive” form of collective punishment, this strategy builds upon the previous one to raise to an extremely high level the potential costs of engaging in sanctioned behaviours (Souleimanov & Siroky 2016). By holding accountable the relatives of insurgents alongside entire communities for the deeds of single individuals, authoritarian counterinsurgents force opponents to capitulate or defect to the pro-government camp in the hope to spare their loved ones from the incumbent’s retribution. Endowed with credibility by the government’s willingness to perform gruesome forms of violent punishment—including looting, rape, torture, forcible disappearance, public execution, and mass-murder—a strategy of collective violence deters potential insurgents, individual avengers, and civilian supporters from even considering defying the government’s authority. The history of COIN warfare is rich in episodes of violent retribution executed in a “deterrence by punishment” configuration. For instance, collective punishments constituted a standard operating procedure for the German forces deployed in central Italy during the Second World War. In the effort to punish the partisans and deter the population from providing assistance to the insurgents hiding in the mountains, the SS divisions engaged in the extermination of the villagers inhabiting the rural areas where many families of local insurgents lived (Olsen 1968). Entered in the collective memory of the Italian nation, large-scale massacres of civilians, such as the one occurred in the area of “Monte Sole” in September 1944, epitomise the profound psychological impact that the threat of collective punishments can engender amongst potential insurgents and civilian supporters (Prete 1988).

By reversing the democratic constraints on the use of military might to quash rebellion and deter pro-insurgent mobilisation, the authoritarian shortcut allows the incumbent to fully capitalise on its military prowess, bypassing the psychological

barriers placed by Western counterinsurgents against the strategic use of civilian victimisation in warfare.

### ***3.4 Second Pillar: Political Legitimacy***

Considered by U.S. military doctrines as “principle of war” an “main objective” of asymmetric conflicts, the quest for establishing legitimacy—defined by Hammond as “the population’s acceptance of a set of rules or an authority” (2010: 69)—has become a leading objective in population-centric COIN operations (U.S. Gov. 2014a: 1-19; U.S. Gov. 2018c: A-4). Rooted in the intellectual legacy of Max Weber, who famously portrayed the state as the only entity capable of monopolising “the legitimate use of physical force” over the national territory, the assumption that strengthening government legitimacy inhibits civil conflict underpins the strategic approaches of both democratic and authoritarian counterinsurgents (Weber 1946: 77; Kirtzen 2017; Nachbar 2012). In securing the population’s obedience, conceptualised in Weberian terms as ranging from passive acquiescence to active adherence, the incumbent discourages individuals from engaging in violent activities at the expense of the rebels’ potential for exacerbating social unrest (Duyvesteyn 2017; Matheson 1987). Although promoting legitimacy for the government is of the utmost importance in COIN operations, irreconcilable democratic and authoritarian values engender contrasting variants of state-building endeavours.

According to the *FM 3-07: Stability Operations*, spreading liberalism and consolidating democracy are “the hallmarks of a well-functioning government” (U.S. Gov. 2016: II-6). Philosophically rooted in John Locke’s political theory (Locke 2017: 32; Marden 2006), democratic COIN guidelines sustain that social contracts produce unsatisfactory results unless the majority of the population actively takes part in the political process. The importance of fostering political participation as a way to defeat insurgency resides at the core of some of the most influential studies exploring the dynamics of nation-building interventions. Whilst Kilcullen considers democratic systems as qualitatively superior to coercion-based governance models (2006: 3), Kirtzen (2012) and Bell (2011) profess that inclusive governments are more likely to be successful in restoring peace and addressing the rebellion’s root-causes.

Despite liberalist precepts continuing to guide legitimacy-building endeavours carried out by democratic counterinsurgents, a recently growing literature underlines

that the “free and fair election” formula consistently scores low success rates in insurgency-affected societies (Wiechnik 2012: 23). In commenting on the results obtained by electoral processes held in Iraq, Etzioni (2012) affirmed that democratic institutions are far from constituting a panacea for socio-political unrest. Sharing Etzioni’s assessment of the state of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan as “prone to failure” (Ibid.), Greene (2017) further defined as “pathological counterinsurgency” those legitimacy-building endeavours overly focused on promoting electoral democracy in traditionally non-democratic societies. Alongside Gawthorpe’s (2017) assessment of local elections in civil war as hardly ever successful, empirical evidence suggests that building legitimacy from the ground-up might not be as effective as conventionally surmised.

In contrast to the Lockean tradition embedded in democratic blueprints, authoritarian social engineering efforts are ideologically ingrained in the Hobbesian principle stating that, without an authoritative power regulating society, life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1965: 97). Because insurgent warfare exposes individuals to “continual fear and danger of violent death” (Ibid.), authoritarian counterinsurgents conclude that frightened populations will legitimise any authority, even if coercively imposed, capable of ending the hostilities and restoring public order (Philp & Pelczynski 2012: 134; Millen 2007). While the mechanisms of legitimacy-building in authoritarian settings remain largely under-explored, several scholars confirmed that the regime’s repressive apparatus plays a role of primary importance for the consolidation of autocratic sovereignty in territories contested with grassroots insurgent movements (Gerschewski 2018, Whiting 2017, Fukuda 2011: 43). By cultivating and then capitalising on the population’s incessant demand for stability, authoritarian counterinsurgents secure the regime’s uncontested ascendancy over the population, which is terrorised into passive acquiescence by the incumbent’s promise of a draconian retribution against anyone found somehow associated with the rebels (Asal et al 2017; Levitsky & Way 2010; Höglund & Söderberg 2010). This oppressive approach to legitimacy-building heavily informed the COIN operations carried out by Fascist Italy during the pacification campaign in Libya. After having wiped out the indigenous resistance to the Italian invasion force, Rome enforced its direct control over the country through a combination of exemplary punishments and invasive policing activities (Rochat 2005: 12-14). Intimidated into submission by the Fascist surveillance apparatus, the population progressively started collaborating with the Italian



authorities. As underscored by Dotolo in his study of Italy's COIN operation in North Africa, this strategy facilitated the enforcement of the local governorate's legitimacy, as people knew that "the war was not against (the) population per se; it was solely against the rebels" (2015: 176).

Although repression never ceased constituting the bedrock of authoritarian legitimacy-building operations, nowadays' autocratic counterinsurgents dispose of much more sophisticated tools to prolong the incumbent's dominion over society without triggering large-scale popular uprisings. As Kendall-Taylor and Frantz (2014) suggested in their article on the resilience of contemporary authoritarian regimes, autocratic rulers developed the ability of "mimicking" democratic practices, such as periodically held elections and multi-party systems, in an effort to manipulate popular dissent and appease the population's desire for transitioning towards a democratic political system. Agreeing with Kendall-Taylor and Frantz, researchers of autocratic governance models interpreted authoritarian elections as stabilising mechanisms necessary to consolidate the status quo (Croissant & Hellmann 2018), signal regime invincibility (Seeberg 2014), minimise the recurrence of anti-government protests (Günay & Dzihic 2016), and redistribute material incentives to co-opted elites (Bray et al. 2019; Levitsky & Way 2012). While the proliferation of pseudo-democratic institutions should not conceal the fact that authoritarian-sponsored elections are "hardly more than a façade" that counterinsurgents utilise to magnify the regime's control over society, empirical research conducted across numerous instances of authoritarian COIN confirmed that electoral processes can assist incumbents in garnering consensus and deprive the opponent of crucial popular support (Soest & Grauvogel 2017: 292; Soest & Grauvogel 2015; Edel & Josua 2018). The 2014 presidential elections held in Syria amidst an ongoing civil war constitute a recent instance of electoral processes utilised by an authoritarian regime to consolidate its authority and delegitimise its competitors. Winning by a landslide against a largely non-existent political opposition, President Bashar al-Assad reconfirmed his ascendancy over Syria, "convincingly" signalling to the population that the rebels stood no chance of overthrowing a resilient authority enjoying widespread popular support (Anderson 2015; Sly & Ramadan 2014).

From the juxtaposition of democratic and authoritarian approaches to legitimacy-building, it results clear that the means utilised by the authoritarian shortcut to secure the population's obedience promise faster results at lower political costs. If

democratic COIN textbooks advance complex procedures designed to establish legitimate governments via popular will, the authoritarian shortcut prioritises the employment of long perfected instruments of authoritarian dominion to control the population and secure the regime's uncontested predominance over society. In contrast with the theoretical precepts of orthodox COIN doctrines, evidence from the authoritarian experience confirms that spreading democracy is only one of several ways to engender political stability.

### ***3.5 Third Pillar: Economic Development***

In 2006, U.S. General David Petraeus published a list of fourteen observations refined from the U.S. experience against the Iraqi insurgency. Prominent among these remarks is the maxim asserting that, in COIN, “money can be more important than ammunition” (Petraeus 2006). Reiterated in the *Commander's Guide to Money as a Weapons System*, which states that “money is one of the primary weapons used by war-fighters to achieve successful mission results” (U.S. Gov. 2009b: 1), this notion has found widespread validation in academia and considerable application in contemporary theatres of COIN warfare (Cohen et al. 2006; Bodnar & Gwinn 2010; Berman et al. 2011). Defined by Donley as “the provision of sufficient basic services, infrastructure, and economic essentials to garner popular support and engender government legitimacy” (2016: 103), economic development constitutes a twofold instrument that counterinsurgents dispose to counter the enemy's propaganda and reinforce societal resilience (U.S. Gov. 2009a: 17; Choharis & Gavrilis 2010). Despite these strategic objectives constituting the end-goals of all COIN campaigns, mutually incompatible visions for a functional post-conflict environment induce democratic and authoritarian states to operationalise contrasting templates for economic development operations.

Most of the aid programmes sponsored by Western counterinsurgents are ingrained in opportunity-cost theories suggesting that individuals can be discouraged from supporting insurgents if provided with unconditional access to unwavering livelihood opportunities (SIGAR 2018; German Gov. 2010: 1). Embracing the premise that civil unrest endures where poverty rates are high (Fearon 2003; 2008), democratic COIN doctrines expound that endeavours centred on boosting economic prosperity dwindle the rebels' recruitment capabilities whilst strengthening the government's authority (U.S. Gov. 2014a: 10-10; Weintraub 2016; Djankov & Reynal-Querol 2010).

To lower the potential for insurgency, democratic regimes inject local markets with large-scale monetary spending meant to re-activate the economy and incentivise the growth of a capitalistic, autonomous society. Although financial expenditures are channelled into a multitude of different projects aimed at maximising the chances of economic recovery (Sexton 2016), the *FM 3-24* considers the establishment of small private enterprises as the key objective of development operations (U.S. Gov. 2006: 5-17). As concluded by Kilcullen, Mills, and Oppenheimer, “ensuring the smooth operation of the (private) market” triggers a “reinforcing cycle of recovery and prosperity” that counterinsurgents utilise to solve the conflict’s economic root-causes (Kilcullen et al. 2011: 106). Despite local entrepreneurial activities generating communal wealth and reducing the numbers of unemployed people forced to join the insurgency out of economic necessity, the emergence of a self-sufficient economy inevitably decreases the government’s direct control over society. If democracies deliberately strive to reduce the population’s dependency on state-owned enterprises as a way to fight insurgency and promote societal resilience, authoritarian regimes espouse a diametrically opposed vision for economic development operations.

Instead of identifying the larger population as the recipient of economic benefits, authoritarian counterinsurgents convey their material resources into programmes aimed at buying off selected social elites, such as defected rebel chiefs, religious leaders, and influential businessmen (Hazelton 2017: 91). Defined by Gerschewski (2013: 22) as “the capacity to tie strategically-relevant actors to the regime,” co-optation is a relatively inexpensive stabilisation strategy designed to provide local power holders with the instruments necessary to enforce order and generate compliance (Kreitmeyr 2019). Despite co-optation being criticised as prone to backfire when the government fails to satisfy the elite’s expectations (Brenner 2015), a burgeoning literature sustains that co-opting the only individuals within society possessing “the talent, resolve, and social status to organise economic, political, or military activities that will antagonise violent insurgents” constitutes an effective strategy to administer state-controlled economies during periods of social turmoil (Moyar 2011: 6; Wilson & Akhtar 2019; Raleigh & Dowd 2018).

In authoritarian COIN operations, the practice of hindering the emergence of a private sector responds to the imperative of reducing the amount of resources that insurgents can obtain from individuals politically aligned with the rebels’ cause. Falling under the category of strategies defined by Leites and Wolf (1970: 36) as “input-

denial,” this approach to economic development leverages on the incumbent’s coercive potential “to diminish the supply of human and material resources available for rebel use” (Mason 1996: 75). By depriving suspected non-compliers of the possibility to find employment in state-controlled businesses, the incumbent forces the population into choosing between two mutually exclusive options: either people stop collaborating with the insurgents in return for economic gains or continue disobeying the authority at the risk of incurring into severe punishment (Moore 1995). If reducing the population’s possibilities to free-ride—that is to say, enjoying the collective benefits provided by the incumbent whilst continuing supporting the opponent—is not an uncommon practice amongst democratic counterinsurgents (Dugan & Chenoweth 2012; Evans 2014), what is unique to the authoritarian model are the extreme forms of punishment inflicted upon insurgent sympathisers. By promising to deprive insurgent collaborators of the means necessary to provide for their families, authoritarian regimes raise to an unacceptable level the costs of defying the authority—a threat endowed with credibility by the incumbent’s capability of acquiring personalised information on actual and potential disobeyers (Kalyvas 2006). In other terms, authoritarian counterinsurgents put individuals in front of a choice: providing allegiance to the incumbent in return for a life of relative comfort or supporting the rebellion at the risk of seeing their relatives sentenced to a life of hunger and affliction. As free riding is made virtually impossible by the diffused presence of government informants within society, most people accept the government’s offer and turn their back against the insurgency, depriving the rebels of fresh recruits and crucial resources necessary to prolong the armed struggle against the authority.

A revealing illustration of this shortcut pattern to economic development is offered by Murtazashvili’s analysis of the Uzbek regime’s survival strategy. To retain power over society, the Uzbek government assigned to co-opted powerholders the task of operating the state-owned welfare system. By forcing people to depend on the state for healthcare, education, food subsidies, and employment, the government compelled the population into passive acquiescence and raised to an extreme level the potential costs of supporting the rebels (Murtazashvili 2012: 86). Building on Murtazashvili’s work, Ucko (2016) further revealed that the Chinese government adopted a similar approach to defeat the insurgency rooted in the Xinjiang province. To placate the rebellion, Beijing co-opted several opposition leaders and hired a large part of the unoccupied population to carry out public works meant to improve the local

inhabitants' life conditions. Paid by the government to build public infrastructures designed to satisfy the local population's most pressing needs, many individuals preferred accepting the government's offer over living a life of severe hardship, condemning the weakened insurgency to slowly wither away under the pressure exercised by the Chinese security forces (Odgaard & Nielsen 2014: 540).

Instead of devolving considerable resources in earning the entire nation's gratitude, the authoritarian shortcut recommends that development aid should be used to win over a carefully selected minority capable of optimising state-sponsored recovery programmes. By forcing society to rely on the state for satisfying essential economic needs, authoritarian counterinsurgents leave people with no other option than forsaking the insurgents and providing allegiance to the incumbent. This deplorable, but nevertheless effective approach to economic development allows the regime to establish its dominion over society without having to compromise with the population in return for its acquiescence.

### ***3.6 Overarching Objective: Success in Population-Centric COIN Operations***

After following mutually incompatible pathways throughout the execution of the COIN campaign (Figure 2), the orthodox and shortcut patterns converge in the last operational step entailing the delivery of long-lasting mission success. Although both democratic and authoritarian regimes strive to achieve the same strategic end-goals, success in population-centric COIN constitutes an elusive concept, difficult to define and even harder to operationalise. This is because, as Bartholomees suggested in his essay titled "Theory of Victory," success in war largely corresponds to "an assessment, not a fact or condition" (2008: 26). This notion holds particular relevance for COIN operations, a typology of armed conflict in which 80% of the effort is attributable to socio-political activities and the remaining 20% of military engagement can rarely deliver victory on its own (Zellen 2012: 132; Griffin 2014; Galula 2006: 63). The difficulty of conceptualising success in COIN is epitomised by the *FM 3-24*, which does not provide a definition of victory and openly specifies that "following the principles and imperatives (provided in the manual) does not guarantee success" (U.S. Gov. 2006: 1-20).

	Orthodox Pattern	Shortcut Pattern
Intelligence Penetration	Persuasive	Coercive
Information Operations	Qualitative approach	Quantitative approach
Use of Force	Minimum	Unrestrained
Political Legitimacy	Bottom-up, Lockean	Top-down, Hobbesian
Economic Development	Private market	State-controlled economy

Figure 2: Principal divergences between orthodox and shortcut patterns

As official military doctrines neglect to determine what success in COIN warfare looks like, the analysis must turn once again to Galula, who dedicated a small section of his book to identifying the parameters for victory in population-centric COIN operations. According to Galula, victory comprises two principal sets of objectives. The first one, derived from the Clausewitzian tradition embraced by enemy-centric proponents, includes the destruction of the insurgency’s fighting force, its loss of morale, and its admission of the above by giving up its intentions (Clausewitz 1984: 234). But because insurgency cannot be defeated solely by military means, neglecting to pursue political solutions would allow insurgents to reconsolidate their organisational infrastructure and wage new seasons of protracted warfare. Building on the enemy-centric definition of success, Galula further specified that victory in population-centric COIN is preconditioned on the “permanent isolation of the insurgent from the population, isolation not enforced upon the population but maintained *by and with* the population” (2006: 54, italics added).

Although Galula’s theorisations brought the political sphere to the forefront of population-centric COIN operations, his excessively vague definition of success caused scholars and practitioners to misinterpret the concept of victory in COIN warfare and bring it to an extreme end. In particular, experts increasingly consider success as unachieved until the incumbent eliminates all the “broad public grievances” on which the insurgency fed on to gain momentum in the first place (Shemella 2015: 64;

Connable & Libicki 2010: 154). While addressing the root causes of rebellion undeniably decreases the potential for an insurgent's comeback, achieving this ideal-type objective constitutes an extremely arduous task that only a handful of states at most would be able to accomplish. With victory conceptualised in these terms, counterinsurgents would have little to no chances of seeing their efforts being repaid by full-fledged success. Originated from a misconception of the tenets of population-centric COIN warfare, this excessively idealistic framing of victory threatens to obscure Galula's description of success as the (re)building of "a political machine" capable of exercising uncontested control over society and guaranteeing a situation of relative stability across the country (2006: 95). In other words, Galula underscored that establishing control over the local population—and not addressing the full range of popular grievances—constitutes the conceptual mainstay of population-centric COIN victory. This interpretation was confirmed by Kilcullen, who remarked that COIN warfare can be assimilated to a competition between the state and the rebels in which whoever does better in "establishing a predictable, consistent, wide-spectrum normative system of control is most likely to dominate" the population, overpower its opponent, and prevail in the armed struggle (2015: 126).

Accepting the twofold interpretation of success as provided by Galula and shared by Kilcullen, this section extrapolates from recent quantitative research conducted on the sources of success in asymmetric warfare the parameters necessary to empirically assess the effectiveness of population-centric COIN endeavours. The first contribution to this study's definition of success is derived from Zhukov's research on the determiners of victory in COIN warfare. Measured by the frequency of insurgent attacks and degree of popular support received by the rebels, the "disruption of an insurgency's ability to sustain its operations" is considered by Zhukov as the narrowest threshold for victory in COIN, assimilable to the enemy-centric propositions utilised by Galula as a baseline model for his visualisation of success (Zhukov 2008: 7). The second set of criteria is extracted from "*Paths to Victory*," a RAND study focused on assessing the roots of victory in COIN operations by drawing upon one of the most extensive and empirically rich datasets on asymmetric conflicts currently available. Embodying the second part of Galula's definition of success, "*Paths to Victory*" considers the incumbent as "unambiguously" triumphant if the government stayed in power throughout the armed struggle, the country remained intact, and no major concessions were granted to the insurgents (Paul et al. 2013: 17). Taken together, these

two studies supply the parameters necessary to operationalise Galula’s interpretation of victory and apply it to the outcomes generated by both the orthodox and shortcut patterns (Figure 3). In identifying a standardised list of criteria suited to assess the performances of democratic and authoritarian counterinsurgents, this study provides a common normative standard of evaluation, so far lacking in the COIN literature, necessary to estimate the degree of success achieved by states waging population-centric COIN warfare, regardless of their regime type (Ucko 2016: 56).

1st Set of Criteria: The “Enemy-Centric” Legacy	2nd Set of Criteria: The “Population-Centric” Cornerstone
Substantial decline in the frequency of insurgent attacks	Government stayed in power throughout the armed struggle
Substantial decline in pro-insurgent popular support	The country remained intact (no secession occurred)
	No major concessions granted to the insurgents

Figure 3: Common Normative Standard of evaluation for population-centric COIN engagements as conceptualised in the twofold configuration suggested by Galula (2006)

### 3.7 Hypothesis Formulation

After having delineated the mechanisms on which the authoritarian shortcut rests upon, this chapter demonstrated that the criteria utilised to assess the effectiveness of authoritarian COIN operations should not differ from the ones applied to democratic COIN campaigns. This last observation should result rather puzzling for proponents of the democratic camp, as repressive measures are considered by this school of thought as “poor COIN concept(s)” which “sit uneasily” within the conceptualisation of population-centric COIN as provided in Western military doctrines (Paul et al. 2013: 108-109). By affirming that the same criteria for success can be applied to democratic *and* authoritarian COIN operations, the present study questions the intellectual foundations on which democratic enthusiasts formulate their theorisations upon, further suggesting that checklists of “bad COIN practices” might, in fact, constitute perfectly valid playbooks for victory in population-centric COIN operations (Paul & Clarke 2016: 3). Should the authoritarian shortcut fulfil the criteria for success in population-



centric COIN warfare, the theoretical foundations underpinning the democratic paradigm would be problematised, and the common wisdom on the (in)effectiveness of numerous COIN practices would have to undergo a significant re-evaluation. In an effort to establish whether the authoritarian shortcut challenges the robustness of the orthodox narratives of COIN warfare, this study formulates and tests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis: Because of its strong divergence from the precepts of democratic military doctrines, the authoritarian shortcut should fail to deliver mission success as operationalised in population-centric counterinsurgency metrics.*

This working hypothesis fulfils several purposes. Firstly, it provides an explicit link between theoretical and empirical sections, making sure that the analysis of the proposed case-study remains focused on addressing the puzzle delineated in the theoretical chapter. Secondly, wording the hypothesis in a way that reflects the democratic camp's assumptions facilitates the re-elaboration of the empirical data meant to generate recommendations for Western strategists. While the hypothesis is designed to assess the results produced by the authoritarian shortcut, this study refrains from evaluating the performances of authoritarian regimes in comparative terms with the ones obtained by liberal democracies. As previously mentioned, because democratic and authoritarian approaches should be considered as diametrically opposed and mutually incompatible, any study attempting to establish which of the two is the "most effective" would incur in serious methodological pitfalls already discussed in other publications (Byman 2016, Ucko 2016). While authoritarian practices "do not square" with the way in which democracies fight insurgency, "kind-hearted" democratic approaches are unappealing to authoritarian regimes, with the consequence that strategists do not possess the luxury of selecting one of the two models: the choice is already being determined by the regime type of a given COIN force (Byman 2016: 87). Mindful of this limitation, the present study limits its scope to assessing whether the authoritarian shortcut can reach a satisfactory degree of effectiveness according to the common normative standard of evaluation as expressed in the previous section.

## 4 Methodology

### *4.1 Research Design*

Having theoretically expounded the authoritarian shortcut in the previous chapter, the rest of this study establishes whether authoritarian counterinsurgents can effectively deliver mission success. To achieve this aim, the study investigates the mechanisms of the authoritarian shortcut from a critical realist (CR) philosophical standpoint. Representing a deviation from positivism and constructivism, CR has been selected as this study's guiding paradigm for its vindication of ontology as a concept not entirely reducible to epistemology (Bhaskar & Lawson 1998). At its essence, CR acknowledges that the scientific description of the empirical world is necessarily influenced by the constructs utilised by researchers to simplify and understand reality (O'Mahoney & Vincent 2014). Put differently, critical realists recognise that the empirical domain "is always theory-impregnated," as the researcher's perception of a given phenomenon shapes the way in which data is processed and presented (Danermark et al 2005: 21). Embracing the conceptual premises of CR, this study "puts theory first" and utilises the authoritarian shortcut as a framework to interpret and organise empirical observations (Vincent & O'Mahoney 2018: 206).

To analyse data and reach meaningful findings, the study adopts a hypothetico-deductive qualitative reasoning (Evans & Kakas 1992). Following Popper's (2005) guidelines on the use of deductive methods, the analysis focuses on theory falsification and compares the predictions embedded in the hypothesis with the results extracted from the empirical analysis to satisfy this project's research objectives.

In outlining the authoritarian shortcut in action, the empirical chapter employs a single case-study procedure, defined by Yin as the holistic investigation of a phenomenon "in its real-world context" (2014: 2). As this method takes into account the contextual intricacies of the phenomenon under scrutiny, a single-case study approach results appropriate to illustrate the authoritarian shortcut, a theoretical framework requiring a high degree of contextual insight for being fully elucidated (Dyer & Wilkins 1991). To fulfil these requirements, the authoritarian shortcut is contextualised to the COIN operations performed by Russia during the Second Chechen war of 1999-2009. Selecting the Chechen conflict as a case-study presents two major advantages. First, Russia meets the criteria for regime type identified as a precondition

for testing this study's theoretical formulations. While Freedom House (2020) classified Russia as one of the countries with the lowest political rights and civil liberties in the world, The Global State of Democracy Initiative (2020) considered the Russian Federation as an authoritarian state by any standard of comparison. Second, Chechnya constituted a testing ground for the development and refinement of the techniques employed by authoritarian counterinsurgents in contemporary theatres of COIN operations. As sustained by Blank (2016: 81), the Second Chechen War constitutes "the latest adaptation" of a "well-established history" of authoritarian COIN measures that find their most recent operational battleground in the ongoing Syrian civil war (Haines 2016; Avramov 2018). Due to its importance for the study of authoritarian COIN endeavours, Chechnya constitutes an excellent starting point for assessing the effectiveness of the authoritarian shortcut.

#### ***4.2 Data Collection and Analysis***

In alignment with the CR tenet stating that data triangulation is essential for "capturing as much of reality as possible," this study not only relies on secondary sources, but also bases its findings on interviews carried out with eight Chechen refugees in the region of the Pankisi Gorge, Georgia (Denzin & Lincoln 1998: 9). Situated at the mountainous border between Georgia and Chechnya, the Pankisi Gorge experienced an influx of almost 10.000 refugees seeking asylum during the first years of the war, many of which permanently settled in the region (Kurtsikidze & Chikovani 2002). Participants have been recruited following a "snowballing sampling" procedure, a non-random sampling technique appropriate for recruiting members of "unique, hard-to-reach, or marginalised populations" such as communities of displaced people (Tenzek 2018: 1614). At the end of each interview, participants were asked to recommend other potential interviewees belonging to the same community of Chechen refugees. By exploiting the tight social interconnectedness typical of rural, isolated village communities, this sampling method allowed the researcher to access a target audience otherwise impossible to reach. When referring to interviewees, this study utilises alphanumeric codes, concealing names, genders, and professions to protect the participants' identity. As the Pankisi Gorge is a demographically and geographically small area, providing additional information on the participants' identities would risk infringing essential anonymity requirements. It is however specified that two of the

eight interviewees were former insurgents, as their accounts of the war provide a “military spin” to the data collected, complementing and reinforcing the more “civilian-centred” perspective provided by the other participants.

The Chechen communities residing in the Pankisi Gorge constituted an optimal pool of potential interviewees for three main reasons. First, most of the Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge maintain regular contacts with friends and relatives in Chechnya. Due to the proximity of the region to the Chechen territory, many inhabitants frequently receive guests and/or visit their families across the border. Hence, these individuals not only can provide first-hand accounts of the war but can also discuss the long-term effects that the COIN operations had on the Chechen society. Second, the possibility of conducting interviews in Chechnya is very limited. While Human Rights Watch reported in 2016 that people would refuse to interact with its personnel because afraid of triggering the government’s reprisals (HRW 2016), Iliysov recently confirmed that the climate of fear enforced by the regime “prevents people from participation in any kind of interview” (2019: 1710). Third, the quality of information collected from people living in Chechnya can often be of poor quality, as interviewees might deliberately provide inaccurate or deceptive information to protect their families from the regime’s retaliation. The “chilling effect” produced on the data collected in Chechnya has been well-documented by Ratelle, who reported that most of his interviewees provided standardised answers that added little to no novel information for research (2013: 219-220). This was confirmed by one interviewee, who stated that “to this day, people cannot speak freely about the situation in Chechnya. I can, but only because I am in Georgia” (PG20201). Given that the limitations on fieldwork and the potential risks for interviewees render Chechnya an unsuitable location for conducting interviews, the Pankisi Gorge provides a viable alternative for collecting information on the Chechen conflict.

To warrant flexibility during the interview process and to allow interviewees to focus on the most salient aspects of their own experiences, interviews were conducted following a semi-structured format (Priyadarshini 2020). While questions changed according to the dynamics of the single interview, the authoritarian shortcut’s theoretical mechanisms were utilised as lines of inquiry to ensure the extraction of appropriate and meaningful data. To facilitate the discussion and guarantee a logical progression of the interview process, interviews were organised according to the four-stage theoretical model proposed by Arthur and Nazroo (2003). Adopting an interview

guide proved to be effective in increasing comfort for the interviewees, who perceived the questions as more sequential and were better able to adjust their answers according to the interviewer's interest in specific topics. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and lasted around 40 minutes on average. Because interviewees exhibited strong emotional attachments to their "Motherland," they were all eager to share information and personal opinions on the war and its aftermath.

As the researcher does not speak neither Chechen nor Georgian, interviews were carried out with the assistance of an interpreter. Despite numerous scholars underscoring that relying on an interpreter might inhibit the collection of reliable information due to cultural and linguistic differences between interviewer and interviewee (Suurmond et al 2016), the social traits of both researcher and interpreter largely compensated for potential drawbacks. A first advantage was given by the researcher's "status" of a student in his early 20s. While people living in the Pankisi Gorge often consider journalists as hostile and untrustworthy (Cagara 2016), interviewees did not feel threatened by a "harmless, inexperienced" student, and were rather pleased to see a young man showing sincere interest for the "Chechen cause." On more than one occasion, people volunteered for being interviewed only when they realised that the researcher was "only" a student. Choosing a local university student born and raised in the area as the interpreter further reduced the barriers between interviewer and interviewee. Because each interviewee knew the interpreter since he was a child, the long-standing trust relationship between the two helped to set the stage for a more relaxed conversation, incentivising the interviewee to share more information and with more confidence. As experienced by Jentsch (1998) in similar interview settings, the participants' perception of the research team as a "pair" of harmless students contributed to minimise attritions that could have impacted the collection of reliable data.

The findings obtained from the interviews will be utilised to either confirm or challenge the evidence acquired from secondary sources. Although performing a documentary analysis on Russian military writings is unfeasible due to the classified nature of such documents (Renaud 2010), the voluminous literature on the Second Chechen War provides a solid testing ground on which to corroborate the interviewees' assertions. Reports on human rights abuses will be analysed alongside working papers of international organisations and academic publications to provide a global, critical perspective of the Russian COIN operations in Chechnya.

To process the data collected, the study follows a thematic analysis procedure, defined by Maguire and Delahunt as the “process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data” (2017: 3352). To code and “thematise” the data collected, the study follows the procedural guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) in a widely acclaimed publication. Through the identification and refinement of the information contained in the interview transcripts, a thematic analysis allows to deconstruct and filter data according to the parameters set forth by the research question. As the project aims at assessing the authoritarian shortcut’s overall effectiveness, the analysis employs a “theory-driven” approach focused on scrutinising themes relevant to the study’s research interests (Ibid.). Successfully implemented in previous publications (Miller & Shifflet 2016; Lee et al 2014), a theory-driven procedure is particularly suited for studies, such as the present one, that follow a deductive approach to analyse and present empirical data.

The analysis encompasses the content extrapolated from the interviewees’ direct statements (manifest content) as well as the underlying aspects of the emerging patterns (latent content) (Boyatzis 1998: 16). While a manifest analysis is necessary to identify significant themes, a latent approach allows the researcher to disclose psychological reasonings left unexpressed or implied in the conversation. For instance, a latent analysis is indispensable for interpreting the passages in which interviewees assess the economic conditions of their fellow countrymen living in Chechnya. Because statements such as “in comparison with my relatives...I am very poor” and “when I go (to Chechnya), it is like going from rags to riches” are symptomatic of grievances felt by the Chechens in Georgia, but that do not necessarily express the views of individuals living in Chechnya, a latent analysis limits the contamination of data and enables the accurate triangulation of the information obtained through a manifest analysis (PG20202; PG20204).

### ***4.3 Reliability, Validity, and Limitations***

In describing the techniques employed to collect and process empirical data, this chapter demonstrates that both sources and methods fit the criteria for scientific reliability—defined by Leung (2015) as the extent to which processes and findings can be successfully replicated by other researchers. In terms of sources, the decision to carry out interviews in the Pankisi Gorge was determined by the imperative of extracting

information from individuals possessing an in-depth knowledge of the topics discussed in this study. As suggested by Acey in his paper discussing Moscow's strategy in Chechnya, reliable information on the Chechen population's attitudes and beliefs "can only be gathered when speaking with people from the region" (Acey 2013: 46). Nonetheless, one could sustain that interviewing more people would have better consolidated this research's findings. It may also be argued that additional data could have disclosed new patterns in the participants' responses. As these are reasonable concerns, all necessary precautions were taken during the data collection and analysis to minimise the incidence of participant bias. While the use of a diversified range of probing questions was specifically aimed at preventing the naïve incorporation of group narratives in the research output (Franklin & Ballan 2011), the information presented in the empirical chapter underwent a thorough process of data refinement designed to rule out irregularities within the interviewees' patterned responses.

In addition to utilising well-established data collection and analysis techniques, the study increases the validity of its findings by acknowledging that the population constitutes the "centre of gravity" of COIN operations (U.S. Gov. 2018a: I-5). Rather than exclusively focusing on the dyadic relationship between insurgents and counterinsurgents, this study argues that the population's behavioural attitudes should be treated as closely correlated with the outcomes of COIN operations (Taarnby 2013). By affirming that the local population holds the same analytical importance as the other two principal actors, this study incentivises researchers to carefully consider how the conceptual tenets advanced in military blueprints should inform the collection and analysis of empirical data.

Although almost all the secondary sources utilised in the empirical chapter have been published by authors writing in English, every effort has been made to encompass works either produced by non-Western authors or including extensive commentaries of Russian sources. As this material is widely available and rich in content, it is believed that this limitation has been effectively minimised through the methodical triangulation of data collected from diversified sources (Brink 1993). While the use of a single case-study procedure necessarily limits the generalisation of the findings obtained from the Russian COIN in Chechnya, the research techniques employed are potentially applicable to any other instance of authoritarian regime waging a population-centric COIN warfare. The selection of a single case-study method should not discourage researchers from applying this study's methodological approach to a multiple case-

study design, as this would offer the opportunity to further enrich and refine the authoritarian shortcut’s theoretical propositions.

## 5 The Authoritarian Shortcut in Chechnya: An Empirical Case-Study

### 5.1 Background of the Conflict and Narratives for Russia’s Counterinsurgency Operations

“The Chechen wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2009 were dramatic, vicious, and complex affairs,” stated Galeotti (2014: 9) in his account of the vicissitudes experienced by the small, breakaway nation of Chechnya during its struggle for independence in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse. Covering an area of approximately 17,300 square kilometres, roughly equivalent to the size of Montenegro, Chechnya is a land-locked autonomous republic located in the North Caucasus, a mountainous region included within the borders of the Russian Federation (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Map of Chechnya.

Source: <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/chechen.html>.

As with the secessionist wars occurred in neighbouring post-Soviet republics, the Chechens’ centuries-old ambition for national self-determination lays at the roots of the brutal conflicts that pitted a “small, but proud and warlike” population against a state striving to recover its territorial integrity after the disintegration of its multi-ethnic



empire (Kipp 2001: 47). Triggered by the Chechen leadership's resolve in resisting the Kremlin's demands for capitulation, the First Chechen War represents an initial Russian attempt directed at crushing the Chechen uprising and enforcing Moscow's sovereignty over the rebellious republic. Anticipated by the Russian military leadership as a "bloodless blitzkrieg," the fighting quickly took an unexpected turn for the Russian forces, which entered Chechnya unprepared to face a resourceful enemy determined to wear out the invaders in a partisan warfare of ambushes and ruthless terrorism (Lapidus 1998: 20). Forced to withdraw after that the insurgents re-obtained control of Grozny, Chechnya's capital, in August 1996, the Russians undertook an accelerated programme of military reforms intended to prepare the Army to confront and—this time—defeat the Chechen separatists (Baev 2003). The opportunity to take back the autonomous enclave came in 1999, when the incursion of a group of armed Chechen rebels in the neighbouring Republic of Dagestan gave Moscow the pretext to launch a large-scale offensive against the *de facto* independent republic (Pain 2001: 11). After accomplishing an initial conventional phase aimed at conquering Grozny through an intensive campaign of artillery shelling and carpet bombings, the over 90.000-strong invasion force spread to the countryside and engaged the retreating rebels in a series of aggressive COIN operations (Oliker 2001: 122). Nine years after the start of the pacification efforts in Chechnya, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin announced to the State Council that, in the fight against the Chechen "terrorists," the Russian forces had prevailed, and that the insurgents suffered a "decisive and crushing blow" from which they could never recover from (Kremlin 2008). While the scholarship generally confirms that the outcome of the Second Chechen War favoured the Russians, the nature of the COIN operations performed against the insurgency is highly contested in the literature.

One group of scholars interpreted the Russian COIN during the Second Chechen War as inherently enemy-centric. According to this scholarship, the Russian Army "singularly failed" to win the population's hearts and minds, as its irresistible "desire" for all-out conventional battle could not be reconciled with the protracted, low-intensity engagements characterising population-centric COIN operations (Hodgson 2003: 80; Janeczko 2012: 4). While these studies show that the Russians never ceased resorting to indiscriminate measures in the fight against the rebels, their conceptualisation of the Russian COIN as centred on physically exterminating the insurgents downgrades the strategic relevance placed by Moscow on seizing and maintaining long-term control

over the local population. The incongruences between these approximative theoretical assumptions and the evidence emerging from empirical examinations of the Russian COIN characterise even widely acclaimed publications, as typified by Schaefer's book discussing the strategic measures implemented by Moscow to defeat the Chechen insurgency. While the author introduces the Russian COIN as a "clear example of enemy-centric approach in action" (2010: 7), his descriptions of the tactics utilised by the Russians to engender popular support for the local government plainly mismatch the fundamentals of COIN warfare as outlined in enemy-centric narratives.

Although the scholarship consistently refrains from considering the Russian COIN as an offspring of the population-centric paradigm, a substantial body of research has acknowledged that enemy-centric narratives do not exhaustively explain the strategic rationale behind Russia's employment of a highly varied "instrumentarium" of military, political, economic, psychological, and civic measures. By interpreting the Russian COIN as "neither military-centric nor population-centric," this school of thought advances an "hybridity narrative" based on the belief that Russia "changed the variables in the Western standard counterinsurgency matrix to come up with her own autochthonous formula" (Grebennikov 2015: 75; Miakinkov 2011: 648). While the physical neutralisation of the insurgents continues to be considered as the main objective of the Russian military operations, the centre of analysis results shifted from the Chechen to the Russian domain of the COIN effort. In scrutinising the Russian media coverage of the Second Chechen War, these studies demonstrated that Moscow, instead of securing popular support for the authority in Chechnya as recommended in conventional hearts and minds guidelines, utilised its non-kinetic tools to persuade the domestic public opinion that the Chechen "terrorists" constituted an intolerable national security threat (Meakins 2017). Although these studies confirmed that the Second Chechen War can "certainly" be read through the lens provided by Western COIN textbooks, their conceptualisation of the Russian COIN as an enemy-centric endeavour contaminated by "reversed" hearts and minds blueprints denotes a rather marginal consideration given to the political and economic aspects of the efforts implemented *within* the Chechen territory (Blank & Kim 2013: 929).

While the proponents of enemy-centric and hybridity narratives enriched the available knowledge on the Second Chechen War, their accounts of the Russian COIN rely almost exclusively on empirical evidence and suffer from the mainstream literature's assumption of authoritarian COIN efforts as incompatible with population-

centric templates. Lacking a solid theoretical understanding of the conceptual foundations of the population-centric paradigm, these studies ended up utilising inaccurate theoretical models to delineate the Russian COIN, with the consequence that research conducted on the Second Chechen War presents the same problematics affecting the wider literature on the authoritarian model of COIN warfare. In an effort to redirect the study of this conflict towards a better refined framework of analysis, this chapter advances the first empirical account of the Second Chechen War in which the Russian COIN is explicitly considered as an instance of population-centric COIN warfare in action. Following the theoretical guidance provided by the authoritarian shortcut as outlined in Chapter 3, this section examines the intelligence, information, military, political, and economic aspects of the “Russian shortcut” in Chechnya.

### ***5.2 Support Base: Intelligence Penetration and Information Operations***

In Chechnya, the weaponization of fear never ceased constituting the “official state policy” of the Russian intelligence services (Gilligan 2010: 70). While the Russians systematically terrorised the population for intelligence-gathering purposes, their toolkit of intelligence measures underwent a notable evolutionary process throughout the execution of the COIN campaign.

The initial use of wantonly brutal intelligence techniques, including beatings, humiliations, rape, and torture, was dictated by the imperative of providing combat troops with constant streams of actionable intelligence (OCHA 2001). As combat units were suffering heavy casualties in the effort to crush the resistance (Kramer 2005: 214), the intelligence services were put under pressure to collect, collate, and distribute information necessary to pinpoint and liquidate high-value targets within the insurgency’s ranks. To achieve this aim, the Russians rapidly set up a network of “filtration points”—clearinghouses in which suspected fighters and civilian supporters were detained and interrogated. Described as “cramped, filthy, and sordid,” these detention centres were designed to force even the most determined insurgent sympathiser to reveal, under torture, the identities of other individuals associated with the rebellion (HRW 2000: 38). Terrorised beyond imagination by the prospects of being “welcomed to (the) hell” of filtration camps, many Chechens ended up collaborating with the Russians to escape torture and death (Ibid.: 40). Although deplorable, these techniques served the purpose they were intended for. As one interviewee put it, “of

course (the population) would collaborate...everywhere you could find a traitor...in every family there was one” (PG20207).

While frightening the population into passive collaboration allowed the Russians to acquire much-needed intelligence, the system reliant on filtration camps was far from efficient. Not long after the start of the conflict, analysts such as Garwood (2002) and Peterson (2003) signalled that the insurgents were replenishing their ranks with new recruits determined to avenge their relatives tortured and murdered by Russian soldiers. Realising that combat troops were failing to make substantial progress, Moscow opted for a strategic turnaround and started replacing in 2004 the Russian servicemen with the so-called *Kadyrovtsy*, a local paramilitary force named after President Putin’s chosen overlords for Chechnya—Akhmad Kadyrov and his son Ramzan. Largely composed of former insurgents persuaded to defect in exchange for a state pardon, the *Kadyrovtsy* could draw upon their intimate knowledge of the rebels’ *modus operandi* and socio-cultural milieu to accurately identify and neutralise insurgent fighters and civilian supporters (Souleimanov 2015).

While incentivising rallied insurgents to share information on their former comrades-in-arms allowed the Russians to stem the tide of individuals joining the rebellion, forcing the defectors’ families to rely on the government’s successes for securing their own safety provided the COIN forces with massive inflows of high-quality intelligence. Fearing the insurgents’ retaliation, the relatives of turncoat rebels started to “routinely” report any suspicious insurgent activity to the pro-government militias (Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015a: 697). Penetrating deep into society by leveraging on the population’s fears, the Russians were able to consolidate “all-seeing, all-hearing” grids of local informants capable of tracking down the insurgents’ movements. As reported by Seierstad during her trip in Chechnya, “the strife...has entered a phase where streets have eyes, everyone watches everyone else, and anyone who doesn’t denounce others is hiding something” (2008: 153). The psychological effects produced by this surveillance apparatus on the Chechen population hardly goes unnoticed by people travelling across Chechnya. While the relatives of one interviewee visiting his/her family were afraid to share their thoughts on the country’s political situation as “there is always the risk of someone eavesdropping and reporting you to the authorities,” the friends of another one were telling him/her “to always watch (his/her) mouth, as walls have ears” (PG20202; PG20208).

If establishing a pervasive surveillance apparatus enabled the security forces to detect and react to early signs of insurgent activity, the tight control exercised over the sources of information available in Chechnya greatly facilitated the broadcasting of pro-government propaganda messages. Sealing off the Chechen territory from all non-authorised media sources constituted the first step of Moscow's information warfare campaign. By denying the rebels access to external sources of information and systematically destroying their systems of communication, including radio stations, cellular transmissions, and relay points, the Russians immediately seized the upper hand in the "war of words" waged against the insurgents' political machine (Thomas 2003: 211; Herd 2000). After accomplishing these tasks in the initial stages of the invasion, Moscow in 2001 launched a large-scale media offensive aimed at suffocating the enemy's propaganda infrastructure and saturating Chechnya with pro-government indoctrination material (Jaimoukha 2005: 232). Initially focused on "blaming the militants for everything" that the population suffered throughout the conflict, Russia's "quantitative approach" to IO was gradually refined as Moscow transformed the war from a struggle for independence into an inter-Chechen strife—a policy known as "Chechenization" (Thomas 2005: 753; Ware 2009).

Under the Chechenization agenda, the Russians exposed the population to campaigns of aggressive, brainwashing messages meant to stigmatise the rebels as radical Islamists committed to bring Chechnya on the verge of a new civil conflict (Blank 2013). The effects obtained by this incessant disinformation on the socially polarised Chechen population should not be underestimated. According to several refugees, the state propaganda has been "a very effective tool for controlling people" in Chechnya (PG20207). As one interviewee put it:

"The regime is constantly utilising mass-media to influence the public's opinion. TVs, journals, lately social networks: everything contributes to brainwashing people into believing that the regime is doing good things for the Chechen population. (Ramzan Kadyrov) is always saying that Putin saved Chechnya from terrorists, and that we should be grateful to the Russian Federation. It goes on every day...I think it really works. No freedom of choice, no freedom of speech. People are blindfolded, it is like living behind the iron curtain" (PG20205).

Acting as a catalyst for societal polarisation, the regime propaganda dehumanised the rebels in the eyes of many Chechens, who “ended up believing in what they were told by the state” and started perceiving the insurgents as a living cancer threatening the nation’s security (PG20203). Taken together, deep intelligence penetration and aggressive IO severely weakened the Chechen insurgency, disrupting the enemy’s political apparatus whilst strengthening the government’s ability to control its population. Eluding the complexity of Western COIN blueprints, the authoritarian shortcut enabled the Russians to fully capitalise on their military prowess to accelerate the insurgency’s downfall.

### ***5.3 First Pillar: Use of Force***

Subduing a population that considers bravery and self-sacrifice in war as its sacred values was no easy task for Moscow. Driven by what some interviewees defined as the “warrior soul” of the Chechen nation, at the start of the hostilities the population was firmly determined to fight the Russians until the last man. According to several interviewees, Chechens “never run away” from a fight, and they are “always ready to protect their Motherland, no matter the cost” (PG20204; PG20201). This was confirmed by one eyewitness, who recalled that “we were willing to give our lives in fighting (the Russians)—we feared nothing. We were proud to sacrifice for our country’s independence” (PG20202). Confronted with such a fierce opponent, the Russians knew that victory would have been difficult to achieve without firstly breaking the “warrior soul” that made the Chechens coalesce in defence of their homeland.

To curtail the Chechens’ potential for mass mobilisation, the Russians embarked in what Schafer defined a “savage warfare” of indiscriminate, random violence (2010: 192). Premeditated and systematic, the intensive shelling of populated settlements signalled that the Russians were ready to exterminate entire villages in the effort to seize territorial supremacy. The profound societal shock produced by these brutalities is vividly recalled by those who directly witnessed this strategy in action. Initially, the all-out campaign of randomised shelling terrorised the population into paralysis, forcing people to seek shelter and stop providing logistical support to the rebels. As accounted by one interviewee, “I cannot express with words that kind of fear. In those moments, all you want to do is to run for cover” (PG20204). The intensive shelling of populated areas was complemented with aggressive sweeps—infamously known as

“*zachistka*”. On the way to the border with Georgia, one refugee directly witnessed how the Russians executed *zachistkas*: “the soldiers were setting fire to many villages, burning houses with people still inside. They were also killing men on the spot and forcefully separating family members according to their gender” (PG20208). Demoralised and traumatised, the vast majority of the population renounced taking part in the hostilities, with the consequence that the insurgents saw their support networks abruptly shrinking in the early stages of the war (Cohen 2014: 43). As one interviewee explained, “during the First War, the Chechens fought as one entity... During the Second, however, the Russians destroyed our internal cohesion... This strategy broke our determination and prevented us from fighting as effectively as we did in the First War” (PG20203).

Having terrorised the population into submission, the Russians gradually de-escalated the use of random attacks and, acting on the basis of more accurate intelligence submitted by captured and rallied insurgents, switched to more pinpointed forms of kinetic operations. Starting from early 2004, the selective targeting of rebels and civilian supporters by *Kadyrovtsy* units severely damaged the insurgency’s operational infrastructure, which was gradually deprived of many high-ranking members liquidated during targeted operations performed by Russian special forces. The increased accuracy and frequency of these targeted raids exercised “tremendous pressure” on insurgents to either capitulate or defect to the pro-Russian camp (Lyll 2010b: 14). As underscored by Souleimanov, the selective targeting of insurgents and civilian supporters fragmented the insurgency “from within,” leaving the rebels with no other option than accepting the government’s amnesties and joining the fight against their former comrades-in-arms (2017a: 35-39).

The systematic targeting of insurgents and civilian supporters has been complemented and reinforced by the extensive use of collective punishments against the insurgents’ relatives in a “deterrence by punishment” configuration. Encapsulating a “guilt by association” logic, the practice of holding the insurgents’ families responsible for attacks carried out against the security forces acted as a forceful deterrent for pro-insurgent collective action, heightening the costs of defying the authority well-above any acceptable level of risk (Souleimanov & Siroky 2016). The severe consequences of upholding outlawed behaviours have been made unequivocally clear to the population, as epitomised by the following excerpt of a 2008 public discourse held on national television by the then-mayor of Grozny Khuchiev: “If your

relatives commit an act of evil, this evil will be brought upon you, your other family members and even your descendants...The evil perpetrated by your relatives from the woods will come back to your own houses and in the very near future everyone (of you) will feel it on your own back” (HRW 2009: 24). By openly warning the population that entire families would have been tortured and murdered for providing support to the rebels, the regime instilled in potential insurgent recruits the fear of disobeying the government’s directives—a peril constantly reminded by exemplary punishments performed by the *Kadyrovtsy* against non-compliers. “It only takes few public punishments to scare the rest of the population into submission,” noted an interviewee, as everyone in Chechnya is aware that “challenging the government constitutes a death sentence for you and your family” (PG20205).

Fearful of the regime’s open-ended threats against their relatives, many insurgents and potential avengers lowered their weapons, indefinitely postponing—or abandoning altogether—the commitment to take the fight against the government. As remarked by numerous members of the Chechen diaspora, the population is acutely aware of the dilemmas faced by individuals desiring to retaliate against government representatives. As one refugee explained, “you might want to take revenge against those who inflicted sufferings upon you and your family, but it is impossible to do so. Giving a pretext to the authorities is more than enough to trigger their reprisals, and the risk of losing your life and those of your loved ones in the process is too high” (PG20205). This was confirmed by another interviewee, who stated that “nobody would be so reckless as to put his family in grave danger to seek revenge against the government” (PG20204). Prevented from waging warfare in Chechnya, the remaining rebels were forced to either join insurgent groups in other areas of the Caucasus or confront the Russians in the Syrian battlegrounds of global Jihad (O’Loughlin & Witmer 2012; Ratelle 2016). By holding entire families accountable for the deeds of single insurgents, the Russians minimised the rebels’ potential for mobilising the population in anti-incumbent collective actions. As emphasised by one interviewee, “those with a ‘warrior soul’ are no longer in Chechnya; they either died in the fighting...or joined the cause elsewhere—Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and other territories of the former Soviet space” (PG20203). In contrast with the precepts of democratic COIN doctrines, the extensive use of violence against civilians has not precluded the Russians from neutralising the insurgents and seizing control over the local population.



#### *5.4 Second Pillar: Political Legitimacy*

In their monograph titled “*Russia’s Restless Frontier*,” Trentin and Malashenko defined Chechnya’s political situation during the two wars’ interlude as a slow “degeneration into anarchy” (2004: 15). Ever since the First War’s aftermath, the Chechen resistance has been torn apart by a fierce competition for leadership between two principal camps—the nationalists, initially led by the elected president of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) Aslan Maskhadov on one side, and the Islamists, guided by popular Salafi warlords such as Shamil Basayev and Arbi Barayev on the other (Moore & Tumelty 2009). Refusing to accept Maskhadov’s secular leadership as legitimate, the Islamists started challenging his authority, engaging in subversive activities to discredit the government as incapable of guaranteeing the enforcement of law and order. By the summer of 1997, the rivalry between the two factions was already reaching a tipping point, with armed confrontations occurring between Chechen troops and Salafi fighters near Gudermes, Chechnya’s second largest city (Knysh 2007: 517). The 1999 Russian invasion further deepened the fissures emerged within the insurgency’s ranks. As explained by Toft and Zhukov, despite nationalists and Islamists coexisting in Chechnya “for more than 15 years, fighting the same enemy (and) over the same terrain,” their mutually incompatible objectives prevented the resistance from presenting a united front in the struggle against Russia (2015: 225).

It was on these premises that Moscow built its political scheme for Chechnya. The first and most important step in the consolidation process of a local pro-Russian government was the co-optation of Ahkmad Kadyrov—former *Mufti* of the CRhI and hard-lined separatist during the first conflict. Opposed to the spread of Salafi-Jihadism but also deeply aware of Russia’s determination to crush the Chechen dream of independence, Kadyrov realised that defecting to the pro-Russian camp constituted his only chance to protect his clan from Moscow’s destructive wrath (Russell 2011a). Designated as Moscow’s endorsed candidate for the 2003 presidential elections, Kadyrov’s rise from former insurgent to figure of authority of the new Chechen government signalled that Chechnya was not necessarily destined to remain what Politkovskaya (2003) described as a “small corner of hell.” If a Western audience might consider Kadyrov a traitor, for many Chechens his election constituted a long-awaited milestone in the process towards the normalisation of the country. As one interviewee remarked, “most people welcomed (Kadyrov’s) decision, as it was clear to everybody

that defeating the Russians was impossible, and that prolonging the hostilities would have only brought more sorrow upon our people” (PG20202).

While Kadyrov’s assassination by a group of rebels in 2004 threatened to derail Moscow’s political scheme for Chechnya (Myers 2004), the appointment of Kadyrov’s 27-year-old son Ramzan as his father’s political successor prevented the pacification effort from reaching a dangerous dead-end. Defined by Russell (2008) as “the indigenous key to success in Putin’s Chechenization strategy,” Ramzan Kadyrov was able to rapidly consolidate his leadership position, leveraging on a mixture of charisma and intimidation to engender “genuine popular support” for his government (Dannreuther & March 2008: 98). To win the hearts of his suffering population, Kadyrov resorted to two main mechanisms. Outsmarting the Salafists’ political narrative by portraying himself as restorer of the “morally declining” Chechen culture constituted an excellent strategy for gaining popularity among the older generations (Souleimanov 2006). By referring to Salafism as a devilish faith and vilifying its adherents as “enemies of Islam,” Kadyrov drove an ideological wedge between radical insurgents and the vast majority of the population, which follows a more moderate form of Islam called “Sufism” (Smirnov 2006). The politicisation of religious and cultural values allowed Kadyrov to present himself as a guardian of God’s law and preserver of traditions that Chechens care deeply about (Kurbanova 2011). This strategy permitted Kadyrov to secure the population’s sympathy, as suggested by the comment provided by one interviewee, who stated: “what I like about Kadyrov is that he promotes and protects the customs of our people. He is a good leader, because he takes care of our cultural heritage” (PG20204).

If preserving the nation’s spiritual integrity contributed to stigmatise the rebels and increase popular support for the government, the rhetorical construction of Kadyrov’s persona as the “saviour” of Chechnya granted him the sincere gratitude of many Chechens, who started admiring their young leader and building a personality cult around his figure. Treated with deferential respect by his admirers, “King Ramzan” leveraged on his popular appeal to indoctrinate the nation into considering his father and himself as bringers of peace and prosperity (The Independent 2007). Constantly hosted in popular TV shows and public events in Chechnya, Kadyrov has become the object of a nation-wide cult, as signified by the following passage extracted from a 2006 schoolchildren poetry contest titled “Ramzan—hero of our time”:

Praise to our radiant sun—Ramzan  
Mighty leader and fighting man  
To the faith and love and hope of Chechnya  
Grant a long life, O eternal Allah! (quoted in Russell 2011b: 517).

The fame and admiration for Kadyrov extends well-beyond Chechnya's borders. While a refugee considered Chechens as "better off with rather than without Kadyrov," another participant stated that "Chechens couldn't ask for a better president," stressing the fact that Kadyrov brought hope when before it was only woe (PG20202; PG20204). Particularly interesting is to note that the brutal crackdown on dissidents and the climate of repression enforced by the regime are not just accepted, but also justified by many individuals, who consider limiting the population's democratic freedoms as necessary to prevent people from threatening the current state of relative peace. As one interviewee put it, "limiting the population's freedom of saying whatever it wants is a necessary evil, as people that have no restraints often do more harm than good with their words. This is especially true for Chechens: it is necessary for some to stay quiet and stop inciting others to think of violence as a viable solution for their problems" (PG20203). This opinion was shared by another refugee, who specified that "people must understand that authorities deserve respect.... This is what Kadyrov does: he teaches people to stop shaming the government and making a mockery of the nation's leaders. Chechnya needs men like Kadyrov" (PG20206).

The support obtained by the Kadyrovs in Chechnya not only demonstrates that authoritarian top-down approaches to legitimacy-building can produce substantial results, but also that a long-suffering population is inclined to accept as legitimate any authority, even if coercively imposed, capable of guaranteeing the provision of law and order. Although interviewees were well-aware that political processes in Chechnya "mean nothing" and that elections are "a pure formality," they nevertheless considered the imposition of a *de facto* dictator as the price to pay for enjoying the return to a peaceful life after years of all-out warfare (PG20204; PG20202).

### ***5.5 Third Pillar: Economic Development***

At the beginning of 2000, Chechnya was dangerously close to resembling a war-torn wasteland. With its "industrial base, social infrastructure, public and private housing,

transport links, and engineering capabilities almost completely destroyed” by artillery shelling and carpet bombings, the Chechen population was enduring dreadful economic conditions, with many individuals forced to join rebel groups and crime syndicates to provide for their families (Basnukaev 2014: 76; Galeotti 2002). For the purposes of revitalising the economy and restoring an appearance of normal life, the Russian government granted Chechnya an unprecedented influx of federal subsidies to rebuild hospitals, schools, roads, households, and industrial complexes. Between 2000 and 2010, Moscow transferred from federal to Chechen coffers the impressive amount of 30 billion dollars—money that the Chechen leaders used at their own discretion to stimulate Chechnya’s economic recovery (Alexseev 2011).

Following what Matveeva defined as an “essentially Soviet approach” to economic development (2007: 6), the Kadyrovs prioritised the country’s reconstruction along two main lines of action. A first step taken to stabilise Chechnya was the recovery of the country’s public facilities and urban settlements destroyed during the war. At the end of 2009, Chechnya appeared as a regenerated nation: while entire neighbourhoods were being brought back to their pre-war status, medical and educational facilities were restored to “the same level as before the wars” (LandInfo 2012: 13). Although the reconstruction of householdings and critical infrastructures occurred all across Chechnya, it was in Grozny, Kadyrov’s “most impressive gift to the Chechen nation,” in which Moscow’s subsidies have been put at their best use (Erbslöh 2016: 208). Flattened to the ground during the conflict, nowadays Grozny looks like a world-class capital, with luxurious buildings, fancy cafes, and the recently inaugurated “Europe’s largest mosque” standing as a symbol of Chechnya’s economic rebirth (Reuters 2019). If Grozny’s transition from devastated battleground to modern city impressed the international audience, the effects produced on the Chechen population were even greater. While a Chechen economist confessed that “what has been achieved (in Grozny) is... most astonishing,” the comment of one interviewee confirmed the strategic significance of the city’s reconstruction: “when I visit Grozny, I cannot even remember how the city looked like during the war, everything is brand-new. There is nothing that reminds people of those tragic years” (Hille 2015; PG20202). By hiding the scars of war behind a façade of economic lavishness, Kadyrov demolished the insurgents’ popular appeal, signalling to the population that defying the authority would have risked jeopardising the prosperity obtained after years of laborious progress. While Grozny’s reconstruction fulfilled important propagandistic purposes, the

organisation of Chechnya's national economy permitted the regime to minimise the risk of a resurgence in rebel activity.

Preventing individuals from finding profitable employment outside of state-controlled enterprises constituted the strategic keystone of Kadyrov's development agenda. Although the regime encourages the proliferation of small private businesses, such as mini-markets, cafes, and restaurants, as a way to consolidate the illusion of a thriving economy, enterprises that generate significant revenues are precluded from operating without the government's direct approval. As underscored by one interviewee maintaining regular contact with people living in Chechnya, "private businesses are always controlled by governmental organisations, there is no way to avoid it. For example, anyone who wants to open a business must rent a property, but all properties are owned by the state, and the state alone decides who can and can't open a business. Usually, only those loyal to Kadyrov are allowed to operate remunerative activities" (PG20203). The government's pervasive presence in the country's economic life was evident to another interviewee, who concluded that, in Chechnya, "you do not own your own business, as the authorities are in charge of everything. If the government does not like your business proposal, there is no chance for you to start that activity" (PG20202). By keeping the private market in a state of chronic underdevelopment and by offering people few "exceedingly" underpaid jobs, the regime forces entire families to rely on the economic inducements provided by the government as their only viable source of income (Halbach 2018: 25). In doing so, Kadyrov not only forces people into providing allegiance to the pro-Russian regime, but also limits the insurgents' possibility of extracting enough resources from the population to sustain a protracted campaign of partisan warfare.

Despite wages being kept at a low level to deprive potential rebels of active popular support, the regime prevents impoverished people from joining insurgent groups out of economic necessity by providing them with the means necessary to conduct a decorous life. While an interviewee confirmed that the government takes care of the poor and makes sure that "no one starves," another explained that "Kadyrov builds houses, puts furniture inside, and gives the keys to the homeless as a way to win the hearts of the population" (PG20207; PG20206). Kadyrov's apparent generosity towards those in need should not conceal the strategic objectives accomplished by the "charitable" activities sponsored by the government. In Chechnya, the population knows that economic inducements constitute a reward for loyalty, and that suspected

insurgent sympathisers are systematically sentenced to a life of hardship for the crime of disobeying the regime. Acting as a form of collective punishment, the government's practice of denying food, shelter, healthcare, and education to people associated with the rebellion produces a strong deterrent against potential non-compliers. "You must remember that, in Chechnya, the government is the only job provider, the only entity that decides who gets a job and for how long," stressed an interviewee, who further specified that "if someone is caught disrespecting the authority, the government precludes that person from finding employment ever again, condemning his family to a life of misery. By controlling the job market, the regime controls the population and dissuades people from challenging its rule" (PG20206). In other terms, Kadyrov gives the population a choice: either people can enjoy a comfortable life under the government's rule or can choose to support the rebels at the risk of being caught and sentenced to live a life of starvation and disease. Given the alternatives, it is not surprising that the vast majority of the population chose the former over the latter.

While the weaponization of economic inducements facilitated the task of discouraging anti-incumbent activities, Chechnya's reconstruction has been carried out under "the watchful eye" of the Russian government, which prevents Grozny from seizing the wealth necessary to decrease its dependency on federal subsidies (Souleimanov & Jasutis 2016: 122). The hierarchical power dynamics existing between Moscow and Grozny are particularly visible in the economic activities related to extraction of oil—a resource that could provide the regime with a steady influx of considerable revenues. While the Russian government does not allow exploration and drilling activities to take place without its direct approval, all taxes on oil revenues generated in Chechnya are to be paid exclusively to federal institutions (Bodner 2015). By preventing the Chechen leadership from accessing the resources necessary to boost profitable sectors of the local economy, Moscow forces Grozny to rely for more than 80% of its annual budget on federal subsidies, precluding the country from drifting away from the federal centre (Fuller 2017).

Instead of encouraging the emergence of a private sector as advocated by democratic COIN guidelines, the authoritarian shortcut's strategic techniques allowed the Russians to coerce people into relying on the state for their sustenance, leaving individuals with no other option than submitting to the government in return for economic gains. By tightly controlling Chechnya's economy, Moscow reduced the

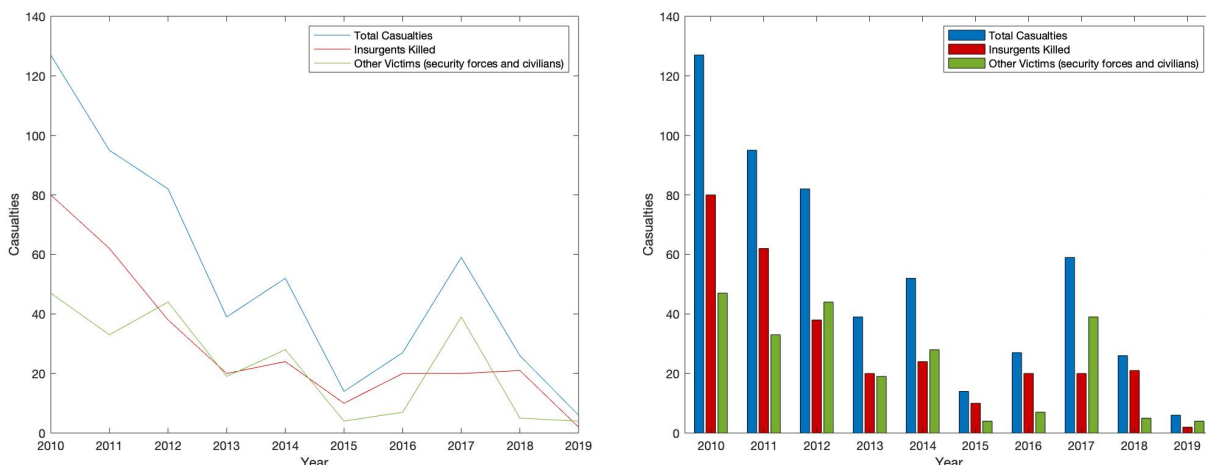
insurgents' potential for collective action whilst preventing the co-opted elite from "going rogue" and attempting to challenge Russia's supremacy.

### ***5.6 Hypothesis Assessment and Success in Chechnya***

In October 2008, less than a year before Russia's then-president Dmitry Medvedev announced the end of the COIN operations in Chechnya, American journalist Steele (2008) argued that Moscow's victory was complete and definitive: "like it or not, Russia has won this war." If this assessment seemed premature to some in 2008, the past ten years of Chechen history have not disproven Steele's evaluation. In the fight against the insurgents, Russia proficiently met all the criteria identified by this study as indicators of full-fledged mission success in population-centric COIN operations.

Ever since the formal end of the Second Chechen War, the frequency and lethality of insurgent-related attacks registered in Chechnya displayed an exponentially downward trend. According to one of the most reliable datasets on battle fatalities in Chechnya, the 2010-2019 period saw a 93% overall decrease in the number of insurgency-related deaths, with the majority of casualties being militants killed during armed clashes with the security forces (Caucasian Knot 2012; 2018; 2019a; 2019b; 2019c). With the year 2017 standing as an exception in this tendency due to groups of avengers staging indiscriminate attacks to retaliate for the COIN operations executed in previous years, Graph 1 and Graph 2 show a substantial decrease in the levels of insurgent activity registered in Chechnya, a trend that reached the historical minimum of only six reported casualties in 2019 (Souleimanov 2017b). Although the drop in insurgent activity can be partially attributed to the outflow of fighters to foreign hotbeds of insurgent warfare (Aliyev 2015), the sharp decline in the number of attacks occurred in Chechnya can hardly be explained without referring to the results obtained throughout years of intensive COIN operations. The almost complete collapse of the insurgency's support infrastructure is another clear indicator of Russia's success. As demonstrated by Souleimanov and Aliyev in several publications discussing the decline of pro-insurgent popular support in the region (2015a; 2015b, 2017), the unbearable pressure exercised by the regime on the population to stop supporting the insurgents became as strong as to compel entire villages to deny shelter and protection to the rebels.

Graph 1 & Graph 2: Insurgent-related casualties registered in Chechnya (2010-2019)



These military-centred metrics of success complement the set of criteria associated with population-centric standards of evaluation. In Chechnya, not only the Russians maintained the co-opted government in charge throughout the entirety of the armed confrontations, but also reduced to a minimum the risk of secession by endorsing an indigenous ally fully loyal to the Russian leadership. As Kadyrov himself regularly affirms, he is proud to be “Putin’s man” and to be “ready to die for him, to fulfil any order” (The Jamestown Foundation 2007; Osborn & Solovyov 2017). The unconditioned loyalty of the Chechen dictator to the Russian president allowed the Kremlin to embark upon the quest of taming the insurgency without granting any concession to its political leadership. As declared by Putin, “Russia does not negotiate with terrorists, it destroys them.” (Kremlin 2004). By strictly following this agenda up until the end of the COIN struggle, Moscow consolidated its uncontested supremacy over the rebellion-prone republic, minimising the potential for an insurgent’s comeback in the long-term.

In the light of these considerations, this study rejects the initial hypothesis on the alleged ineffectiveness of authoritarian COIN endeavours as supported by solid evidence. Challenging the intellectual foundations of the democratic model of COIN warfare, these results indicate that democratic blueprints are far from constituting a universal recipe for victory, as coercion-intensive approaches can be equally effective in defeating bottom-up insurgent movements.

Although Russia’s success in Chechnya calls for a re-evaluation of several techniques categorised by the dominant literature as “bad COIN practices,” scholars



researching the long-term effects of Moscow's strategy underscored that the authoritarian shortcut is not exempt from potential strategic backlashes. If Chechenizing the conflict allowed the Russians to divide and conquer the splintered factions of the Chechen resistance, delegating powers to an indigenous ally disposing of a 7000-strong personal militia might engender potential repercussions for Russia's national security. As noted by Souleimanov, Abbasov, and Siroky, Putin's strategy for Chechnya presents several cracks that could lead the "frozen" conflict towards a "violent thawing period" (2019: 90). First, Moscow cannot predict with certainty whether Kadyrov will continue to remain loyal to its Russian masters. Given the imperative of preserving the integrity of Russia's southern frontiers, Moscow has few available options other than sustaining the costs necessary for securing the allegiance of its Chechen vassal, with the consequence that Kadyrov is becoming increasingly bolder in its requests to the Russian Federation. As Politkovskaya famously commented, "a little dragon has been raised by the Kremlin. Now they need to feed it. Otherwise it will spit fire" (quoted in Knight 2017: 141). Second, Kadyrov's repressive methods broke the insurgency's backbone, but only at the cost of antagonising hundreds of individuals that are now waiting for propitious times to commence violence. As one former fighter put it, "there are a lot of people currently opposing the regime, but they cannot say or do anything (due to the climate of repression). When the president retires, I am certain that many will take blood revenge upon government officials, the *Kadyrovtsy*, and their civilian collaborators" (PG20208).

While the cracks in the foundations of Russia's strategy foretell the risk of a conflict escalation, the evidence submitted in the present study scales down the assessment of Chechnya's status quo as "untenable in the *longue durée*" (Souleimanov et al. 2019: 100). A first indicator suggesting a stronger resilience of Chechnya's political situation emerges from the last two decades of incessant work carried out by the Kremlin to permeate every aspect of the country's social, political, economic, and cultural life. Far from considering the co-optation of the Kadyrov clan as a concluding step in the pacification effort, Moscow continuously makes sure that Chechnya will never again be able to pursue a secessionist agenda. As one interviewee remarked, this restless activity brought substantial benefits to Moscow: "without Russia, I don't think that Chechnya could self-sustain itself. The Russians seized all the resources that Chechnya needs to be functionally independent. There is no doubt that Russia achieved its goals" (PG20207). Should a premature change in Chechnya's leadership take place,

many Chechens are aware that Moscow would immediately step in to de-escalate a potential crisis. While a deterioration in the relationship between Putin and Kadyrov could create temporary instability, it would be surprising seeing Moscow caught unprepared to react to such a predictable eventuality. As one interviewee stated, “I don’t see how this (scenario) would drastically change the situation: the Russian Federation has deep roots in our society and controls every aspects of the Chechen political sphere... the situation will not change after Kadyrov retires; Moscow will identify his successor, who will do exactly what the Russian Federation expects the ruler of Chechnya to do. I don’t see war emerging once Kadyrov will no longer be president” (PG20202).

The tight control exercised by the Kremlin over Chechnya’s political institutions is complemented and reinforced by a second indicator of regime resilience related to the demographic composition of the Chechen population. As estimated by several human rights organisations (World Peace Foundation 2015; RFE 2005), the death toll of approximately 160.000 civilians killed throughout the wars weighed enormously over a nation of around 1 million people, which was further reduced by the outflow of thousands of refugees fleeing to Europe. Occurred in less than twenty years, the depletion of the adult population radically changed Chechnya’s age structure, and with it the socio-cultural composition of its social texture. As explained by one interviewee:

“There is a sharp difference between pre and post-war Chechens. In today’s Chechnya, you don’t see around many people of my age<sup>1</sup>, as many died during the wars. Those who got killed were the brave ones, those willing to sacrifice for their country...The old generation is no longer capable of revitalising the rebellion. It is up to the new generation now, and the beliefs, aspirations, education, and socio-cultural roots of the youth will be decisive in determining the likelihood of a new conflict. But the legacy of the two wars is fading away, and the new generation is far different from the previous one—it does not want to fight the government. I am convinced that even in front of a political crisis, such as a change in the Chechen leadership, the young generation would not pick up a rifle to fight for independence” (PG20203).

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<sup>1</sup> Between 50 and 60 years old.

With a population largely comprised of people raised and educated under the banners of the new pro-Russian regime, Kadyrov—and Putin in turn—ensured that the dream of independence would fall out of fashion among a generation of Chechens that, aware of what their families endured during the wars, no longer desires to “spill blood” in the pursuit of their fathers’ ambitions (PG20207). While this evidence does not refute the fact that Moscow’s political edifice for Chechnya has been built on unstable foundations, the measures taken to contain potential fallouts suggest that the current status quo might be more resilient than what concluded by previous analysts. In applying the guidelines advocated by the authoritarian shortcut, Moscow circumvented the restrictions placed by liberal democracies on their militaries without jeopardising the attainment of top-priority strategic objectives. The attested success of the authoritarian shortcut in Chechnya holds substantial implications for Western counterinsurgents.

### ***5.7 Implications for Western Military Planners***

Sharing the perspective of many Western analysts, military historian Miakinkov concluded in his study of the Chechen Wars that “there is little indeed” a democratic state can absorb from the COIN experience of authoritarian regimes (2011: 674). Miakinkov’s assessment bears some truth, as most of the wantonly brutal tactics utilised by authoritarian counterinsurgents remain inaccessible to liberal democracies. Nevertheless, *a priori* refusing to extrapolate useful lessons from the experience of successful COIN operations only contributes to slowing down the progress towards better-refined COIN techniques. In an effort to overcome the psychological barrier placed against the study of authoritarian COIN endeavours, this study distils from the Chechen case a list of five takeaways meant to improve the strategic blueprints available to Western democracies:

- **Intelligence Base: Play the Indigenous Card**

The deployment of indigenous forces for intelligence-gathering purposes constituted the trump card of Moscow’s COIN efforts during the Second Chechen War. Marking a watershed in the process of identification and neutralisation of enemy fighters and civilian supporters, the provision of actionable intelligence by defected insurgents and their relatives triggered the decapitation of the insurgency’s leadership and facilitated

the disruption of the rebellion's organisational infrastructure. Although this study discourages Western practitioners from resorting to torture and other illegal intelligence collection techniques, the Chechen case-study demonstrates that setting up a capillary network of native collaborators magnifies the amount and quality of collected HUMINT. In the light of these findings, practitioners would find profitable employing more invasive intelligence techniques geared towards the exploitation of indigenous sources. By establishing a permeating surveillance system within the host society, counterinsurgents could better triangulate the information collected from trusted informants without compromising the legal requirements for intelligence operations conducted during wartime.

- IO Base: Demonise the Enemy

Russia's all-out media offensive in Chechnya incorporated the typical features of Soviet-era propaganda campaigns: aggressive in its nature, pounding in its execution, and merciless towards its target. Quick in silencing the enemy's propaganda, the Russians achieved impressive results by bombarding the population with contents meant to dehumanise the rebels and deepen the cleavages already existing within the Chechen society. Conversely, democratic counterinsurgents have been struggling to outsmart insurgent groups in the information domain of COIN warfare. While the U.S. information campaign in Iraq "lack(ed) resonance and relevance among ordinary Iraqis" (Garfield 2007: 27), the Coalition forces operating in Afghanistan largely failed to discredit the Taliban's propaganda, ultimately signalling "more vulnerability than strength" to the local population (Rahmani & Lawrence 2018). Faced with determined and resourceful enemies, Western IO officers must be ready to confront the insurgents at their own game, communicating decisiveness and resolve to their target audience with all means at their disposal. This will require discarding the "political correctness" characterising democratic approaches to IO in favour of more aggressive techniques aimed at stigmatising the insurgents and curtailing their popular appeal. By saturating the area of operations with assertive counter-propaganda messages, IO officers would more effectively seize and maintain the information initiative against the insurgents' political apparatus.

- Use of Force: Bet on Deterrence

As long as the population is allowed to provide support to the rebels, COIN endeavours are destined to fail. Learned the hard way by the Russians during the First Chechen War, the marginalisation of the insurgents from their popular mass base constituted the top-priority objective of Russia's second round of COIN operations. While Moscow's use of indiscriminate violence against the population was patently criminal, its effectiveness signals that a COIN campaign can hardly be victorious if the population is left free to decide where its allegiance resides, as all odds suggest that brothers, husbands, and sons will always be chosen over the government. These observations suggest that counterinsurgents who refuse punishing individuals that act against the restoration of law and order are likely to prolong the armed struggle and delay the transition towards a more peaceful environment. By harmonising the principle of "minimum necessary force" encompassed in democratic blueprints with the calibrated use of coercion in a "deterrence by punishment" configuration, counterinsurgents would more effectively dissuade the population from supporting the rebels without infringing the moral requirements imposed by democratic states on their militaries.

- Political Legitimacy: Leverage on Charisma

The co-optation of the Kadyrov clan constituted the strategic mainstay of Russia's political scheme for Chechnya. While turning notorious foes into loyal friends facilitated the decapitation of the insurgency's leadership, endorsing charismatic figures as the chosen leaders of the new regime allowed the Russians to garner genuine popular support for the pro-Russian camp. As people living during periods of social disarray are prone to accept as legitimate any authority capable of restoring a resemblance of normal life, democratic counterinsurgents would find more effective designating an authority figure *before* promoting electoral processes. By placing popular elites in leadership positions, counterinsurgents could postpone electoral processes to more peaceful times, minimising the risk of actors spoiling democratic elections and discrediting the COIN force as incapable of protecting the population from the insurgents' retribution.

- Economic Development: Weaponize Carrots

In Chechnya, people can live a decorous life provided that they refrain from engaging in behaviours sanctioned by the authority. Leveraging on the security forces' ability to

identify and punish non-compliers, the Chechen government ensures that only those individuals who submit to its rule obtain access to essential services and sources of income. By depriving insurgent sympathisers of the means necessary to provide for their families, the regime deters the rest of the population from collaborating with the opponent, raising the costs of defying the authority well-above any potential benefit associated with supporting the rebellion. Because of its effectiveness, the weaponization of economic carrots could find profitable application in democratic COIN blueprints. By threatening to deprive insurgent supporters of their chances of living a comfortable life under the incumbent's rule, Western counterinsurgents would minimise the recurrence of latent anti-incumbent collective action, minimising the risk of seeing their progresses nullified by few individuals persisting in acting against the restoration of law and order.

## 6 Conclusion

This study has advanced and tested “the authoritarian shortcut”—a novel theoretical framework expounding the logic of authoritarian COIN operations. Challenging the dominant literature on COIN warfare, the study argued that authoritarian counterinsurgents can deliver mission success *in spite of and thanks to* their disregard for the strategic tenets regulating the COIN operations performed by democratic states.

The overarching premise underpinning this “unorthodox” variant of population-centric COIN is that the field manuals issued to Western militaries do not constitute a universal textbook for COIN operations. By circumventing or altering the limitations on the use of force contained in Western military doctrines, authoritarian counterinsurgents developed an alternative pathway which does not require limiting the use of coercive techniques to confront insurgency. The authoritarian shortcut diverges from the precepts of traditional COIN narratives in the execution of intelligence, information, military, political, and economic activities. Authoritarian counterinsurgents exploit fear to collect intelligence, utilise propaganda to dehumanise opponents, victimise civilians to deter non-compliance, co-opt indigenous elites to engender legitimacy, and weaponize economic inducements to dissuade pro-insurgent activity.

The Russian COIN operations carried out during the Second Chechen War provide empirical confirmation to the authoritarian shortcut's theoretical propositions. Drawing upon original data generated during interviews conducted with several Chechen civilians and two former insurgents, this study demonstrated that Moscow, following a shortcut pattern to COIN warfare, crushed the rampant insurgency and consolidated its ascendancy over the breakaway republic. While the initial use of randomised violence and wanton intelligence techniques allowed the Russians to stem the tide of people joining the rebellion, "indigenising" the conflict by exacerbating the socio-political cleavages already existing within the Chechen society enabled Moscow to engender popular support for the co-opted Chechen leadership. Acting upon increasingly accurate intelligence submitted by turncoat rebels and local informants, the Russians started selectively targeting suspected insurgents and punishing their families for the crime of defying the incumbent. With most of its fighters either killed or dissuaded from further action, its support network largely dismantled by the security forces, and its popular mass base deterred into passive acquiesce, the insurgency progressively collapsed under the pressure exercised by the "rule-by-fear machine" set up by the pro-Russian regime (Souleimanov et al. 2019: 98). At the time of writing, more than ten years after the official end of the COIN operations, the situation in Chechnya remains relatively stable. Against a backdrop of widespread scepticism, the "Russian shortcut" seems to have ticked all boxes in the checklist of a successful COIN campaign.

These findings bear important implications for Western practitioners at a time of deep crisis for the democratic model. Despite thousands of lives lost and billions of dollars dissipated in striving to win the "hearts and minds" of local populations, results obtained by Western counterinsurgents have been "distinctively unimpressive" at best and utterly disastrous at worst (Gray 2013: vii). While rebel groups continue inflicting heavy sufferings upon the Iraqi population, killing more than 2300 civilians in 2019 alone, the situation in Afghanistan is worsening as the government loses ground to a resilient insurgency exercising control over almost 20% of the national territory (Iraqi Body Count 2020; Roggio & Gutowski 2020). As these failures call for a re-thinking of the precepts encompassed in military manuals such as the *FM 3-24*, Western strategists could draw from the experience of authoritarian counterinsurgents new solutions for the shortfalls affecting the democratic model. While this study discourages Western practitioners from emulating Russia's patently criminal strategies, its findings

suggest that a COIN force can hardly be victorious if it is not willing to fully exploit its coercive potential. By harmonising the principles encompassed in “hearts and minds” military blueprints with the calibrated use of “deterrence by punishment” techniques, Western counterinsurgents could reduce the incidence of rebel activity without infringing the moral requirements imposed by democratic states on their militaries.

This study has also revealed that the authoritarian ways of COIN warfare remain largely unknown and widely misunderstood. To further enrich this overlooked research area, the scholarship disposes of several options. For scholars specialised in quantitative analysis, testing the mechanisms of the authoritarian shortcut on a large-N dataset of historical cases could help tracing the evolution of the authoritarian model throughout time. If complemented with qualitative case-study research conducted across a broad spectrum of authoritarian COIN operations, this evidence would shed light on how authoritarian regimes learn from each other to better confront and suppress insurgency. As the concept of “authoritarian learning” scarcely features in the field of COIN studies (Heydemann & Leenders 2014), understanding how authoritarian regimes improve their strategies “upon the prior successes and failures of other governments” could potentially disclose important findings regarding the evolutionary trends characterising the authoritarian shortcut (Hall & Ambrosio 2017: 143). As a last thought for future researchers, this study recommends to closely monitor the authoritarian shortcut as applied to the Syrian theatre of COIN operations. With the rapid urbanisation of the Third World pushing large masses of impoverished people to leave the countryside for large metropolises, the environmental settings of future COIN operations appear less like Chechnya’s woods-covered peaks and more like the smoking ruins of Aleppo’s suburbs. With the “coming age of the urban guerrilla” rapidly approaching, this study joins Kilcullen in arguing that the time has come for researchers to “drag ourselves...out of the mountains” (2013: 262).

In rationalising the logic of authoritarian COIN operations, this study has not aimed at justifying the use of torture, forced starvation, mass killing, and other repulsive techniques of warfare. Instead, its purpose was to elucidate the reasons why these supposedly counter-productive methods display a surprisingly high record of successes. As the world likely enters its 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of shrinking democratic freedoms (Repucci 2020), understanding—and therefore predicting—how future authoritarian regimes will draw upon the teachings of others to suppress rebellions falls far from being futile. This study revealed that authoritarian ways can and do work; what remains



to be established is whether a marriage between coercive and persuasive measures could put an end to the trail of disappointing results achieved by Western states throughout the last two decades of uninterrupted COIN operations.

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### Interviews

Code	Status	Date	Location
PG20201	Former fighter	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20202	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20203	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20204	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20205	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20206	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20207	Civilian	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia
PG20208	Former fighter	February 2020	Pankisi Gorge, Georgia

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