

# PHOTOGRAPHY BLOG



## 'Photography cannot be objective': uncovering Chechnya's hidden identity

Daide Monteleone's poignant exhibition about the Russian republic shows signs that it is recovering after years of brutal conflict and repression. But at what cost?

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Silhouettes of supporters of the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, awaiting the opening of a new ski resort. All photographs: Davide Monteleone

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"In some ways, [Chechnya](#) has won and [Russia](#) has won," says the documentary photographer Davide Monteleone, offering an unlikely perspective on the legacy of a brutal conflict [that has cost more than 150,000 lives](#). Such a statement would seem shocking were it not for the deep consideration that the three-time World Press Photo winner has given to it. Over three months in Chechnya, he has examined the fragmented identity of the Chechen people [after years of war, exile, repression and hostility](#). But if victory can indeed be claimed by both sides, then at what cost to the Chechen way of life? It is a question that [Monteleone's latest exhibition in Paris](#) aims to answer.

Sarcastically titled Spasibo (meaning "thank you" – as if from the people of Chechnya to the Russian regime they feel tyrannised them), Monteleone's show reveals life in the Russian republic has regained an unexpected sense of order through compromise. Gone are the days when Chechens were prohibited from speaking their own language: Islam is now flourishing and the capital, Grozny, has been rapidly rebuilt using Russian aid. But all this has been done under strict parameters governed by the republic's pro-Moscow Chechen president, [Ramzan Kadyrov](#).



Security forces line the streets during the 10th annual celebration of Constitution Day

"There is a process of [Chechenisation](#) going on and Kadyrov is shaping the identities of the Chechens using lots of different ingredients: Islam, megalomania, the cult of personality, traditional Chechen customs, globalisation," says Monteleone. "The Chechen population is living much better than five years ago, when some of them didn't have houses, water or food. But there is constriction. They have had to compromise for a better way of life. So I wanted to do an investigation about what it means

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to be Chechen right now."

Monteleone's photographs neatly convey the myriad ingredients of modern Chechnya. Through a combination of portraits, pictures of military forces, landscapes and depictions of wrestling, marriage and other traditional activities, he draws out the rich symbolism of the region. Moreover, his images brim with the same uncertainty that hangs over it.



Fireworks in Grozny's main square to mark Constitution Day

The opening shot in the [Paris](#) show is of a huge cloud of smoke billowing from a building. Is this another image of an uprising? No, it's a fireworks display – though the gut reaction it provokes leaves a lingering feeling of unease. "It's like it could be a picture from or a memory of the war, but the viewer can't be sure until they read the caption," says Monteleone.

Likewise, there is a striking photograph of a young bride on her wedding day – a phantom-like presence at the far end of the exhibition. It is traditional in Chechen culture for women to marry very young – though the practice is strongly opposed by Russian law and even Kadyrov, formerly a rebel fighter, has been forced to condemn it (another instance of compromise). Yet we learn that the child bride in the photograph is in fact an actress rehearsing for a movie. There is also an astonishing image of silhouettes at night, shown only in the accompanying book, which seems redolent of the men and women who have lost their lives down the years, but is actually a shot of young Kadyrov supporters awaiting the opening of a new ski resort.

"All of the work is made of these doubles – it is a game I'm playing," says Monteleone. "This is like what's happening in Chechnya itself – there

are a lot of facades. There is the reconstruction of Grozny, which is real, but behind that there is still a lot of tension."



Rada, 14, trying on a wedding dress on a bus during a rehearsal for the shooting of a movie about Chechen deportation

Central to Monteleone's project, which earned the Carmignac Gestion Photojournalism award, was an intention to do away with the clichés that surround the region and its people. His success is considerable; the images demand suspension of prior judgements in order to be fully understood.

"Every time I start a project, I type into Google the title I want to give to the project, and I see what comes out. If you type in 'Chechen identity' you'll find a lot of pictures of war and disaster. That's still the stereotype of Chechnya. A lot of people think there is still a war there. A lot of people think it is independent. A lot of people think it is full of extremists. I think there is even confusion in the people themselves [about their identity], because they don't really know who they are any more."

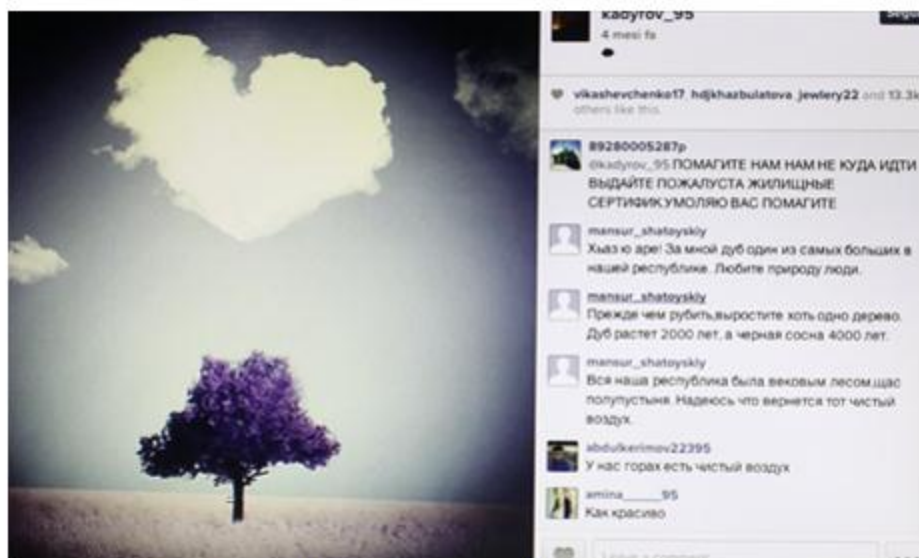




The landscape near Lake Kezenoyam

In one of the exhibition's most poignant moments, a woman is seen raising a large portrait of the former Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev. But the image conceals her – and thus, Monteleone shows how the past still overshadows the present. Elsewhere, the mood of the photographs is so sombre and reflective it becomes clear that although the physical conflict with Russia has died, the mental conflict rages. "The violence is now psychological – a form of brainwashing that starts with the young," he says. "The authorities use things like religion and propaganda on their own people to make them believe everything is fine. It's easy to buy or convince the young people."

There is a remarkable twist at the end of the show, when Monteleone addresses the issue of propaganda head-on by including a slideshow of photographs posted on Instagram by Kadyrov. The images are amusingly staged, the kind that Vladimir Putin would himself propagate, and include the Chechen leader with wildlife, at the dentist and climbing a blossom tree. Most bizarre of all is an image of a heart-shaped cloud hovering in lilac-tinted sky – a doctored picture that is both a fantasy and a symbol of tenderness toward his homeland.



A screenshot from Ramzan Kadyrov's Instagram feed

"These are Kadyrov's own perceptions of Chechnya," Monteleone explains. "It's a false impression, but it's how he would like to show Chechnya now. His pictures have some similarities with the pictures I have made, and yet they are so far away. The concept of photography has been completely deformed by him."

From this acknowledgement, Monteleone comes to an unlikely conclusion about his own attempts to convey Chechen identity. "I don't think photography can be objective at all," he says. "Kadyrov is openly playing a game to show what he thinks, just as I was. It makes you understand how much truth can be photographed – probably zero per cent. It's all interpretation."

- Spasibo is on show at the Chapelle de l'École des Beaux-Arts in Paris until 4 December 2013