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Russia's Chechnya First Region to Seal Off Internal Borders Amid Coronavirus

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Chechnya is among Russia's least-hit regions, with 10 out of 2,777 coronavirus cases reported nationwide. The region reported its first coronavirus-related death Wednesday. **Yelena Afonina / TASS**

The republic of Chechnya will close its internal borders this Sunday, becoming the first Russian region to bar entry to fellow citizens as novel coronavirus cases slowly spread across the world's largest country.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov announced on Instagram that his region will ban entry into and exit from Chechnya by land or air starting April 5, the state-run RIA Novosti news agency reported Wednesday.

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"Anyone wishing to return to or leave [Chechnya] must do so before April 5, after which we won't allow anyone to pass," he was quoted as saying.

Chechnya will allow only food and medical supplies into the region after sealing off its borders, Kadyrov added.

Last week, the Chechen capital of Grozny banned non-essential entry to Russians who are not registered as living there. Authorities also ordered residents of other Chechen cities to avoid all travel.

Several towns in at least three regions, including annexed Crimea, have set up roadblocks barring non-residents to prevent the spread of coronavirus, Bloomberg reported Wednesday. The steps appear to contradict President Vladimir Putin's entreaties to regional envoys Monday to "prevent any attempts to restrict trade flows between regions."

Footage circulated on social media this week depicting men in uniform patrolling Chechnya's deserted streets brandishing plastic pipes as a quarantine enforcement tool.

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"This is about the security of my people, the republic, and I must take decisive measures in this situation," Kadyrov was quoted as saying.

Kadyrov, who has led the Muslim-majority region of Russia's North Caucasus for over a decade, previously dismissed concerns over the coronavirus pandemic and recommended home remedies as prevention measures.

A majority of Russian regions have instituted coronavirus lockdowns, following Moscow's self-isolation rules which came into effect Monday. The capital's strict rules on residents' movement, enforced through what city authorities called a "smart monitoring system," coincided with Putin's announcement of a paid "non-working" week to slow the outbreak.

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