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In ‘No Nation Without Culture,’ Vladlena Sandu Reckons With Chechnya’s Lost Identity

By Samantha Berkhead

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Courtesy photo

While Russia was amassing troops and tanks along the Ukrainian border in the spring of 2021, film and theatre director Vladlena Sandu was in the Chechen capital of Grozny to film a documentary based on her memories of growing up during the Chechen Wars.

Two decades after it was flattened by Russian bombs during Chechnya’s wars for independence from Moscow, Grozny has been rebuilt with Kremlin money and is ruled with an iron fist by Ramzan Kadyrov. Portraits of President Vladimir Putin, Kadyrov and his late father Akhmat Kadyrov hang from nearly every official building, from government offices to kindergartens.

Seeing these portraits, Sandu, who was born in Crimea and raised in Grozny, her mother’s

hometown, sought to capture the feeling of living under the relentless gaze of dictators. She started secretly filming from the back seat of a car at the crack of dawn.

The result was the short documentary "No Nation Without Culture," a rare first-hand view from the streets of Grozny under Kadyrov's totalitarian rule.

Embed:

Just months after Sandu and her team finished filming, Russian forces — with Chechen troops among them — would invade Ukraine, deploying the same brutal tactics that once leveled Grozny to ravage Ukrainian cities like Mariupol, Bakhmut and Avdiivka.

Sandu left Russia following the invasion and now lives in The Netherlands.

The Moscow Times spoke with Sandu and film producer Yanna Buryak about the erasure of Chechen culture and identity under centuries of Russian rule, life under a totalitarian regime and breaking the cycle of violence caused by war.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MT: The title of 'No Nation Without Culture' is ironic, because obviously in Chechnya there is no artistic freedom or any freedom. What does the title mean to you more broadly?

VS: It's like a joke from Akhmat Kadyrov and the modern regime: 'There's no nation without culture.' But what is the culture now in Chechnya? [Chechens] lost their culture. It was killed by the Russian Empire. After that, they were deported to Kazakhstan and the Soviet Union killed the culture. And after that, modern-day Russia bombed Chechnya and destroyed everything — entire artifacts of the culture, architecture, everything. They don't have cultural artifacts [anymore] in Chechnya. Before, they had their own alphabet, but now it's only Cyrillic. And the only 'culture,' as we saw in the film, is a portrait with dictators. In the last scene... I sit on the stage of a theatrical hall under a huge portrait of Akhmat Kadyrov with this sentence 'No nation without culture'... and I'm asking myself, 'What is the culture? What am I doing here?'

I was doing 'Memory,' which is another project about the Chechen War. This topic is totally off-limits in both Russia and Chechnya. For us to be able to do this project I pretended that we had an agreement with the Russian Culture Ministry to make a patriotic film about my grandfather, a hero in the Second World War. After that, we met with the Culture Ministry in Chechnya and they agreed to this fake scenario.... I said, 'I'm from Chechnya, I grew up here, my grandparents' house is here, so maybe I can support you with something.' We understood each other. [Because of this] we shot 'Memory' without people from the FSB or the Chechen FSB.

We started to shoot this documentary ['No Nation'] in parallel to 'Memory.' We woke up early in the morning, like 4 or 5 a.m., and shot this film in the street inside a car with tinted windows. It's difficult to shoot without special protection, such as with tinted windows,

because anyone can report you to the authorities.

For me, ‘No nation without culture’ is like an ironic joke by Akhmat Kadyrov, and now it’s used by the modern regime of Ramzan Kadyrov and Putin. No one, I think, understands what culture is in Chechnya. And these huge portraits remind me of ‘1984,’ with Big Brother, who watches you all the time, everywhere. The first time you see these huge portraits, you are frozen, because you feel how these huge portraits are watching you like Big Brother.

MT: It was clear that you had to shoot this footage in secret. Did you ever feel like your safety might be jeopardized even while filming in a car?

VS: Yes, we felt fear. Once, in the hotel where the lead group was filming, the hotel director drew up a report about us, saying ‘I don't understand what they're doing, these are weird people.’ This is very dangerous for me, for the DOP (director of photography), for the man who supported us with a car. People like Liza Popova and the man with the car agreed and said ‘Yes, this is important. It's dangerous for us, but we will do it.’ So yes, we had fear, but I think the process of shooting this film inspired us to feel like we did something important.

YB: It's impossible to film in Chechnya, as you probably know, and this was right before the war. When Vladlena saw what was going on there, she shared it with me. We felt strongly about getting this message out there now of what was going on within our country, because whatever is going on in Chechnya is something that consequently takes place in Russia as well. And it's quite an important fact that we created a fake script. That was how we got all... the rights to film in this country that is usually closed.

VS: Another point of view is that we [Chechens] have a special propaganda image created by Russia. They created an image of the Chechen population like, ‘This is a very dangerous people, they are weird, they are angry people, they are terrorists.’ How did they create this image? Every Chechen person is still afraid of talking about this topic. Because if someone started to tell the truth, he would be arrested — not just him, but also his family and friends. Big Brother sees everything in Chechnya. That’s how this regime continues. Everyone is still living in fear.

For example, a friend from Chechnya told me about going to the village where he grew up where he met a classmate. After this meeting, everyone asks himself, ‘Who will be the first to go to the police and create a report?’ You understand how this regime works after hearing this story. Everyone could be a great report, because this could be your relatives, your friends, your wife, your kids. No one in Chechnya talks about reality. If you start to ask questions, like, ‘What do you think about this,’ [the response is] ‘Maybe we should talk about the weather.’

MT: Did you have a chance to speak to people in private while you were in Grozny?

VS: Everyone talked to me about their fear and about how this regime controls them. One friend, who works in a kindergarten, has a special WhatsApp chat that includes people from the government. They told them, ‘You need to post comments for Ramzan Kadyrov's son on Instagram. And after that, you need to send us a screenshot of what you did.’ If you don’t... they will ask ‘Why didn't you do this?’ And after that, maybe they’ll sanction you, like cut your salary. This is all managed within a structure, an organization. They have chats with

people from the government or police. I can't reveal the names of my friends because it's dangerous for them, they still live in Chechnya and their relatives live in Chechnya.

MT: Russia's tactics during the invasion of Ukraine have been compared to its actions during the Chechen Wars. This film also felt like a warning that what we see in Chechnya today could happen to Ukraine someday.

YB: We shot the film right before the war. We had a copy without the last part where Vladlena flees Russia. We showed it to a few festivals, and we were like, 'This is so important,' we wanted to send this warning out. They weren't really comprehending what we were showing them. And in a few weeks, the war erupted. That's when we revised the film to include the part of Vladlena fleeing from Russia.

MT: You were in Grozny to film 'Memory,' your upcoming documentary about your adolescence during the Chechen Wars. What was the process of making that like?

VS: 'Memory' is [about] the childhood perception of war. This is without questions from adults. What is war for a child? I was there for years during the war and it was like my normal life. After some time, kids become very adapted to war. I'm trying to create some document of what happened in Chechnya with my memories, because now we have 'fake' documentation made by Russia. They despise alternative perspectives about this topic.

My memories are from the 90s, the time I was in Chechnya. But I think they're very relevant to the present because it's all about the cycle of violence. And how this cycle uses kids. This is the main idea from the film. A lot of kids lost parents or relatives in the war, and they desperately want revenge. And the conflict still needs to continue. I was the same way. Many of those with PTSD after a war want revenge. How we can stop this cycle of violence? The whole population in Chechnya has bad memories of the 20th century and of modern times, but there is still this fear. And I don't know how it's possible to try to be independent without Russia now. They have lost this idea because they have fear.

MT: There are no easy answers, but I think it's important that the questions be asked.

VS: Now the Russian Federation of Terrorists manages all ideas and questions. It's not easy to ask questions in the arms of the terrorists. They've been in the arms of real terrorists for 20 years now. After 20 years of living with fear, people lose their will. It's like slavery. Because people who live long periods with this enormous fear inside them lose the will to ask questions.

And this is the final scene of 'No Nation Without Culture': you see the kids with weapons talking about 'Russia, my homeland,' and everyone wants to kill the enemies of the Russian Federation. How can we continue? The people who do not resist are slaves. And it's sad to call the Chechen population slaves, but this is true now.

MT: What is it like to live in the Netherlands, where there's so much freedom and open-mindedness, while so much of your work focuses on a place without freedom?

VS: During two and a half years of living in The Netherlands, I've lost my fear. In Russia, my graduation film was about the Chechen War... At the university, the commission said, 'We don't know what you're talking about in your film, why are you talking about that, this is not important.' In Russia, people don't want to recognize the process from the present time, and what happened. Those who talk about what happened are 'weird.'

This is how the regime in Chechnya works. They've created the same image about people who try to share the truth. After that, society hates people who speak the truth. In the Netherlands, I feel more and more like what I did is important. I'm a real person who knows the facts, and it's important to share my knowledge about this topic.

Vladlena Sandu will speak at Women Against the Kremlin, a groundbreaking gathering of women leaders standing against war and authoritarianism hosted by The Moscow Times in Amsterdam on Nov. 26, 2024.

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