



Ramzan Kadyrov: insecure strongman?

by Martin Breitmaier

Nearly one year ago, Russian liberal oppositionist Boris Nemtsov was gunned down in the centre of Moscow. On the eve of the anniversary of his death, the evidence produced by the Russian Investigative Committee (RIC) examining the case points to seven Chechen nationals led by Ruslan Mukhutdinov, the fugitive driver of an officer of the Chechen 'Sever' (special forces) battalion, as the culprits. However, lawyers representing Nemtsov's daughter consider the focus on the hierarchically unimportant Mukhutdinov to be an attempt to cover for a higher-ranking grey eminence. Although the involvement of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and his entourage seems likely, the RIC has refused requests to interrogate them.

Strangely enough, the Chechen leader has recently gone out of his way to draw attention to himself. In mid-January, he reignited a confrontation with members of the Russian liberal opposition whom he called 'enemies of the people' and threatened with punitive psychiatric treatment. The resulting outrage in liberal circles led to one Siberian politician calling Kadyrov 'the shame of Russia', an insult which caused Kadyrov to mobilise (allegedly) one million supporters at a rally in Grozny.

The row turned uglier when Kadyrov released a video making death threats against two Liberal Party (PARNAS) politicians, one of whom, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, was later attacked by Chechens in a Moscow restaurant. Despite the obvious links, President Putin's press

secretary Dmitry Peskov played down Kadyrov's January statement and claimed the restaurant attack was an act of hooliganism that should not be associated with the Chechen leadership.

Kadyrov has long been known for his hyper-masculine public image (similar to Putin's) and for threatening his opponents with violence. However, the suspicions of his involvement in Nemtsov's assassination and the apparent baselessness of his recent confrontations suggest that he is pushing boundaries even by his standards. What is he trying to achieve? And why is Moscow turning a blind eye?

The double-hatted patriot

Moscow's championing of former insurgent Kadyrov as leader of Chechnya has come with several strings attached. Shortly after he came to power in 2007, he successfully established relative stability in the war-torn region (today, it – officially – has one of the lowest crime rates in Russia). In exchange for his loyalty to the centre, Kadyrov was granted special powers and concessions, which allowed him to introduce a highly personalised style of authoritarian governance and turn Chechnya into a *de facto* autonomous region.

For years, the Chechen economy has been receiving large amounts of federal subsidies (which, for example, made up 83% of the federal subject's 2015 budget) and it is an open secret that

Kadyrov uses the lion's share of these funds to buy the loyalty of local clans. Chechnya also differs from Russia's other provinces in a military sense. Although its battle-hardened armed forces are formally subordinated to federal command, they reportedly take orders exclusively from the Chechen leadership.

Although Kadyrov is *de jure* a regional politician, he has long expanded his influence beyond the borders of Chechnya. While his main role is to guarantee stability in the volatile north Caucasus, he is also an active contributor to Russian foreign policy. The more public part of his international engagement is his frequent statements on current issues, in which he never fails to depict himself as exemplary patriot and the Kremlin's hatchet man. His threats and promises are usually formulated in a characteristically boastful manner. For instance, in December 2014, he threatened to kidnap and kill Ukrainian MPs for their statements on militant attacks in Grozny, and in September 2015, he offered to send 'tens of thousands' of Chechen troops to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria.

But there is also a more subtle side to Kadyrov's international engagement, namely his contribution to diplomacy between Russia and Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In what is rather unusual for Russian regional politicians, the Chechen president has received or visited many senior political leaders of the MENA on behalf of Moscow (the Saudi king or Afghan vice president last year, for example). His role as one of Russia's 'Muslim ambassadors' is especially important since several countries in the region view Russia in a negative light and the fate of Moscow's key regional ally Bashar al-Assad remains uncertain.

Between the lines

The recent media confrontation emphasises both a high level of interdependency between Kadyrov and Putin and an increasing insecurity on the part of the Chechen leader. Kadyrov relies on Putin for political legitimisation and funding. His second term as head of the Chechen Republic expires in spring 2016, after which an interim governor (possibly himself) named by the Russian president will take over until the Chechen elections on 18 September.

Yet in the aftermath of the assassination of Nemtsov, Kadyrov's appears to be increasingly uncertain about his standing with the Russian elite. In April, he rekindled his conflict with the

Russian *siloviki* (public officials previously affiliated to security/military organisations), who reportedly disapprove of his insurgent background and the Kremlin's appeasement of his actions. When police from the neighbouring federal subject of Stavropol entered Chechen territory and killed a Nemtsov murder suspect, Kadyrov responded by ordering Chechen police to shoot law enforcement officers from other Russian provinces operating in Chechnya without permission.

Another source of Kadyrov's insecurity is the Russian economic crisis: cuts to regional subsidies are an obvious cost-saving measure. This poses a clear problem as loyal troops are key to maintaining the 'Pax Ramzana', but the Chechen clans' allegiance to Kadyrov is partially based on a leasing agreement. Should the Kremlin decide to decrease payments, Chechen domestic tensions may rise again.

Putin on the other hand highly values Kadyrov's loyalty and efficiency, and the security and stability of the North Caucasus is one of the key pillars upon which Putin built his rule. Moreover, in the present context of economic downturn, growing civil discontent in Russian society and the increasing destabilisation of the MENA, the Russian president is not in a position to take risks. Finally, Kadyrov's brute showmanship benefits Putin by averting negative attention from the president and emphasising the fact that anyone who could replace him is a far worse alternative.

However, Putin cannot entirely ignore the interests of the *siloviki* and will try to avoid a situation in which he might look weak. Thus, while Kadyrov's replacement remains unlikely, the RIC's findings suggest that the ruling elite is increasingly divided over his position. Most likely, Kadyrov's recent stunts were intended to remind the Kremlin of his allegiance, emphasise his own indispensability and to defy those in the ruling class who oppose him.

While Kadyrov's statements sparked a debate about his hatred of the Russian opposition, the real line of conflict runs between Kadyrov and the Russian *siloviki*. Although the public clash certainly caught the Kremlin's attention, it remains to be seen if Kadyrov succeeded in transmitting the desired impression of strength, loyalty and threat necessary to bolster his privileged position *vis-à-vis* Moscow.

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