

What Putin's Exit Could Mean for Chechnya

THE PITFALLS OF KADYROV'S STATE-WITHIN-A-STATE

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After the Soviet Union broke apart, the Russian government fought two highly destructive wars against insurgents in Chechnya—in 1994-1996 and in 1999-2009. Both wars caused immense bloodshed, dislocation, and property damage. The first war ended in a humiliating setback for the Russian authorities, but the second war resulted in a forceful reassertion of Moscow's control over the rebellious province and the establishment of a pro-Moscow government in Grozny that rules to this day.

The peculiarities of the Chechen Republic, where Russia's laws and constitutional order are of almost no relevance, has far-reaching implications both for the Russian Federation and for the West. Ramzan Kadyrov has been head of the republic for more than a decade and has created, with Moscow's approbation, a local governance system that entrenches his absolute control. Chechnya has been relatively stable and peaceful over the past several years, but this calm is deceptive. Seven scenarios are outlined here that could affect the future stability of the North Caucasus. Destabilization of the region could occur via several possible routes, including the recrudescence of an Islamist insurgency in Chechnya, the outbreak of warfare between Chechnya and neighboring areas of the North Caucasus, and the abrupt removal of Kadyrov against his will. The Chechen leader has legions of enemies in Moscow as well as Chechnya, and he remains head of the republic only because he continues to enjoy Vladimir Putin's support. If for some reason Putin's support ends, the fate of Chechnya will be in doubt.

Grozny and Moscow: Mutual but Unequal Dependence

The first president of Chechnya's pro-Moscow government, Ahmad Kadyrov, was killed by a terrorist bomb in May 2004. In the wake of his assassination, his son Ramzan

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quickly rose to the top ranks of the province, gaining near-total control of political life in Chechnya by early 2007. Over the next few years, Ramzan Kadyrov moved violently against his potential rivals, sending assassins to murder them in broad daylight in Moscow, Dubai, Baku, Istanbul, and Vienna. Over the past fourteen years, Kadyrov has taken a Chechen state that was shattered by the two wars and built it up into a repressive, personalistic dictatorship. Kadyrov's state-building project has gained considerable popular support in Chechnya through the revival and reconstruction of a devastated economy, but the state he has implanted in the region is unusual even by the standards of personalistic regimes. Kadyrov routinely violates basic norms of human rights, resorting, for example, to the systematic torture and repression of homosexuals and the infliction of murderous reprisals against the families of anyone who crosses him.

The situation in Chechnya is likely to become increasingly complicated over the next several years now that Putin is in his fourth and presumably final term as Russian president. By the time Putin's current presidential term ends in 2024, he will be 71. Although he could try to stay on for a fifth term by pushing through a constitutional amendment, most observers in Russia believe he will step down in 2024 and seek to remain the country's most powerful figure behind the scenes. Regardless of what Putin ultimately decides to do in 2024, the anticipation of that year will generate a good deal of political maneuvering in Russia as potential successors vie with one another.

Kadyrov is not among the likely successors, but his political standing in Chechnya—and therefore the future of the Chechen state—will be heavily influenced by the succession process in Moscow. Putin's firm hold on power in Russia for nineteen years has resulted in a highly personalized system in which institutions and regulations matter far less than personal ties. Putin has been Kadyrov's main benefactor and protector in Russia, and Kadyrov has vehemently proclaimed his loyalty to Putin at every opportunity. For Kadyrov, who is only 42, the possible replacement of Putin could have ominous consequences. Many leading figures in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) and armed forces deeply resent Kadyrov for his brutal assertion of control over Chechnya's internal security. The *Kadyrovtsy* (Kadyrov's own state security forces) long ago displaced the federal FSB and Border Guards in Chechnya after overcoming stiff resistance. In many ways, Chechnya's autonomy in the Russian Federation nowadays bears a resemblance to outright independence—though not the sort of independence that Chechen insurgents had in mind when they fought against Russian federal forces.

As the head of a personalistic dictatorship within a country that revolves around personalized rule, Kadyrov may hope that Putin will prevent a successor from clamping down on Chechnya, but the Chechen leader has no guarantee that his position will remain secure indefinitely. The lack of ironclad assurances means that, as the succession to Putin draws nearer, Kadyrov will almost certainly adopt safeguards that could fend off attempts to remove him or rein him in. However, the very adoption of such measures might itself spur a new leader in Russia to act right away, regaining control of Chechnya

before Kadyrov is too firmly ensconced. Regardless of whether events play out this way, Chechnya is apt to be increasingly volatile as the succession to Putin looms.

Alternative Scenarios

To understand the implications of all this for both Russia and the West, we can think about seven possible scenarios.

1. Putin Stays on for a Fifth Term

If Putin decides he wants to stay as president for a fifth term, he undoubtedly could do so. The Russian parliament is fully under his control and would, if he so ordered, amend the Russian constitution to enable him to serve additional consecutive presidential terms. Such a scenario, whether likely or not, would undoubtedly be welcomed by Kadyrov. So long as Putin remains president, Kadyrov's position seems secure. Putin's main objective in the North Caucasus nowadays is to keep it relatively stable and peaceful and to avoid a return to destabilizing separatist violence. He has relied on Kadyrov to do precisely that and has been willing to put up with Kadyrov's antics and abuses in return. If Putin does decide to serve a fifth presidential term (from 2024), one can expect that Kadyrov will continue to rule Chechnya as a personalistic dictator.

2. The Islamist Insurgency Revives

Amid growing political volatility and uncertainty in Chechnya, Islamist fighters who traveled from the North Caucasus to wage jihad in Syria or Iraq and managed to return home alive may sense an opportunity to regroup and embark on a new insurgency. Even though most of the Dagestani and Chechen Islamists who went to Syria or Iraq were killed there, enough returned to form the core of a possible insurgency. For now, the revival of an insurgency on the scale of the one that existed in the 1990s and early 2000s is unlikely, not least because the wide-ranging defeats suffered by the Islamic State have largely eliminated the most plausible external patron of Islamist rebels. Even so, the periodic occurrence of terrorist bombings, ambushes, and attacks on police stations in the North Caucasus adumbrates what could develop into a larger movement over the next decade. Anyone who might succeed Putin in 2024 (or later) will be mindful of the possibility that an Islamist insurgency could try once again to destabilize the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya and Dagestan. This threat is one of the main reasons that a successor to Putin—even one who detests the current regime in Chechnya—might be inclined to leave Kadyrov in place. The Chechen leader, despite all his faults, has been effective in keeping the Islamists at bay, and the removal of him might well be seen by the Islamists as an opportunity they should not miss to spark renewed warfare.

3. Kadyrov Is Overthrown or Assassinated by a Chechen (or Chechens)

Kadyrov has so many enemies within Chechnya and in the Chechen diaspora that a decisive move against him would hardly come as a shock. Kadyrov is, of course, well aware that many in Chechnya would like to get rid of him, and he has taken elaborate measures to try to prevent and if necessary thwart any coup plots and assassination attempts. Despite these safeguards, at least two assassination attempts have come perilously close to succeeding, and numerous others have been broken up. If Kadyrov were abruptly removed in a coup or by assassination, political uncertainty and instability would engulf Chechnya. Even if a relatively smooth transition to a successor like Adam Delimkhanov (Kadyrov's cousin and closest aide) occurred—something that seems highly unlikely in such circumstances—great uncertainty would persist about Chechnya's future.

In the more likely event that no successor to Kadyrov swiftly emerges, political volatility would jeopardize the relative peace that has prevailed in Chechnya over the past decade. Personalistic regimes are notoriously ineffective at coping with the sudden, unexpected ouster of the personality on whom the regime is based. The violent conflicts in Congo that followed the overthrow of Mobutu Sese Seko in May 1997 and the chaotic dissolution of the Central African Empire (which reverted to its erstwhile name, Central African Republic) after the forcible removal of the self-proclaimed emperor, Jean-Bédél Bokassa, in September 1979 are among the many disquieting precedents. (A more encouraging precedent is the gradual adoption of reforms in Paraguay after the violent overthrow of the long-time dictator, Alfredo Stroessner, in February 1989.) In these cases and many others when a ruthless, personalistic dictator has been abruptly removed from power, uncertainty and instability are bound to ensue.

4. Kadyrov Is Removed by Putin's Successor in Moscow

Even though Putin has consistently stood by Kadyrov, a successor to Putin—especially one who emerged from the ranks of the KGB/FSB—might want to rein in the Chechen leader and consign him to a lowly position or perhaps even prosecute him. Because Kadyrov took over the leadership of Chechnya at such a young age, he potentially could still be ruling there beyond 2050, long after Putin will be gone from the scene. A successor to Putin, who realizes that at some point Kadyrov will no longer have the protection afforded by Putin, might want to move sooner rather than later against Kadyrov to keep him from becoming almost impossible to dislodge in Grozny. Kadyrov's removal or marginalization thus might occur soon after the successor to Putin takes office. Tempting though such a step might be, the problem is what would come in Kadyrov's wake. Although the Chechen leader would undoubtedly accept a decision by Putin to remove him, he would be much less likely to tolerate a move against him by a successor to Putin. The odds are that Kadyrov would actively resist being removed by anyone other than Putin, and he would marshal his heavily armed *Kadyrovtsy* to stand

against the center's encroachments. In this scenario, Chechnya could easily be plunged back into destabilizing violence, with federal forces sent to confront a refractory local government. Given the strength and loyalty of the *Kadyrovtsy*, the federal authorities might need to send tens of thousands of troops to the region, igniting a full-scale civil war. The personalistic nature of Kadyrov's regime and the buildup of his private army have made it extremely difficult to remove him involuntarily without risk of provoking a large-scale armed conflict.

5. Kadyrov Seeks Independence for Chechnya

Kadyrov and his father fought in 1994-1996 on the side of the insurgents who were seeking independence for Chechnya, and they established the *Kadyrovtsy* at that time as an insurgent army. The momentous decision by Akhmad and Ramzan Kadyrov in 1999 to switch their allegiances and support the federal authorities put an end to the Kadyrovs' bid for independence. Ever since the second Russian-Chechen war began, Kadyrov has been a staunch supporter of Putin and the federal government. Nonetheless, many of the officials and soldiers who fought against the Kadyrovs and the *Kadyrovtsy* in the first war harbor suspicions that Ramzan has never truly disavowed his aspiration for an independent state. If Kadyrov were to fear an impending crackdown by a successor to Putin, he might seek to preempt it by declaring Chechnya an independent state and daring the federal government to rein him in. In the face of a bid for outright independence, the federal authorities would be under enormous pressure to crush the rebellion overwhelmingly as an example to other regions of Russia that might think about defying the central government. The result would almost certainly be a devastating civil war.

6. Kadyrov Is Moved to a Senior Post in the Federal Government

To avoid the outbreak of civil war, a successor to Putin might propose to Kadyrov that he take a relatively senior position in the federal government, where his pernicious influence could be contained. When rumors of such an appointment have surfaced in recent years, Kadyrov has always dismissed them and spoken about his commitment to remain in Chechnya. However, if the post offered to him was sufficiently meaningful and visible, he might find it harder to turn down. Because this scenario envisages the relatively smooth ouster of Kadyrov with his own consent, it is one of the most appealing for a potential successor to Putin. But whether Kadyrov would indeed consent to it is at best uncertain.

7. Kadyrov Sparks Warfare with Other North Caucasus Regions

The mass protests that erupted in Ingushetia in the fall of 2018, after Kadyrov tried to impose a one-sided revision of the shared border, underscored the potential for ethnic tensions in the North Caucasus to spawn deadly confrontations. Tensions among ethnic

groups in the North Caucasus existed in Soviet times and occasionally gave rise to violent clashes (as archival documents have revealed), and such tensions have endured in the post-Soviet period. Kadyrov has repeatedly alluded to his desire for a Greater Chechnya that would encompass parts (or even the whole) of neighboring regions in the North Caucasus, and he has also taken steps to promote that goal, as he recently did in sending security forces unannounced to occupy swaths of Ingush territory in order to force the Ingush authorities to accept Chechnya's expanded borders. During Soviet times, Chechnya and Ingushetia were united in a single region, but since mid-1992 they have been separate. The Ingush have prided themselves on being different from Chechnya, having remained peaceful even as Chechnya was plunged into many years of violence. Kadyrov's irredentist ambitions are therefore bound to encounter strong opposition. If in coming years he steps up his bid for a Greater Chechnya at Ingushetia's (and perhaps Dagestan's) expense, armed conflict would be the likely result. To the extent that Kadyrov exploits a period of succession in 2024 to move toward a Greater Chechnya, he could precipitate a war that would draw in the federal authorities and destabilize the whole region.

Implications

The highly personalistic nature of Kadyrov's regime as it has developed over the past twelve years has resulted in a Chechen state that barely functions apart from what he personally directs. To the extent that political institutions exist in Chechnya, they are entirely beholden to Kadyrov.

The emergence of a personalistic state in Chechnya carries risks for Western countries as well as for Russia. The spread of violent instability and warfare in the North Caucasus would be a breeding ground for the resurgence of jihadists and the growth of extreme Islamist ideologies. Even if the radicals do not take up arms against Western countries, their growing presence in Russia would be a constant threat. Although Western governments are not in a position to determine the future of Chechnya's politics, they clearly have a stake in pushing for options that will avert instability and bloodshed. The Russian government fully shares that interest, and this suggests that, at least in some small way, U.S. officials might consult with their Russian counterparts to try to forestall the worst outcomes for Chechnya.