

Russia, Chechnya, and the Sovereign Kadyrov

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Moscow has effectively granted sovereignty over the Republic of Chechnya to its appointed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. Despite frequent claims in some media sources that Kadyrov's days are numbered, and despite Kadyrov's public confrontations with Alexander Khloponin, head of the new North Caucasus federal district, Moscow has no real levers left to use against him.

While in theory President Dmitry Medvedev could relieve him of his post or take away the hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies that he receives each year from the federal budget, to do so would be unthinkable. Kadyrov and his militia would fight to retain their patronage networks, and the resulting instability would risk unleashing another round of civil war. The Caucasus is far from calm, but now in Chechnya, at least, unrest can be blamed by Moscow on Islamist terrorists, who elicit little sympathy anywhere. As long as Kadyrov remains in power, and employs his militia to coerce rebels to turn toward Moscow's side, there is no threat that a violent struggle for secular autonomy will reignite and raise uncomfortable political questions.

This begs the question, however, of why Russia let Kadyrov effectively escape its oversight. In the past, most analysts argued that Kadyrov needed President (now Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin as much as Putin needed him. For years, Kadyrov had been bargaining for more control over Chechnya's affairs. Why then give him what amounts to complete freedom from Moscow, rather than merely leaving him in place? The choice is especially surprising because Russian leaders did so even after having taken advantage of two similar cases in neighboring Georgia, where President Eduard Shevardnadze in the early 1990s grudgingly granted individuals and their militias effective sovereignty over particular regions. Russian officials used the de facto sovereignty of Aslan Abashidze in Adjara and Emzar Kvitsiani in the Upper Kodori gorge to sap Georgian state resources and pressure Tbilisi. Even knowing what the potential dangers were, Moscow has now awarded Kadyrov the same opportunity. What explains Moscow's choices and what are the likely consequences?

The Development of Kadyrov's Sovereignty

Putin first ensured that Kadyrov would emerge as the unchallenged leader of Chechnya following his father Akhmed-Hadji Kadyrov's assassination in 2004. Over the next six years, Russia slowly ceded legal command over most troops and security operations in the republic to Kadyrov. Using the classic definition of "sovereignty" developed by Max Weber at the turn of the twentieth century, Kadyrov now has a virtual "monopoly over the use of legitimate force" on Chechen territory.

As a young man, Ramzan Kadyrov was the leader of his father's private bodyguard militia, the *kadyrovtsy*, while the elder Kadyrov served as Moscow's handpicked leader to manage post-war Chechnya in 2000. Even before his father's assassination, Kadyrov's men began to be appointed as commanding officers in the regional OMON special forces of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). In February 2006, a presidential decree declared that this regional MVD, through the auspices of the operational headquarters of a special counterterrorism task force, would be given "direct leadership" over all counterterrorist activities in the North Caucasus, as well as responsibility for "organizing the planning and use" of activities carried out by joint forces on Chechen soil (including federal troops under MVD command, sent in on contract from elsewhere in Russia). Even though this regional headquarters was still overseen by federal MVD forces in Moscow, the local forces assumed legal day-to-day command responsibilities. In August 2006, Putin went further. He signed a decree pulling most federal Ministry of Defense and MVD troops out of Chechnya over the next two years, while ordering the remaining federal forces to stay on their bases except when called upon for special operations. In other words, Kadyrov's men, at that point, attained not merely day-to-day command in Chechnya, but also operational dominance.

In April 2009, the counterterrorism operation was officially lifted. On October 1, command over the operational headquarters in Chechnya was transferred from the federal MVD to the regional FSB, led by an ethnic Chechen. According to Russian analyst Andrei Soldatov, this meant that command was now put in the hands of locals whom Kadyrov could select and control. Simultaneously, Medvedev announced that all federal forces would pull out of Chechnya by the end of 2011; regional Chechen MVD forces would at that time assume sole responsibility for security in the republic. In November 2009, the 33-year-old Kadyrov was named a major general in the MVD, the youngest man in the history of either the USSR or Russia to receive the rank. He was given not merely de facto but de jure command and control over the vast majority of security forces located on Chechen territory.

The Grozny Airport

Then Moscow did more. As part of the official end of federal counterterrorism operations in the republic, Russia's Interstate Aviation Committee recertified the Grozny airport for international flights. The airport would henceforth be managed by Kadyrov's private foundation, using its own planes for chartered trips. Medvedev also gave Kadyrov the legal right to manage customs operations at the airport. Prior to this

decision, all international traffic out of Chechnya had to pass through other Russian ports and airports, under Moscow's oversight (unless it transited the treacherous and federally patrolled mountain border into Georgia). In November 2009, the first Boeing 757 left Grozny with 200 pilgrims on the Hajj to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Thirteen additional Hajj flights went out that winter, and it was announced that this would become an annual undertaking.

Soldatov called the opening of the airport a "smokescreen" and a publicity stunt, but the certification was in fact very significant. Kadyrov could now send or receive money and goods without Moscow's direct knowledge every time Russian air traffic controllers approved an international flight. This already had the potential to return the Grozny airport to its former status of the 1990s, when it served as a hub for organized criminal activities, but with a single local boss now heading the operation. Even more importantly, Kadyrov acquired the ability to establish connections more easily with foreign investors and governments independently of Moscow, welcoming visitors from anywhere in the world and sending his representatives abroad without Moscow's knowledge.

As of spring 2010, passport control at the Grozny airport appeared to still be conducted by federal security personnel. An officially produced video clip from April 2010 (featuring a controversial Canadian singer, Chrystal Callahan, who moved to Chechnya and appears frequently in propaganda videos) includes a shot of the airport's passport control desk. It is staffed by several apparently ethnic Russian employees wearing federal uniforms, rather than by fatigue- or leather jacket-wearing *kadyrovtsy*. Since the video was aimed at an internet-savvy, English-speaking audience used to finding hidden meanings in official Russian media reports, it was doubtlessly intended to send a message about Moscow's continuing control over the airport. Yet, it would be surprising if those few guards, stationed deep inside Chechnya, would be able to completely withstand either the temptation of corruption or threats by the *kadyrovtsy*. Unless the guards always gave Moscow completely accurate flight manifests, Russian authorities would have no way of knowing who was entering or leaving Grozny by air.

What the Georgian Comparison Reveals

The significance of this becomes clear when we remember Aslan Abashidze and Emzar Kvitsiani, the two provincial leaders who effectively became "middlemen" for Moscow in Georgia. Fearing to fight their militias, and hoping they would repay him with votes and other forms of political support, Shevardnadze looked the other way when they took over security functions within their regions and engaged in smuggling. This cost the Georgian state hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue and cemented Russia's foothold on Georgian territory.

Abashidze, in Ajara, cooperated with the local Russian military base. He obtained heavy Russian weaponry for his militia and appointed a retired Russian general to serve as his own militia commander. Meanwhile, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, his billionaire wife Elena Baturina, and their friend and reputed crime boss Grigory Luchansky reportedly received sweetheart deals on property in Ajara while

providing Abashidze with investment advice. It is rumored that Russian interests were involved in the oil refining and smuggling transit trade through the region as well. In 2004, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili successfully removed Abashidze from power, with Russian cooperation (an outcome that remains somewhat surprising given the hostility between Saakashvili and Putin and begs the question of what Russia received in return). Abashidze now lives in exile in Moscow, where his son works with Luzhkov on construction projects.

Kvitsiani, in the effectively autonomous Upper Kodori region, ran a timber smuggling operation via separatist Abkhazia. He also controlled the electrical power lines running from Russia into Tbilisi, and his territory was used to shoot down the connecting wires at key political moments, plunging the Georgian capital into darkness. Saakashvili removed him in 2006. In the 2008 war, Upper Kodori was lost to Russian forces and came under the control of Abkhazia. Now there are credible rumors that Kvitsiani's network is once again in charge of the mostly depopulated region, but this time under Russian military protection.

While there are many differences between these cases and Chechnya, the key point remains: Russian state and private interests used these "middlemen" and their militias to weaken the Georgian state. When Abashidze and Kvitsiani took control over their provincial territories, they used their access to the outside world to line their own and others' pockets with Georgian revenues, while undermining Georgian sovereignty. Moscow seems now to have given Kadyrov a similar opportunity.

Explaining Moscow's Choices

Many conspiracy theories purport to explain the relationship between Putin and Kadyrov, but there is a simpler explanation for Moscow's choices. Like empires dating back to early modern Europe; like the United States, Great Britain, and France in their own empires at the turn of the twentieth century; and, arguably, like peace enforcement operations in places like Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s, as well as the unsuccessful U.S. effort to control the political futures of Afghanistan and Iraq under the administration of George W. Bush, Moscow has adopted a policy of indirect rule in Chechnya in order to save costs. It has effectively outsourced its own sovereignty.

Sometimes one hears the claim that Moscow's Chechnya policy is all about oil. However, Chechnya's oil fields are projected to run dry soon and the amount produced today is a tiny fraction of Russia's overall market. At one time, Chechnya served as an important transit link for oil from Azerbaijan, but the pipeline was rerouted during the first Chechen war in the mid-1990s. Now, the majority state-owned oil company Rosneft is scheduled to reopen and upgrade the Grozny refinery, but only after years of pressure by Kadyrov. The refinery will only serve to increase the resources at Kadyrov's disposal.

Despite two bloody wars, which were fought to retain and subdue Chechnya, the truth is that as long as Chechnya stays relatively quiet and remains within Russia's recognized legal borders, no one in the Russian political elite cares much about what happens there. In comparison to the rest of the North Caucasus, Chechnya looks like a

haven of stability. This is not to say that Kadyrov has ended Chechen violence. He and his minions are credibly accused of assassinations around the globe, the insurgency may have simply migrated to neighboring areas in Russia, and terrorist acts still occur regularly in Chechnya. Kadyrov himself is sometimes alleged to contribute to the continuing unrest, to make himself appear necessary. Yet allowing Kadyrov to take responsibility for controlling the territory relieves Moscow of both the political and economic costs of military occupation.

Potential Consequences

Like other empires pursuing policies of indirect rule, Moscow may have achieved short-term cost savings at the expense of long-term security interests. Indirect rule is notoriously hard to monitor and control. Kadyrov is a violent and unpredictable man who is known to love expensive toys (including his ever-changing fleet of luxury cars). By granting him effective sovereignty over Chechnya, Moscow has lost oversight of his choices. Kadyrov claims undying loyalty to Putin and recently surrendered the title of “president,” apparently on his own initiative, so as not to compete against his boss, Medvedev, in Moscow. Yet, no one knows what Kadyrov might do for money, or who might pay him to do it. Chechnya could very well become a haven for activities that Moscow regrets. At a prosaic level, this might mean drug smuggling or gunrunning. If Kadyrov’s loyalties are less firm than he claims, however, it could mean cooperating with foreign interests – be they states or other organizations – that contribute to the further weakening of the Russian state. Moscow has risked a very unpleasant future for short-term stability.

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