The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kadyrov Reaches Out to Chechens Outside His Republic

By Paul Goble

May 26, 2010



VIENNA, Austria &mdash In his latest bid to boost his power in Grozny and his influence in Moscow, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov is seeking closer ties with the roughly 600,000 ethnic Chechens who live outside of the republic. About half of them have fled the violence there during the last 20 years, and about half consist of communities that have existed for more than a century.

On the one hand, Kadyrov's efforts are likely to be welcomed in Moscow as a way of reducing the anti-Moscow rhetoric of many in the Chechen diaspora. But on the other, his moves in that direction may inspire other non-Russian groups in Russia to develop similar programs, a trend that could force the powers that be to change the compatriots program.

About The Columnist

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently,

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Indeed, there is some evidence that this already may be happening. Even as Kadyrov made his announcement, government officials and ethnic activists in Marii El have announced plans to reach out to Finno-Ugric groups abroad, something Moscow may be significantly less happy about.

At a meeting earlier in May with Chechen Foreign Minister Shamsail Saraliyev and Presidential press secretary Alvi Karimov, Kadyrov said that "it is necessary to establish close ties with the Chechen diaspora."

Of the 600,000 Chechens living outside the republic, 300,000 live in Russian regions, the Chechen president said, with the remainder living in Europe, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As far as the total number of Chechens in Chechnya is concerned, Kadyrov said, that remains to be established by a census that he is planning there.

"During my recent visit to Turkey and Syria," the Chechen leader said, "I met with people who came from the Chechen Republic. These people sincerely worry about their motherland, have been pleased by the changes that have taken place there and are proud of their origins, even though many of them do not speak their native language."

"I consider it necessary to organize cultural measures for them," Kadyrov continued, including exhibits, concerts, and visits. These events, he said, "must be directed at popularizing the Chechen language and culture. ... In Syria, Chechens said that since we launched the Grozny satellite television channel, their children had begun to learn the language."

According to Kadyrov, "in certain countries, there exist entirely population points in which a large share of the population consists of Chechens."

He said that while in Turkey, he "found out by accident that more than 7,000 Chechens live in one of the population points, and the head of their village is also a Chechen. In such places, we must send our representatives so that people will understand that their link with the motherland is unbroken."

According to the Chechen presidential news portal, Karimov said work in this direction is "already being carried out." Indeed, he said, "for that part of the diaspora which does not know its native language, [Grozny] intends to prepare books in two language, Arabic and Turkic, in which will be included translations of the works of Chechen writers and poets."

A significant portion of the Chechen communities formed more than 100 years ago is in the Middle East, and it is often from those groups that Chechens returned to fight against the Russians in the 1990s.

That had led to the suggestion that there were a large number of Arabs in the Chechen resistance. In fact, there were Arabs, but they were never as numerous as Moscow claimed, and at least some of the Arabic speakers were ethnic Chechens whose ancestors had left the Russian Empire for the Ottoman Empire and then moved from Anatolia to countries in the Arab world.

Chechens who have fled since 1991 are more likely to be found in Europe or the United States. It is unclear whether Kadyrov's program will extend to them, all the more so since they typically have been far more antagonistic to his regime than have Chechens living in the Middle East.

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