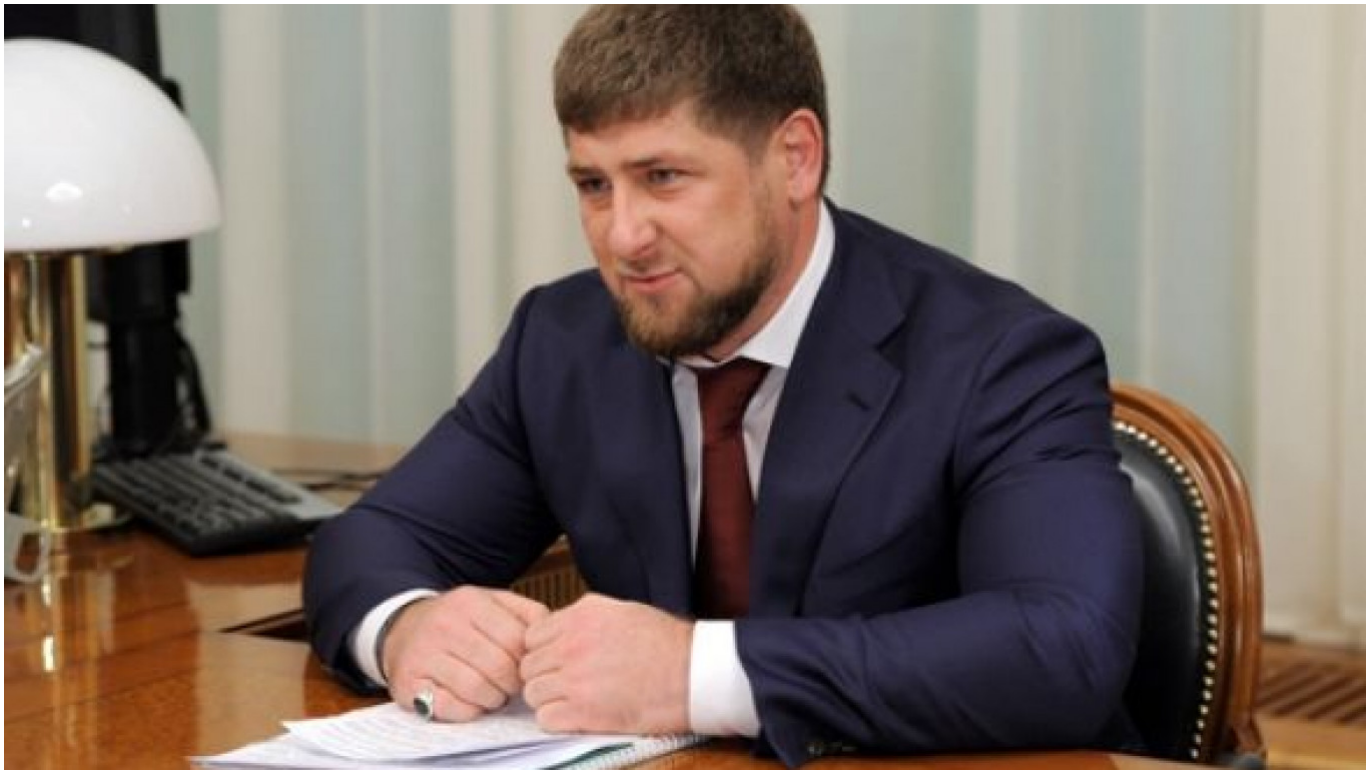
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Kadyrov Faces Sanctions Under Magnitsky Act

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Experts say a public inclusion of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, pictured above, risks further deterioration of political ties between Moscow and Washington.

One month after U.S. President Barack Obama signed the Magnitsky Act, it is clear that Russo-American relations have entered a difficult period.

But the dispute over Moscow's adoption ban might mark only the beginning of the difficulties Obama is facing with the Kremlin in his second term, which officially starts with Monday's inauguration ceremony.

The Magnitsky Law states that no later than 120 days after its Dec. 14 signing, the president must submit to Congress the names of those facing sanctions. That list is likely to contain Ramzan Kadyrov, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

The Chechen leader "is on the list of Russian officials to be sanctioned, as [the commission]

recommended," the organization said in a report published on its website earlier this month.

The report argues that Kadyrov "condones or oversees" mass human rights violations and instituted a repressive state based on his religious views. "At least nine women have been killed for 'immodest behavior' since 2008, with Kadyrov praising the murders, and the killers did not stand trial," it said.

Kadyrov has long been accused of involvement in murders, torture and disappearances of political opponents and human rights activists both in the country and abroad. He denies wrongdoing, and his spokesman, Alvi Karimov, reiterated Tuesday that the report's accusations were baseless.

"Ramzan Kadyrov protects all faiths strictly according to federal law," Karimov said by telephone from the Chechen capital, Grozny.

He pointed out that Kadyrov supported the local Orthodox Church and ordered the reconstruction of Chechnya's only synagogue earlier this month.

"He guarantees ideal conditions for believers of all confessions," the spokesman said, adding that the commission report was not objective.

The U.S. Embassy did not comment on the report. A spokeswoman merely said that names would not be discussed before the list had been presented. Spokespeople for the commission did not reply to questions sent by e-mail Monday.

But the Chechen leader, who changed his title from president to head in 2010, might nevertheless find himself at the center of an unprecedented dispute between Washington and Moscow.

The Magnitsky list originally contained 60 Russian officials implicated in the death of Hermitage Capital lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. It was compiled by the U.S. Helsinki Commission in April 2010 and was widely publicized online.

But the law widened the list by stipulating that it should also contain "persons responsible for other gross violations of human rights." And Kadyrov is the only Russian official directly named in the law.

A passage in the bill's findings says that a string of unsolved murders — including that of Chechen rights campaigner Natalya Estemirova, dissident Umar Israilov and Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya — "illustrate the grave danger of exposing the wrongdoing of officials of the government of the Russian Federation, including Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov."

The bill allows some names to be submitted in classified form "if the president determines that it is vital for the national security interests of the United States to do so."

But a source in Congress said expectations in Washington were high that Obama would include officials unrelated to the Magnitsky case and disclose their names.

"We need to name names and to name names outside Magnitsky. If all are classified, that

would be a strong reason to cry foul," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

The source also said the asset freezes stipulated by the law would be effective only if the names are public because it would be hard to keep secret personal data that is passed to thousands of banks throughout the United States.

He added that freezing assets is a powerful tool of "naming and shaming" people with no U.S. financial interests because being on the U.S. Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals List makes doing business very hard in many other countries.

"It can create havoc if the U.S. shines light on your name, ... and this is a worry for the Russians," he said.

Kadyrov, who has been regularly accused of pilfering federal budget funds, is an avid racehorse breeder and is known to have stables with expensive horses in the United Arab Emirates and the Czech Republic.

In 2011, the State Department effectively banned Kadyrov's horses from racing in the U.S. by raising questions about his human rights record to state racing officials in Kentucky.

Many experts said a public inclusion of Kadyrov risked further deterioration of political ties between Moscow and Washington.

"This would be a serious precedent," said Alexei Malashenko, an analyst and Kadyrov biographer at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Malashenko added that Obama would probably do everything to avoid such an outcome. He said public sanctions against Kadyrov would boost anti-American sentiment.

"Ramzan and Putin will only win," he said.

His comments were echoed by Sergei Markov, a vice rector of the Plekhanov Institute, who said it would be a disaster for the reset of relations with Moscow, a main foreign policy theme of Obama's first term.

"After all, the [Magnitsky] bill was not Obama's but his opponents' idea," he said.

Administration officials have argued that the Magnitsky Act is unnecessary because human rights offenders are routinely banned anyway. The State Department said in July 2011 that a number of people implicated in the Magnitsky case already face entry bans. It did not disclose who and how many names are on that list.

Obama signed the bill in December after it became clear that lawmakers' support for it was so strong that Congress could have overridden his veto.

However, a senior lawmaker for Russia's ruling United Russia party said the inclusion of Kadyrov on the list would not seriously undermine relations.

"That does not change the character of the [U.S.] demands," Vyacheslav Nikonov, a first

deputy chairman of the State Duma's International Relations Committee, told the Moscow Times.

Nikonov added that Moscow would have no trouble retaliating symmetrically.

"Maybe we ban the commander of the Guantanamo prison," he said.

That detention camp is part of the Guantanamo Bay U.S. Naval Base in Cuba, which is commanded by Rear Admiral John Smith.

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