

The Kremlin's 3-Ring Circus in Dagestan

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Amid alarming rumors of his imminent dismissal, Dagestani leader Magomedislam Magomedov flew to Moscow last week to sort things out. Within three days of his arrival, Magomedov received assurances that his job was not on the line. He phoned the news back

to Makhachkala, where his supporters fired guns into the air in joy.

On Saturday evening, Magomedov took a charter flight back to Dagestan. Twenty minutes after his departure, the order for his dismissal was signed in Moscow. His replacement, veteran lawmaker and newly minted United Russia loyalist Ramazan Abdulatipov, wasted no time in giving an interview in which he confirmed that he was, in fact, the new leader.

Presidential decrees take effect not the moment they are signed but once they are published. News of the change in power in the Caucasus should have been conveyed not by the new appointee in a hastily arranged local interview but by the Kremlin. President Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, said as much to Abdulatipov, who thus began his leadership with a black mark on his record.

But this circus did not end here. It seems Magomedov was ousted as leader but appointed Putin's deputy chief of staff. If Magomedov was a great leader, why remove him? But if he was, say, drinking and handing out posts in his administration for money, why appoint him to a top post in the Kremlin? It almost looks as if Magomedov flew to Moscow with a suitcase full of cash in a bid to keep his job but in vain because the Dagestani post had already been sold to somebody else. How else can you explain this strange reshuffle? The only thing I can surmise is that the seller offered Magomedov the job in the presidential administration as a consolation prize.

The main method now used for controlling Dagestan is extortion by Islamist extremists, who use the money to further their jihad.

Here is an example. A furniture store owner receives a message containing a threat. Thinking that Islamists are after him, he turns to a friend for help. The friend asks, "Who bought furniture from you recently?" It turns out that the message was sent by two Federal Security Service agents who posed as Islamists, one of whom had just bought some furniture at the store. In an effort to "earn" his money back, he came up with the scheme of sending the threat so that the store owner would come to him offering to refund his expenses in return for assistance.

Another example: A person enters a store that sells ceramic tiles and sees workers with long beards — often a sign of Salafis. He asks them about it. "We are not Salafis," they answer. "We're here to make sure nobody sends the owner a threat."

There are two reasons why it is impossible to stop the incursion of Islamists. First, Islamism is a new totalitarian ideology making inroads everywhere, from Egypt to Norway. Considering that British authorities have been unable to stop its growing influence, it would be foolish to think that it will prove any easier in Dagestan.

The second reason is the Kremlin's incompetent administration. A fish rots from the head, and the mess in the North Caucasus begins in the Kremlin, with its circus acts of ridiculous appointments and dismissals. Not only are the top government posts in the regions bought and sold but apparently the same thing happens in the presidential administration in Moscow as well.

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