The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Chechens Forced to Attend Rally on Putin's Birthday, Report Says

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October 09, 2014



Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov walks before a meeting of the state council at the Kremlin in Moscow.

School classes were canceled and government agencies shut down in Chechnya this week to ensure students and workers turned up for a 100,000-strong rally in honor of President Vladimir Putin's 62nd birthday, a news report said.

News site Kavkazsky Uzel — an independent agency founded seven years ago by esteemed human rights group Memorial — polled government employees, students and teachers to report Wednesday that scores of people around Chechnya's capital Grozny faced coercion and threats of disciplinary action to attend the Tuesday rally.

A Chechen regional ministry employee, identified only by her first name Seda, was quoted as saying that workers who tried to skip the rally got called out later in the day by their supervisor, who said they were lucky the turnout was high or they could have been fired.

But firings would not have been unprecedented, Seda said: A few years ago several ministry workers got the boot for missing a "subbotnik" — unpaid community work during a weekend, ostensibly done by volunteers — that had been ordered by Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Kavkazsky Uzel reported.

A student at a Grozny college added that pupils were ushered into buses when they showed up for class Tuesday morning, given Russian and Chechen flags and T-shirts with the likenesses of Putin and Kadyrov, and told that they could forget about showing up for exams if they missed the parade, Kavkazsky Uzel reported.

Following the rally, Chechnya's leader said on his Instagram account: "We are united in support for our national leader, the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin!"

Chechnya also has a history of strong turnout and support for the president at national elections: The 2012 presidential election results at one of Chechnya's polling stations showed that ballots for Putin were cast by 107 percent of all registered voters.

During the 2011 election to Russia's parliament, Chechnya's official results showed a turnout of 99.4 percent, and a 99.5 percent support for the ruling United Russia party.

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