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Chechnya's Growing Image Problem

By Ivan Sukhov

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During his visit to senior Moscow officials in January, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov immediately posted selfies on Instagram in which he embraced such prominent figures as Investigative Committee Chairman Alexander Bastrykin and President Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of staff Vyacheslav Volodin.

The two men wore forced smiles on their faces, perhaps because the visit at least proved that they were not among the "traitors" that Kadyrov had recently said he would purge from the Kremlin.

Ramzan Kadyrov has long referred to himself as a devoted foot soldier of President Vladimir Putin. With the help of Moscow image makers, Kadyrov has cultivated the persona of a young knight who maintains unquestioning allegiance to his elder overlord in the Kremlin.

He presents himself as a leader who commands an impressive army of men who are loyal to him, who share Kadyrov's love for the head of state and who will brave thick and thin to carry out their duty. Of course, the extent of their love for Putin is best judged by those who speak Chechen, and very few in the Kremlin do.

Now, when confusion and anxiety in the high ranks of the Russian state are increasing because of events in Ukraine, Kadyrov and his men seem to be an impressive toolkit in the hands of the president to force officials to remember that nobody is indispensable. And if he reminds them of that on a regular basis, the fear will gradually spread.

In the same way, rumors persist that the Kremlin is keeping a contingent of Kadyrov's soldiers on duty in Moscow just in case mass unrest and protests break out.

The assumption is that those men, although they hold only a sketchy understanding of Russian laws, are expert marksmen who have no qualms about shooting when ordered to.

However, that "idyllic" picture of Chechnya has its limits. This pertains first not only to the impressive picture of Grozny as it was restored after both Chechen wars, but also to the comfortable relationship between a once-rebellious Chechnya and the federal center.

Chechnya relies primarily on subsidies from the Russian budget, and that support will drop by about 50 percent this year. The neighboring North Caucasus regions face similar budgetary constraints, so competition for diminishing resources has intensified.

And Kadyrov — who holds the reins of Chechnya's authoritarian system — knows that no matter how often he pledges his fealty to Moscow, he will not receive a single kopek more in support, thus calling into question the reason for making such oaths in the first place.

According to the Caucasian Knot news agency, Chechnya was the only region in the North Caucasus where the number of victims from fighting between security forces and suspected militants increased rather than decreased from 2013 to 2014.

In fact, only 52 people died from fighting in Chechnya last year — probably 10 times fewer than die in active war zones and about the same number that die daily in southern and eastern Ukraine. And yet that number is still almost one and a half times greater than it was in 2013. According to Caucasian Knot, two of the dead were civilians, 24 were alleged militants and 26 were siloviki.

Second, there is a risk that Chechnya will once again become an international problem for Russia. It is apparently no easy task to turn the republic into a national showcase when a full-scale war was raging there not long ago.

Isa Munayev, the commander of the so-called "Dzhokhar Dudayev international peacekeeping battalion," died near Debaltseve, Ukraine on Feb. 1. That detachment consists of troops from the North Caucasus and South Caucasus who have either personal or political reasons for supporting Ukrainian government forces in the war with the Russian-backed separatists.

Munayev, who had not yet reached his 50th birthday, had lost both his father and daughter in the Chechen war. In 2014 he left his relatively comfortable immigrant life in Denmark to fight in Ukraine, where he died while leading a group of his men in one of the most dangerous areas of the front lines.

The deceased Munayev is a sort of "vanishing breed," a man who almost perfectly fit the old Western ideal of a Chechen, as well as of Chechnya and the wars that Russia fought there.

Munayev was an ideological separatist who fought in both Chechen wars, a brigadier general in the separatist army, a minister in the separatist government, the military commandant of Grozny — and the only one of his fellow countrymen and emigrants who chose to assume command of a detachment of men from the Caucasus fighting on the Ukrainian side.

According to an announcement by the Dudayev battalion's press service, his successor is Adam Osmayev, a Chechen whom the authorities detained in Odessa in 2012 on charges of planning an assassination attempt against Putin. The Ukrainian Ministry of Justice chose not to extradite Osmayev.

It is interesting that Kadyrov, who had previously spoken harshly of Munayev and even called him a personal enemy, took no credit whatsoever for his death. Also, several days before Munayev's death, the commander of the Chechen volunteers fighting with the separatists posted a video on the Internet in which he urged Munayev and his Chechen troops to return home or else join him in fighting against Ukraine.

"We went to war not to kill Chechens," he said, and blamed the conflict in Ukraine on the United States and Europe — "those godless murderers and spreaders of lies."

That persistent anti-Western rhetoric cannot but further taint Western attitudes toward Chechens. The first serious signal came back in 2007 when underground Chechen leader Doku Umarov, with a single stroke of the pen, broke with the last vestiges of the Chechen separatist government and not only proclaimed the creation of the "Caucasus Emirate," but also announced his support for the global al-Qaida organization. After that, even the European left found it difficult to feel any solidarity for those whom they continued to refer to as the Chechen resistance.

The next thorn in the West's side came with the trial against three men convicted of murdering Chechen emigrant Umar Ismailov in Vienna. Ismailov was shot in 2009, and in 2011 three of the four Chechens charged with his murder were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. The fourth escaped to Chechnya and was never handed over to the Russian authorities. And although Ramzan Kadyrov was summoned to appear as a witness in the trial, he refused to go to Vienna.

Of course, this story comes to mind following the arrest of five Russian citizens of Chechen origin on Jan. 19 in the French town of Beziers on charges of planning a terrorist attack. The fact that the accused hold Russian citizenship clearly makes it difficult to unconditionally accept the claim that they have no connection to Kadyrov's Chechnya.

The arrests in Beziers coincided with a huge rally in Grozny at which protestors, while not expressing solidarity with the men who killed the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists, voiced their anger over insults directed against Islam.

This ideological campaign against the West is beginning to blur the boundaries between the supporters of al-Qaida among the Chechen underground and those who organized the massive rallies in Grozny condemning the French cartoonists.

The problem is not just the seeming coincidences that cast a shadow over the Russian and Chechen authorities: Both are accustomed to simply ignoring such suspicions.

The problem is that all of these events have changed the positive stereotype that Europeans once held of Chechens into a negative one.

And all the Chechens who have nothing to do with the terrorists, or with the secret foreign schemes of Ramzan Kadyrov's administration, or with plots to assassinate Putin, or with those who so vociferously align themselves with him, are increasingly faced with fear and hostility from the West, when once they could count on support and assistance.

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