

Nemtsov Probe Exposes Widening Rift Between Kadyrov, FSB

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The Boris Nemtsov murder investigation is the latest episode of an ongoing struggle between Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov — President Vladimir Putin's protege — and Russia's federal law enforcement officials, analysts told The Moscow Times on Wednesday.

The often brazen lawlessness with which Kadyrov's loyal forces have reputedly operated in Chechnya, across Russia and abroad has long been a sore spot for federal law enforcement agencies, according to Alexei Malashenko, a Caucasus analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"From what I can see, there has always been friction between Kadyrov and the federal forces, because Kadyrov only answers to Putin. This has irked people, especially since Putin awarded him the Order of Honor," said Malashenko.

Putin gave one of the country's highest awards to Kadyrov the same weekend the Chechen leader described the suspected triggerman in Nemtsov's murder as a "true patriot."

The fact that the Nemtsov murder probe has so far targeted Kadyrov-linked individuals may be aimed at sending a signal to the strongman leader's loyalists that they are no longer untouchable, said Gregory Shvedov, a Caucasus analyst and chief editor of the Kavkazsky Uzel news agency told The Moscow Times.

"This was a direct blow against Kadyrov, so people at the bottom of the power vertical in Chechnya will start to feel the vibration. If the power vertical vibrates at the bottom, it will shake at the top," Shvedov said in a phone interview.

Kremlin Towers

The claim that Nemtsov was gunned down by a devout Muslim who reportedly felt insulted by the politician's support for French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, has been denounced by critics as an attempt to disguise the roots — and reverberations — of the Feb. 27 shooting.

Tabloid newspaper Moskovsky Komsomolets [reported](#) on Tuesday that footage from surveillance cameras revealed the suspects had been tailing Nemtsov since last autumn, before the January attack against Charlie Hebdo took place.

The report did not cite any sources, but some pundits have suggested the newspaper, which has in the past enjoyed Kremlin-related scoops, is reflecting the stance of specific forces within law enforcement or the Federal Security Service, the FSB.

"Conspiracies, of course. But it looks like some FSB guys don't want the investigation to fizzle out," opposition firebrand Alexei Navalny [said](#) on Twitter, linking to the Moskovsky Komsomolets report.

Navalny echoed suggestions that some forces within the FSB have discarded the theory that Islamic extremists acted of their own accord and are trying to point to higher-level involvement in the murder.

The Islamist motive has been approached with skepticism from the very beginning; while Nemtsov had been a vocal critic of the Kremlin, he was not known for criticizing Islam.

Meanwhile, the theory that federal law enforcement has seized the opportunity to tame Kadyrov by going after his men has caught wind among some Russian media and social network commenters.

The Untouchables

Pundits have pointed to several other high-profile murders that were committed in fashions similar to Nemtsov's, which in their own times were also linked by the media to Kadyrov's forces.

In particular, experts referenced the 2008 murder of Kadyrov's rival Ruslan Yamadayev in front of Russia's main government building, and the 2009 murder of Kadyrov's former bodyguard Umar Israilov in Vienna.

Oddly enough, both of these murders were carried out with the alleged involvement of men with the surname Dadayev. On Sunday, Russian prosecutors charged another Dadayev — Zaur — for his alleged involvement in the Nemtsov murder.

Officials said that Dadayev — a former commander of Chechnya's feared Sever battalion, a force reputed for its brutal crushing of the Islamist insurgency in Chechnya and neighboring Ingushetia — confessed to having fired the deadly shots. Interfax cited unnamed law enforcement sources as having said investigators have proof that Dadayev was the actual assassin.

The Sever battalion is headed by Alibek Delimkhanov, brother of one of Kadyrov's closest allies, Adam Delimkhanov, who infamously carried a golden gun past security detectors into the State Duma, and who Kadyrov has previously declared would be his successor as the leader of Chechnya.

Beyond these murders, Kadyrov-loyal forces have reportedly been linked to the deaths of two men who formerly enjoyed power and influence in Chechnya, and who were seen as potential competitors for the leadership of the turbulent region: Movladi Baisarov in 2006 and Sulim Yamadayev in 2009.

More Speculation

Across the political and journalistic spectrum from the Moskovsky Komsomolets tabloid, independent weekly Novaya Gazeta [reported](#) Wednesday that high-ranking Chechen security officials are alleged to have been among the organizers of Nemtsov's murder.

The report — which did not cite any sources — identified one of the alleged organizers by his first name only: Ruslan, and added that the man was a major and that his last name was known to "dozens, if not hundreds" of Russian security officials.

The FSB may have reason to wish to see Kadyrov's powers diminished: The security agency's clout in the North Caucasus has reportedly shrunk as the Chechen leader's grip on power has bolstered.

"Law enforcement and the secret services have been repeatedly humiliated for the sake of 'political stability' in the Caucasus," Novaya Gazeta said in its article.

Agitation between the FSB and Chechnya is not novel. In a past iteration of these tensions, when three Chechen policemen were released after having been arrested on suspicion of having kidnapped and tortured a Moscow resident, a group of FSB officers staged a hunger strike in 2013.

Is Kadyrov Disposable?

According to Shvedov, resentment over Kadyrov's activities has been building up for years.

"There is a certain cumulative effect. For quite some time, the Kadyrov people enjoyed special rights. They could do whatever they wanted," Shvedov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Wednesday.

Today, there are signs that the situation is changing. In particular, Shvedov pointed to the decision by a Dagestani court last February to sentence two Chechens to nine and 12 years in jail in connection with an alleged plot to murder Saigidpasha Umakhanov, mayor of Khasavyurt, Dagestan's third biggest city.

"The Umakhanov case is a bigger signal than giving Kadyrov a medal," Shvedov said.

"I have absolutely no doubt that if the Kremlin is forced to choose between Kadyrov and federal law enforcement agencies, it will choose the latter. We have reached the point where Kadyrov can be replaced," he said.

Malashenko was more skeptical about Kadyrov's potential ouster.

"Kadyrov has destroyed the inter-clan balance in Chechnya. With him gone, a huge wave of violence would inevitably ensue. Other clans would seek revenge for all of the malfeasances attributed to his rule," Malashenko said.

"The Kremlin doesn't want to deal with this inevitable violence," Malashenko added. "Putin has taken an interest in Kadyrov, and Kadyrov is devoted to Putin. This fact rubs law enforcement officials the wrong way."

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