The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kadyrov's Menace Casts a Shadow Over Moscow

By Thomas de Waal

March 30, 2015



In June 2004, a few weeks after the assassination of pro-Moscow Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov, Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya sought out his son Ramzan in his home village of Tsentoroi.

Ramzan was only 27. Officially he was only head of his father's security service, but in Politkovskaya's terrifying account of the meeting, the younger Kadyrov was acting with impunity, as if he was already in charge of Chechnya.

He bragged that he would "destroy" his enemies. He took a call from Kremlin spin doctor Vladislav Surkov. He mocked and threatened Politkovskaya until she made a hasty exit, fearing for her life.

Reading her Novaya Gazeta article is all the more chilling now with the knowledge that two years later she would be murdered in Moscow, with Chechen assassins implicated in her killing.

Politkovskaya ended her piece with the prophetic observation that "the Kremlin has nurtured a dragon and now constantly needs to keep feeding it so that it does not spew fire."

In 2004, Kadyrov and the men under his control had just crushed another armed group trying to take control of Chechnya, led by the two brothers, Ruslan and Sulim Yamadayev. That battle was also a proxy war between the two Russian intelligence services, the civilian Federal Security Service (FSB) backing Kadyrov, and the military Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) backing the Yamadayevs.

The Yamadayevs were pushed out of Chechnya. In 2008 and 2009 each was assassinated in turn in Moscow and Dubai. Ramzan Kadyrov then claimed that he was "70 percent certain" that Sulim Yamadayev — and by implication the GRU — had organized the assassination of his father.

Politkovskaya also noted in her Novaya Gazeta article the "total failure of the Russian special services" in Chechnya and this grew more prescient with time. If Kadyrov's men were initially linked to the FSB, then they slipped that leash as well and became a force accountable to no one but Kadyrov himself.

A grim series of murders all have a trail leading back to Kadyrov's Chechnya. As well as the Yamadayevs and Politkovskaya, human rights activist Natalya Estemirova was killed in Chechnya and Umar Israilov, a former bodyguard of Kadyrov's in Vienna in 2009.

Kadyrov has laid claim to being the leader not just of Chechnya but of the eastern half of the North Caucasus as a whole. Novaya Gazeta reported recently that an assassination attempt on the mayor of the Dagestani town of Khasavyurt was the result of a quarrel with men close to Kadyrov.

How much do the Russian federal leadership and the security services know about the activities of the "Kadyrovtsy"? That question goes to the heart of the darkest and most secret regions of its security services, what might be called Russia's "deep state."

Sometimes, it is safe to say, it is useful to have a paramilitary group who can do your dirty work for you, but that group also has its own agenda and increasingly fears no one.

Analysts have used different terminology to describe the phenomenon. Sergei Markedonov, a professor at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis in Moscow has described Kadyrov's growing power as the result of "outsourcing sovereignty."

Power, wealth and impunity are all fused. Take the case of Adam Delimkhanov, who is a deputy in the State Duma, Kadyrov's cousin and the man he has named as a potential successor. Delimkhanov was estimated in 2011 by Finans magazine to have a fortune of $300 million.

During a recent fistfight with another parliamentary deputy, he allegedly dropped a golden gun. Most importantly, he was named by the Dubai police as a suspect in the murder of Sulim Yamadayev — but the charges were dismissed in 2012, after Kadyrov visited Dubai.

The murder of Boris Nemtsov has exposed the tensions within the Russian elite about Kadyrov's growing influence. There are at least three different versions about the arrest of the

Chechen suspects for Nemtsov's murder: that the arrested men directly targeted Nemtsov on their own initiative for his statements on Islam, that they were hired killers sub-contracted by someone in Moscow, or that they are innocent and were set up to deflect suspicion from the real killers inside the Russian political system.

In any case, the Chechen connection has split the ruling elite. Putin faces a backlash from those who object to his reliance on Kadyrov. Anti-Chechen racism is only part of it.

Kadyrov's enemies in the FSB and other places suspect, for good reason, that the loyalty of the Kadyrovtsy to the Russian state is provisional. They recall that many powerful Chechen warlords, including the Yamadayevs and the elder Kadyrov, fought against Russian forces in the first Chechen war of 1994-96. If their allegiance changed once, the reasoning goes, it can do so again.

Putin's problem is that Chechnya now lives by completely different rules from the rest of Russia. Federal law and the constitution do not apply there. In a region where Russian leaders have traditionally employed "divide and rule" tactics, one man now enjoys undivided power. It is hard to see how the Russian president could act to remove his protege without risking a dangerous power vacuum.

In other words, Kadyrov has completely cleared Chechnya of all rivals, either Chechen or Russian, such that, having fed and groomed his "dragon," Putin has no Plan B in Chechnya.

Thomas de Waal is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. This is an expanded version of an article that originally appeared on Carnegie's Eurasia Outlook blog.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/30/kadyrovs-menace-casts-a-shadow-over-moscow-a45266