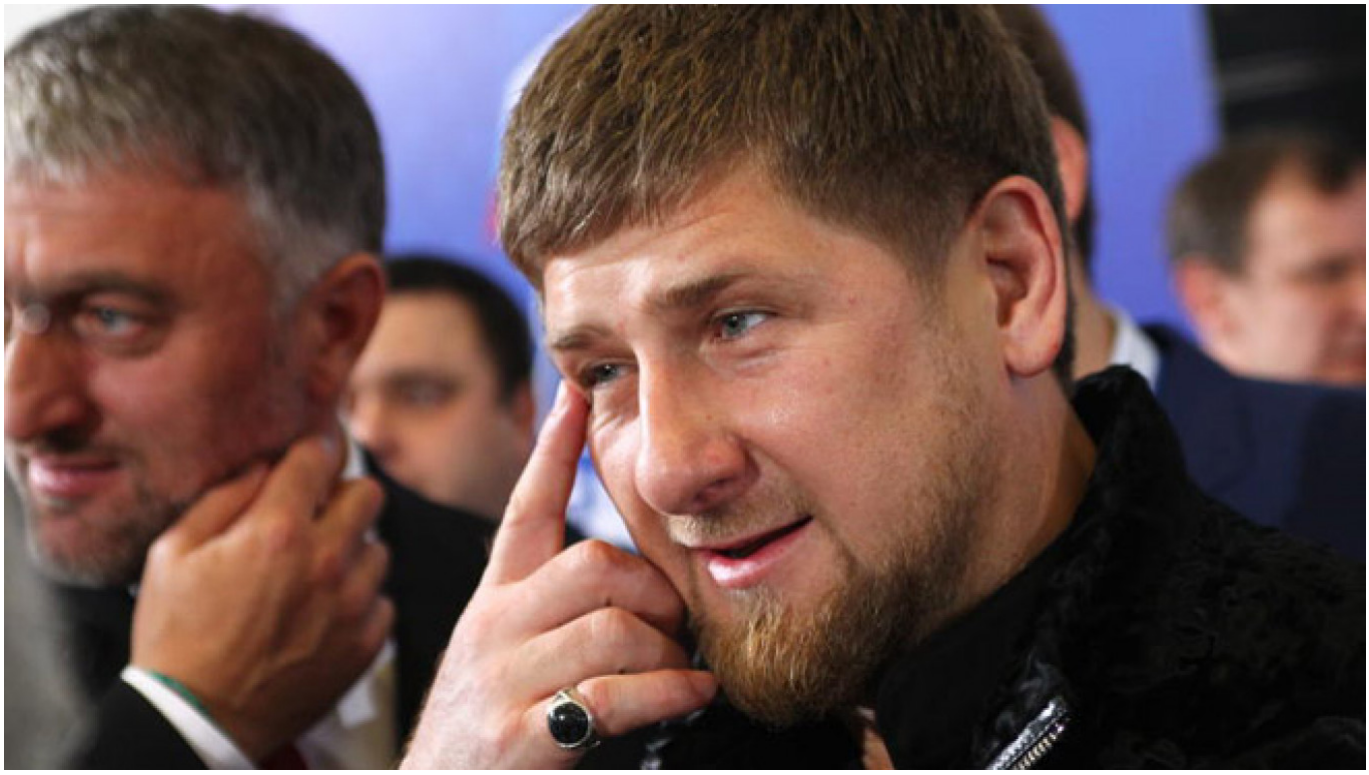
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Chechen Official's Call to Legalize Polygamy Stirs Social Debate

By Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber

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Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, as well as a series of regional lawmakers from the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkiria, has repeatedly called for the legalization of polygamy.

A high-ranking Chechen official's call Tuesday to legalize polygamy in Russia after a local district police chief took a 17-year-old girl as his second wife last week has prompted soul searching among the Russian population, which remains torn between its relative acceptance of extramarital affairs and its attachment to the legal and social status quo, sociologists told The Moscow Times.

Magomed Daudov, head of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's presidential administration, advocated for the legalization of polygamy in an interview with the Gazeta.ru news site on Tuesday. Daudov had taken part in the wedding of police chief Nazhud Guchigov, a man three time older than his second bride. At one point, Daudov was filmed helping the ashen teen, Kheda (Luiza) Goylabiyeva, sign the marriage register.

"If a man is able to support another woman, then why not [legalize polygamy]?" Daudov said. "This [polygamy] is common, so it would be nice to have it regulated."

Polygamy is not permitted under Russian law, although it remains commonplace in Russia's predominantly Muslim republics of the North Caucasus. Taking a second wife, a traditional practice among Chechen men, cannot be recognized as an official partnership according to Russian legislation. The law also sets the minimum age for marriage at 18, with exceptions in only a few circumstances.

But Russians' indignation at the marriage, a topic broadly debated across social media, seemed to stem more from the bride's age than from the groom's marital status.

A poll published last week by the Moscow-based Center for Research on Mass E-Knowledge showed that 22 percent of Russians of all backgrounds were in favor of allowing polygamy in Russia's North Caucasus — so long as the women involved had agreed to the arrangement and the bride and groom had both reached the age of majority. Nearly half of the population, according to the survey, was categorically against formally legalizing the practice in the Caucasus, saying it would violate federal legislation and human rights. The poll, conducted among 11,462 people on popular social media sites, did not specify a margin of error.

The survey found that the demographic most broadly opposed to polygamy is women between the ages of 35 and 44, with 78 percent of this group firmly against the practice.

"Societies in which patriarchy is closely ingrained in the cultural, economic and traditional makeup of everyday life, as is the case in the North Caucasus, are more likely to support the practice of polygamy," said Lev Shcheglov, the president of St. Petersburg's Institute of Psychology and Sexology. "Support for the practice is in decline in general in Russia because patriarchy in society has overall eroded, making polygamy less morally acceptable."

According to sociologists, most parts of modern Russia do not have a history of polygamy, if the notion is understood in terms of formal ties between one man and several women. However, on an informal basis matters were less clear-cut. Prior to the baptism of Prince Vladimir — the leader of Kievan Rus who brought Orthodox Christianity to Russia — he had hundreds of concubines in different cities and was "insatiable in fornication," according to the Primary Chronicle, a history compiled around the year 1113.

In the Russian empire, polygamy was permitted among the Muslim population.

In the 1920s, Soviet authorities moved to ban polygamy in the regions where it had been commonly practiced, including in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Soviet authorities did not immediately criminalize polygamy, but the relevant legislation was later amended, making the practice a prosecutable offense.

Between 1960 and 1965, courts of the Uzbek Soviet Republic reviewed between 30 and 66 polygamy cases, according to Sergei Abashin, an anthropologist at St. Petersburg's European University. Individuals convicted of polygamy faced up to one year behind bars.

The practice remains illegal in the post-Soviet era, but has been decriminalized. The Orthodox Church, which has been increasingly vocal in the policy-making sphere, is sternly opposed

to the practice.

Kadyrov, as well as a series of regional lawmakers from the North Caucasus, Tatarstan and Bashkiria, has repeatedly called for the legalization of polygamy. The boisterous leader of the LDPR party, longtime politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky, has on numerous occasions espoused the virtues of polygamy as a means of bolstering population growth.

In 1999, the president of the North Caucasus republic of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev, decreed that men should be allowed to have four wives. Russia's Justice Ministry dismissed the order as unconstitutional.

Although polygamy is illegal in Russia, extramarital affairs remain at the center of public morality issues, as is the case in many countries. According to leading sociologists, the Russian population tends to be perhaps more forgiving of their spouses' excursions beyond the marital bedroom than many of their Western counterparts.

"If we view polygamy in terms of a man having more than one woman in his life, then yes, the phenomenon exists in Russia," said Alexei Levinson, head of the social and cultural studies department at the Levada Center, an independent pollster based in Moscow. "No one would ever boast or openly declare that they are having extramarital relations. But there is a form of tolerance in Russian society for the phenomenon nonetheless."

A poll conducted by the Levada Center in February found that nearly one-quarter of Russians had no reservations about extramarital relations. But the majority of the population, 63 percent, according to the Levada Center's data, still view affairs as unacceptable.

Most Russian men and women — 55 and 70 percent, respectively — seem to agree that having more than one partner at a time is unseemly. Russian women are, perhaps unsurprisingly, less likely to stray from the bounds of marriage, according to the poll, conducted among a representative sample of 1,600 adults across 46 Russian regions with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent.

Polygamy's popularity in recent surveys, according to Levinson, may be partially explained by a general liberalization of sexuality among Russians. In practice, polygamy could be becoming more appropriate in the eyes of its advocates because of the population's increasing purchasing power in recent decades, which has allowed men to be financially capable of supporting more than one spouse.

"Because polygamy is allowed in the Koran, the notion does not violate social morality in Russia's North Caucasus," Levinson said. "This is what distinguishes [the North Caucasus] from other regions, where the concept violates pre-existing notions of public morality."

The Kremlin refused to comment on Daudov's call for the legalization of polygamy. State Duma Deputy Yelena Mizulina has said that criminalizing polygamy again would be "backward and stupid" because Russian law only permits marriages with one person at a given time, the RIA Novosti news agency reported earlier this week.

Sociologists doubt that the Russian federal government would be willing to accept amendments to regional legislation that would legalize polygamy in Chechnya and other

North Caucasian republics. Shcheglov said that allowing regions to treat their own laws as superior to federal legislation would lead to the unraveling of the Russian state.

Some Muslim religious leaders, including Damir Mukhetdinov, deputy chairman of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, have said that changing legislation to accommodate Muslim populations that traditionally practice polygamy would rattle the legal and constitutional foundations of Russian legislation. But another prominent Muslim religious leader, mufti Shafig Pshikhachev, told the Interfax news agency on Tuesday that polygamy was an "inevitable" reality in Russia.

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