

Kadyrov Set to Play Hardball With Russian Opposition

By [Daria Litvinova](#)

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Kadyrov's aide Magomed Daudov, the speaker of the Chechen parliament, posted this picture on his Instagram, comparing opposition activists and journalists with different canine breeds, and threatening them with Kadyrov's sheepdog Tarzan.

Konstantin Senchenko, a Krasnoyarsk lawmaker, found himself in the spotlight this month when he was the first to oppose Ramzan Kadyrov in his anti-opposition campaign. Kadyrov called opposition activists "enemies of the people" — a term used during Stalin's era as a criminal charge — and in his speech to local media representatives said they should be persecuted for their "subversive activity."

Senchenko called Kadyrov "a disgrace to Russia," in a Facebook post. Several days later a video of Senchenko apologizing for his words appeared on Kadyrov's Instagram with a caption "I accept [the apology]." According to State Duma opposition deputy Dmitry Gudkov, the video was filmed by representatives of the Krasnoyarsk Chechen diaspora.

Numerous civil rights activists, including human rights ombudswoman Ella Pamfilova and members of the Presidential Human Rights Council, condemned Kadyrov's statements as harmful and dangerous and called for the Prosecutor General's office to look into them.

But the story didn't end there. On the contrary, it resulted in the outburst of brazen insults and intimidations from top Chechen officials.

Speaker of the Chechen parliament Magomed Daudov, State Duma deputy Adam Delimkhanov and others embarked on a unprecedented campaign supporting Kadyrov and attacking opposition activists and media outlets, calling them "shaitans," "traitors" and "jackals."

Speaker of the State Duma Sergei Naryshkin called the conflict "unpleasant" and expressed hope for an open and respectful dialogue — statements which only fueled the flame.

Kadyrov issued another statement, this time in the pro-Kremlin Izvestia newspaper. "Those who call for a dialogue with jackals who are dreaming of destroying our state, might not be able to wash off the stink of a cowardly dog," he wrote.

Meanwhile, Russians flooded social media in support of Senchenko, calling Kadyrov "a disgrace to Russia." The Chechen Information Ministry launched its own flood of online commentators in response, urging people to write "Kadyrov is Russia's pride."

As this article went to press, Chechen officials were reportedly planning a rally in support of Kadyrov in the region's capital Grozny. The message of the event, reportedly scheduled for Friday, is clear — Kadyrov has strong support from Chechens, so you better not mess with him.

Intimidation in Action

Kadyrov and his allies are widely criticized and feared due to their cruel treatment of opponents and violent methods of resolving disputes.

Kadyrov's aide Daudov is a former illegal militant. Kadyrov's right-hand man Delimkhanov was on Interpol's wanted list in the 2000s, and made headlines in 2013 a gold handgun fell from his pocket during a fight in the State Duma.

In addition, last spring's investigation into the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was traced to the top of the Chechen elite — to military commander Ruslan Geremeyev, a relative of Delimkhanov, media reported. Another relative of Geremeyev's, Federation Council senator Suleyman Geremeyev, participated in the recent opposition-blasting campaign.

Those to whom the Chechens' threats were addressed realize the danger, but refuse to feel threatened.

Igor Kalyapin, head of the Anti-Torture Committee — an NGO deemed a "foreign agent" last year that operates in Chechnya despite ever-present conflict with local authorities — said that the threats have discouraged neither him nor his fellow civil rights activists.

"Personally, I'm used to it. Almost every month the Chechen media accuse me of something — of being an agent of foreign special services or of funding terrorists, which is far from

being truth,” he said, admitting that after a series of damning articles, his committee's offices in Chechnya were set on fire.

Ilya Yashin, Nemtsov's closest ally, also said he wasn't intimidated. “The situation is starting to change. He feels that people are overcoming their fear, and he is trying to reverse it by publicly intimidating them into becoming afraid again,” Yashin said.

No Reason for Conflict

The current scandal seems to have sparked out of the blue.

Varvara Pakhomenko, an analyst with the International Crisis Group who has been studying Chechnya for years, believes the reason is that locals have begun expressing resentment towards regional officialdom, and Kadyrov wants to prevent them from protesting.

“The Chechens were patient for a long time, because the war was over and they became able to earn a living again. Now the pressure is the same, but there is less money, hence they no longer think it's worth to live in fear,” she said.

Grigory Shvedov — editor-in-chief of the Kavkazsky Uzel ([Caucasian Knot](#)) news website devoted to covering the South Caucasus — notes that Kadyrov is up for re-election this year. He needs to establish himself as the leader the Kremlin needs him to be, Shvedov said.

“He's supposed to be an asset for the Kremlin administration as a threat to mostly Moscow- and St. Petersburg-based opposition,” Shvedov said. “The target audience of the message is the Kremlin,” he added.

Out of Proportion

Following Nemtsov's murder, animosity developed between Kadyrov and elements of the siloviki, yet Putin's approval remains crucial for the Chechen leader. This time Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov requested that Kadyrov's statements not be blown out of proportion and “read calmly.”

“If [you] read carefully, [you can see that] non-systemic opposition is described there. ... Those whose activities are not within the law and those who are ready to violate the law and harm their country,” Peskov told the Interfax news agency.

The Kremlin cannot reproach Kadyrov, believes Dmitry Oreshkin, an independent political analyst.

“The Kremlin appreciates that Kadyrov controls the territory of Chechnya, ... so he can get away with more things than people here, in Moscow, imagine,” Oreshkin said. However, they can't openly support him, because the ruling elite controlling Moscow and central Russia does not like others meddling in their business, he added.

Alexei Venediktov, editor-in-chief of the opposition-leaning Ekho Moskvyy radio station — among those named “traitors” in Kadyrov's Izvestia column — is careful not to blow recent events out of proportion. “His [Kadyrov's] actions are so awkward that why talk about them when you can say nothing,” he said.

Yet Venediktov does not sweep Kadyrov's words aside and has requested additional security for Ekho Moskvyy. "I take seriously all the statements made by the Chechen leadership, because I know that they are serious people, not ear-bashers." he said.

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