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Article on Russian-Chechen Tensions Draws Chechen Ire

By Anna Dolgov

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Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov (2nd L) takes part in a ceremony to inaugurate him for a second term as Chechen president in Grozny.

Chechnya's regional legislature has demanded an investigation for possible "extremism" into an article by a Russian political analyst who wrote that mutual resentment between Russians and Chechens has been growing and was on the verge of an "explosion."

Magomed Daudov, speaker of the Chechen parliament, said political analyst Andrei Piontkovsky was "openly calling for Chechnya's secession from Russia," according to a report by independent Ekho Moskvy radio station, on whose website Piontkovsky's article was posted Saturday.

Chechnya's parliament also demanded that Ekho Moskvy be prosecuted for publishing Piontkovsky's piece, the radio station reported.

In his article titled “A Bomb Ready to Explode,” Piontkovsky wrote that Russia essentially lost its two wars against Chechen separatists in the mid-1990s and the early 2000s.

But instead of a “monstrous” solution — continuing the war to wipe out Chechnya's population — President Vladimir Putin chose a “very bad” one: Installing in Chechnya an ostensibly loyal leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, and giving him free rein to rule the land, Piontkovsky wrote.

Kadyrov's forces have been accused of kidnapping, torturing and killing his political opponents. But local residents prefer a Chechen strongman over a Russian one, according to Piontkovsky.

“What did we fight twice in Chechnya for? For Russia's territorial integrity,” Piontkovsky wrote. “For Chechnya within Russia. But territorial integrity is not scorched earth without people. We fought to demonstrate to the Chechens that they are citizens of Russia. But at the same time we eradicated their towns and villages with airplanes and barrage fire systems ... kidnapped peaceful civilians, whose bodies were later found with signs of torture.”

Kadyrov has received at least 500 billion rubles ($6.4 billion at the current rate) for his republic in official subsidies from Moscow, but the actual figure may be much higher, according to a documentary “The Family,” released by the pro-democracy Open Russia foundation last year.

“Having unleashed and lost the war in the Caucasus, the Kremlin is paying, in exchange for ostensible submissiveness, a toll and contribution not only to Kadyrov, but also to the criminal elites of other republics,” Piontkovsky wrote. The money “is spent to buy palaces and golden guns for local leaders.”

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny wrote on his website earlier this month that Kadyrov's supposed loyalty to Putin was spurious, and the Chechen leader planned secession as soon as federal subsidies dry up.

“Kadyrov's strategic task is to break away from Russia and create his own authoritarian state under the cover of Islamic slogans,” Navalny wrote. “He is simply awaiting the moment when the budget absolutely runs out of money.”

Putin and Kadyrov seem to have shown no signs of a willingness to break ties so far. Yet the people of Russia and Chechnya have been growing increasingly resentful of each other, according to Piontkovsky.

“Two ethnic groups with these kind of established attitudes toward each other cannot live within a single state,” he wrote. “Project 'Kadyrov' with its ticking bomb has postponed the resolution of the problem for a decade, but its time has run out.”

His article, published Saturday, came a day after thousands of people gathered in the center of Chechnya's capital Grozny for a rally in support of Putin and Kadyrov. Typically for mass rallies in Chechnya, most participants were forced to show up by their employers and local government agencies, according to news reports.

A week earlier, Kadyrov issued a fierce diatribe against Russian opposition activists, calling

them “jackals” and “enemies of the people.”

Kadyrov allies' virulent tirades prompted an outcry from Russia's opposition-minded figures. Ekho Moskvy radio host Matvei Ganapolsky published an open letter to Putin last week, asking the Russian leader, as the “guarantor of the Constitution,” to respond to the anti-opposition rhetoric pouring out from Chechnya.

"Why are you silent, Vladimir Vladimirovich?” Ganapolsky wrote to Putin on the radio station's website. “Why is your administration silent?”

“Don't you see that this [rhetoric] is an appeal for some proper Chechens to kill somebody from the Ekho Moskvy radio station or from Dozhd [independent television], while holding your portrait in front of them?” Ganapolsky wrote.

The response came this week, when on Monday Putin praised Kadyrov as an efficient leader.

Dozhd, the independent television station, cited an unidentified official close to the presidential administration as saying Tuesday that Kremlin officials were displeased by the mass rally in Grozny, interpreting it as Kadyrov's demand to keep up federal subsidies to his republic.

But Putin's Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov denied the report, saying: “As for the actions of the leader of the Chechen republic, it raises no questions in the president's administration,” the Interfax news agency reported Tuesday.

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