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Editors: Sławomir Dębski • Patrycja Sasnal • Rafał Tarnogórski

Sebastian Płóciennik • Justyna Szczudlik • Daniel Szeligowski
Jolanta Szymańska • Marcin Terlikowski • Szymon Zaręba • Tomasz Żornaczuk

Chechnya's Significance to Russia's Internal and Foreign Policy

Jakub Benedyczak

The actions of the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, towards the neighbouring republics of the Russian Federation have increased tensions in the North Caucasus region. The Russian authorities tolerate Kadyrov's policy because of the significance of Chechnya to Russian politics in the Middle East and the fight against terrorism. Kadyrov remains loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is the most important guarantor of the Chechen leader's position. However, in the long run, once Putin leaves office, the Chechen Republic may attempt to gain independence.

In autumn last year, Kadyrov forced the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia to resolve a territorial conflict with the Chechen Republic that had lasted since the collapse of the USSR. As a result of the agreement, Ingushetia renounced 10% of its territory to Chechnya. This led to massive protests of the Ingush people, and as a result, the resignation of Ingushetia's head. Then, Kadyrov forced the Republic of Dagestan to join similar talks on territorial changes. Fearing a repetition of the Ingushetia scenario in April, the parties suspended negotiations. Despite the tensions in Ingushetia, the Russia's Constitutional Court approved the Chechnya-Ingushetia border agreement, and the central authorities will not intervene in this unprecedented shifting of borders within the Russian Federation.

Chechnya's Quasi-Sovereignty. Since the end of the active phase of the Second Chechen War (2000), the Russian authorities have transferred control over the republic to local elites in exchange for tamping down aspirations of independence. This has led to the formation of an informal and unique status for the Chechnya Republic in the Russian Federation called an "internal foreign", which is characterized by the limited authority of the central authorities over the republic. In the republic, the institutions and offices of federal offices only formally function based on the law of the Russian Federation. In practice, they are subject to Kadyrov directives, informal local schemes, and customary Chechen laws.

Contrary to federal law, the authorities of the Chechen Republic conduct their own Chechenisation and Islamisation practices based on at times extreme interpretations of local cultural and religious jurisprudence: allowing polygamy, marriages of underage women, "matrimonial" kidnappings, honour killings, and the domination of the Chechen language in media, offices, and local government meetings. This has been taking place with the tacit agreement of the central authorities, along with mass persecution of opponents and the use of torture and collective repression.

The basis of Chechnya's autonomy is the 10,000–30,000-strong local armed formation, the so-called Kadyrovtsy. Formally, they are subject to the Russian Ministry of International Affairs and the National Guard. In reality, they are Kadyrov's private army, led by his associates. Almost all defence and security units are under the control of the authorities in the Chechen Republic, with only the local Federal Security Service left.

Kadyrov's clan has monopolised the local economy. The Russian government controls only the energy sector in the republic, although 80% of its revenues comes from the federal budget. The Chechen authorities also derive tribute paid by local state and private institutions in the form of payments for the benefit of the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation, connected to the leader of the republic.

The quasi-sovereignty of the Chechen Republic and the politics of Chechenisation strengthen the strong feeling of separateness and superiority among Chechens over other Caucasian nations. This also makes the Russian language, culture, and date alien to the inhabitants of the republic, consolidating the conviction of their area as an independent country belonging to the Chechens, including the neighbouring republics of the North Caucasus, which further increases the separatist tendencies.

Chechnya's Significance in Russian Politics. Chechnya is an important element of Russia's fight against terrorism in the North Caucasus. The Kadyrovtsy supported the Russian services in the so-called "zachistka" (mopping-up) of separatists and Islamic fundamentalists, consisting of the fighters' absorption into their ranks or killing them, isolating them from cities and depriving their families of their livelihoods. The Kadyrovtsy also reportedly supported 4,000–5,000 of the region's militants' travel to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS, including around 600–1,500 Chechens, and now are preventing their return. This has made it easier for Russian military intelligence to infiltrate ISIS and also to break up the Caucasus Emirate, a terrorist organisation responsible for many acts of terror in Russia. Fighting Islamic radicals with the Chechen forces increases the effectiveness of Russia's anti-terrorist policy. In 2010–2018, the number of victims of violence and acts of terror in the North Caucasus decreased by almost 90% (from 1,710 to 110), and in Chechnya by over 70% (from 250 to 35). In addition, the involvement of Chechen troops allows federal authorities to avoid responsibility for acts against civilians.

The Kadyrovtsy often act without agreement with the federal authorities. Justifying this by the fight against terrorism, they have fought Kadyrov's political opponents, organised armed raids in Ingushetia and Dagestan, and carried out murders outside the territory of the Chechen Republic. Thanks to Kadyrov's protection, the Kadyrovtsy avoid criminal liability for these actions—the exception being the Chechens convicted in 2017 for the murder of former Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov. This has led to the emergence of a conflict between Kadyrov and the heads of Russian power structures, who would like to limit the leader of the Chechnya's freedom to act as he wishes. However, they are currently unable to weaken his position because he enjoys Putin's personal protection.

The Russian president perceives the Chechen leader as a guarantor of Russian priorities towards the North Caucasus, ensuring the stability of Chechnya and keeping it within the Russian Federation. It can be assumed that only if Kadyrov attempts to take over further Russian Federation territory will he meet a firm reaction from Putin.

Chechnya's Significance in Russian Foreign Policy. Kadyrov has become an important instrument of Russian politics in North Africa and the Middle East. In the last four years, he and his associates, as special representatives of President Putin and the Russian Federation, have held dozens of meetings with the highest authorities of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, and Libya. Two close Kadyrov advisors pursue Russian policy in the region: Lev Dengov is the head of the Russia-Libya contact group, working to regain Russian influence in the Libyan economy, and Ziyad Sabsabi, Kadyrov's envoy for the Middle East and North Africa, is responsible for the repatriation of Russian women and children from Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

An important role is played by Kadyrov's troops, who have fought or are fighting in the Russian-Georgian conflict, in Donbas in the Ukraine, and also in Syria, where the Russian military sided with Bashar Al-Assad. Currently, about 1,000 Chechens are stationed in Syria. In addition to intelligence tasks, they protect strategic objects, humanitarian aid and the reconstruction of mosques, financed by the Akhmad Kadyrov Foundation. The foundation also establishes contacts with the relatively large Chechen diaspora, including in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan, thus building Kadyrov's influence in the Middle East. This strengthens the Chechen leader on the Russian political scene, leveraging power over structures hostile to him.

Conclusions and Perspectives. For the Russian authorities, Kadyrov's seemingly independent actions are the price for his contribution to the fight against terrorism and the stabilisation of Chechnya. For this reason, the quasi-sovereignty of the republic will be preserved, allowing Kadyrov to further strengthen his political position, deepen Chechnya's independence within the Federation, and expand its influence in the region. This will be supported by maintaining Kadyrov's role as an intermediary in Russian politics in the Middle East and North Africa.

In the short term, a scenario in which Kadyrov's actions threaten the stability of the North Caucasus or the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation is unlikely. The massive scale of repression Kadyrov has used against the Chechens, as well as the conflict with the Russian power structures, mean that the republic's leader must remain loyal to the federal authorities to maintain his power and security. However, if he attempts to change the status quo in the region, the Russian authorities will use all means, including military force, to restore full control over the North Caucasus.

As the most important guarantor of the current status of Chechnya and Kadyrov's position is Putin, in the long term, after the change in the leader of the Russian Federation, the existing model of relations between the central authorities and the republic could be revised. If Putin's departure weakens the federal authorities, it is possible that Chechnya will attempt to gain independence and expand its borders into neighbouring republics, as it did after the collapse of the USSR and considering the separatist tendencies still present in the republic.