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KADYROV AS A TOOL OF THE KREMLIN FOR MAINTAINING STABILITY IN CHECHNYA

GIORGI BILANISHVILI

140

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

Control of the situation in Chechnya has a very high political price for Moscow. The pursuit for the independence of this republic, which gained a strong foothold in the 1990s, was not just a problem of local importance for Moscow. During that period, quite a number of subjects of the federation tried to distance themselves from the center and pursue independent policies. The failure of the federal government in the first military campaign of Chechnya has exacerbated this trend.

When the second military campaign was launched in Chechnya in the autumn of 1999, the federal government believed that regaining control of Chechnya would help restore its weakened influence over other entities in the federation. Consequently, it would have been an important step forward in establishing stability in the Russian Federation and strengthening the authority of the federal government. Alongside the resolution of the acute domestic political problem, Moscow's political weight and influence in the foreign arena would also increase which would help to restore the positions lost in international politics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

There is another important variable that has to be associated with the re-establishing of control over Chechnya. In particular, the success in the second military campaign of Chechnya significantly contributed to the long political career of Vladimir Putin. Making significant progress in resolving the Chechen problem was especially important at the initial stages of Putin's arrival at the head of the Russian government when his influence and authority were not great. Indeed, the restoration of control over Chechnya and the stabilization of the country as a whole are still considered as one of Putin's main achievements, significantly strengthening his authority and power.

The purpose of this publication is to assess the seriousness of the Chechnya problem, the role that the Kadyrov clan played in the success of Chechnya's second military campaign, the solidity of Chechnya's stability today and the acceptability of the situation in Chechnya for the federal center.

Federal Center and Subjects in the 1990s

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, separatist tendencies were evident in Russia amid growing political, economic and social problems.

As early as August-October 1990, more than ten political entities within the then Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic adopted a declaration of state sovereignty called the "Sovereignty Parade."

During this period, the so-called Domino theory was gaining popularity. According to this theory, Russia's territorial integrity is closely linked to the North Caucasus as separatist movements in the region contribute to the activation of various religious or ethnic groups and separatist movements in the Muslim republics of the Volga-Ural region.¹

Against this backdrop, Chechnya, which declared independence shortly before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in November 1991, is becoming a symbol of the collapse of the Russian Federation and a synonym of the insult and humiliation of the Russian state.²

In February 1992, Yeltsin's government tried to resolve the problems with the regions through a new federal agreement. This agreement regulated the relations of the federal center with the republics within the federation and entities with different statuses (region, district, autonomous district, autonomous okrug, federal city) in various ways. This attempt was not successful. The republics of Chechnya and Tatarstan refused to sign the agreement while the Republic of Bashkortostan and Sakha (Yakutia) strongly criticized it. Complaints were also made by other subjects of the federation which saw that the federal agreement granted certain privileges to entities with the status of a republic inhabited by ethnic minorities.³

After that, even before the first war in Chechnya, there was a tendency of a further deterioration of the situation between the federal center and its subjects. Some of the subjects of the Russian Federation negatively viewed the new constitution of 1993 which was a new attempt to separate the powers of the federal center and the federal subjects. The entities of the federation which had already acceded to the federal agreement now objected to certain norms of the new constitution since they considered that they were in conflict with the federal agreement which they had already signed.⁴

Apart from Chechnya, the federal center had the most problems with Tatarstan. To avoid a further complication of the situation, Yeltsin's government decided to conclude a bilateral agreement with this republic in February 1994.⁵

At the same time, Moscow also made a number of attempts to resolve the Chechen problem in some way. Among them, the Russian special services tried to overthrow the government in Chechnya in the summer of 1994, albeit unsuccessfully.⁶

The first war in Chechnya, which began in late 1994, further pushed various regions of Russia to demand a bilateral agreement on relations with the federal center.⁷ Like Tatarstan, the federal government had to conclude bilateral agreements with the Republic of Yakutia, Bashkortostan, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Perm, Irkutsk, Kaliningrad, Leningrad Oblast and St. Petersburg. By 1998, the federal center had a bilateral agreement with half of the federation entities. The last such entity of the federation, with which the federal center signed a bilateral agreement, was the city of Moscow itself.⁸

Against the background of the above-mentioned problems, the Russian political and intellectual elite feared that yet again that the country had fallen into another time of troubles (смутное время)* and, consequently, faced the threat of collapse.

The vitality of this challenge was also well realized by Vladimir Putin even at the time when he became Prime Minister in August 1999.⁹ He believed that the Russian Federation, like Yugoslavia, was falling apart. If this process could not be stopped immediately, the Russian Federation would cease to exist. In Putin's view, the establishment of control over Chechnya was of particular importance for the future of the Russian Federation.¹⁰

Kremlin Strategy and the Kadyrov Clan

The Kremlin's strategy for resolving the Chechen conflict is known as "Chechenization." It included two main components: 1) the transformation of the Chechen conflict into an internal Chechen confrontation and 2) the transfer of the responsibility for establishing order in the republic to local structures.

The establishment of an alternative power center in Chechnya was crucial for the implementation of this strategy. To this end, before the start of the First Chechen War, in November 1994, Moscow mobilized

* This is the period of the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century in the history of Russia when, after the death of the last king of the Rurik dynasty, revolts, invasions of other countries and a great famine began in the country, creating the danger of collapse.

Dudayev's opposition. Even after that, the Kremlin attempted to establish an alternative government in Chechnya and officials of Chechen origin were sent from Moscow to Chechnya. However, none of these attempts delivered a successful result for Moscow.¹¹

After the above-mentioned failed attempts, Moscow no longer actively attempted to gain the support of any Chechen clan before the start of the second war in Chechnya in 1999. However, some contacts were established with possible candidates.¹²

Logically, one of the main tasks of the Russian intelligence services during this period was to find a force in Chechnya capable of becoming a reliable asset for the Kremlin on the ground and playing an important role in defeating the Chechen resistance movement. Since the assets sent from Moscow were unsuccessful, the focus had to be on one of the strongest local clans. Such a force could only be manifested as a result of a rift within the resistance movement.

Thus, in order to succeed, the Kremlin had to enter into a deal with a leader who had previously fought against the federal center but was now ready to cooperate with Moscow. Such a leader was Akhmad Kadyrov who fought against federal forces in the first war in Chechnya and declared a "holy war" - jihad against Russia in 1995.¹³

After the end of the first war in Chechnya, the political situation in the republic did not stabilize. Internal confrontations deepened which at some point escalated into a political crisis, armed clashes and dual governance.

Against this background, Akhmad Kadyrov attempted to seize power in Chechnya in 1999. He conspired with most of Maskhadov's law enforcement agencies and simultaneously opposed Maskhadov and Basayev.¹⁴

In doing so, Kadyrov simultaneously challenged both the secular and Islamist sections of the pro-independence Chechen government which was an ideal option from the Kremlin's stand point.

Apart from the fact that Kadyrov was the leader of one of the clans in Chechnya, which had its own armed group, he was also very interesting and favorable for the Kremlin as an ally due to another aspect. He was a mufti; that is, a spiritual leader in Chechnya. Consequently, his struggle against the growing Salafist stream in Chechnya at that time had a special bearing. For Moscow, this was a strong argument to show that it was fighting radical Islamists alongside the representatives of "traditional

Islam.” It is also noteworthy that in the early 2000s, the term “traditional religion” was coined in the Russian Federation which was preferred and consequently even protected by the state.¹⁵

Since the start of the second military campaign in Chechnya, official Moscow emphasized that it was fighting international terrorism in Chechnya and attached great importance to Kadyrov’s role in this fight. This is even confirmed by the recordings of conversations between Clinton and Yeltsin¹⁶ which coincide with the start of the second military campaign in Chechnya. In particular, according to declassified documents, Yeltsin underlines the fight against terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya. He also mentions the transition of the Chechen mufti (Kadyrov) to the side of the Russian federal forces as a remarkable and important event in the context of the settlement of the Chechen conflict.

In addition to reinforcing the Kremlin’s narrative of the fight against terrorism, the Kadyrov clan has made a significant contribution to the physical destruction of the resistance movement. Kadyrov’s government was offering amnesty to the resistance fighters. Moreover, the amnestied fighters were not asked to surrender their weapons. They continued their service in various paramilitary formations under Kadyrov’s government. Among them, Akhmad Kadyrov’s security service was filled mainly by the exact same members of informal armed groups.¹⁷

At the same time, extremely harsh policies were applied to those who refused amnesty and remained in the resistance movement. In particular, their relatives were killed or tortured and repressions were carried out against them. The terror undertaken by the Kadyrovs themselves proved to be much more effective and efficient than the actions of the Russian federal forces.¹⁸

Exact statistics on the total number of fighters who sided with the federal government are not available. According to a statement made by Ramzan Kadyrov in the spring of 2015, their number reached 7,000.¹⁹

As a result of this policy, Moscow has achieved at least two major goals:

1. Crushed the resistance movement in Chechnya and stabilized the situation.
2. Discredited the resistance movement and portrayed Chechnya’s second military campaign as a fight against terrorism.

Agreement between Putin and Kadyrov

One episode that took place at the beginning of the second Chechen war is important for understanding the agreement between Putin and Kadyrov. In particular, during one of the interviews, a telephone call was made to Akhmad Kadyrov's office. Kadyrov, who, at that time was appointed by the Kremlin to lead the Chechen administration, had instructed that no one should disturb him. Nevertheless, since the call was from the Kremlin, he was compelled to answer it. While talking on the telephone, Akhmad Kadyrov interrupted the interlocutor several times - "No, tell him, no Surkov! I only meet with President Putin."²⁰

Further developments suggest that the plot of relations with "only Putin" was not just about a specific telephone conversation. It emerged as a model for the relations between Moscow and Grozny. Many years after that episode, Ramzan Kadyrov, following in the footsteps of his own father, has also repeatedly underscored his special relationship towards Putin. According to him, he is infinitely loyal to the president (Vladimir Putin) like no one else. He himself elected the Commander-in-Chief and remains loyal to him, both in service and in life.²¹

Consequently, the model of relations between the federal center and Chechnya, which dates back to the first years of Putin's rule, is still based entirely on the pact of loyalty between Putin and Kadyrov.²² Under the pact, Kadyrov must ensure stability in Chechnya and recognize Putin's superior power. Putin, on the other hand, must facilitate Kadyrov's support so that his power does not face any kind of challenge. Support includes financial allocations from the federal center and a guarantee of safety for Kadyrov who is suspected in various serious crimes.

Under the Putin-Kadyrov Pact, a feudal-colonial constitution of relations was actually established by which one of the Chechen clans receives large-scale support and special preferences from the metropolis in exchange for loyalty and the fulfillment of certain conditions.²³

This Chechen clan is quite complex in configuration. Ramzan Kadyrov, who heads it, relies on his immediate friends, his fellow villagers and the people of his generation who are grateful to him for everything they have. At the same time, the most important members of the clan are also those who were considered to be late Akhmad Kadyrov's partners.²⁴

Moscow is well aware of the price of Chechen stability. But at the same time, it is also well aware that under Ramzan Kadyrov's rule, the subject of the Russian Federation - Chechnya - was transformed into a "state formation" under Kadyrov's rule. Even Putin's closest entourage raises the question of the extent to which the vertical of power established under Vladimir Putin's presidency extends to this "state formation."²⁵

For these and other serious reasons, Ramzan Kadyrov will not be an acceptable and credible figure for the federal center. It is not surprising when various publications say that the Russian elite, especially the heads of Russian law enforcement agencies, are not distinguished by their kindness to Kadyrov. Nevertheless, he has held the post of Commander of the Chechen Republic for many years now.

Often when discussing Kadyrov's ouster, the emphasis is on the fact that this decision could lead to a new large-scale conflict in Chechnya. In this context, it is noteworthy that Kadyrov has under his control about 20-30 thousand well-trained and armed military servicemen who are often referred to as a personal army.²⁶

Any possible new destabilization in Chechnya will be a rather serious problem for the federal center. According to a Russian National Guard document, the destabilization of Chechnya would destabilize the entire North Caucasus in which case the federal center would need to mobilize 100,000 National Guard fighters and an additional 50,000 troops from the regular military units.²⁷

Now let us leave behind this radical scenario of events to look at the problem from another angle. As we have seen above, stability in Chechnya is based on the dominance of one (Kadyrov) clan which dates back to the early 2000s. Ramzan Kadyrov is the political successor of his father Akhmad Kadyrov whose power is recognized or forcibly tolerated by other clans in Chechnya. Kadyrov, for his part, acknowledges Putin's supremacy.

The Kremlin may easily find a new candidate who recognizes Putin's supremacy but a serious question remains as to whether or not the candidate's authority will be recognized in Chechnya.

Conclusion

Today the federal center is much stronger than it was during Yeltsin's rule and it has much more solid leverage for the influence and the management

of its subjects. However, there are still serious questions about the solidity of the internal political stability established during Putin's rule in the Russian Federation. This is also confirmed by the example of Chechnya where Ramzan Kadyrov remains the sole leader to this day despite the negative attitude of rather influential sections of the Russian elite.

In general, the problem of Chechnya and Russia as a whole is linked together by a single key issue. All of Russia's achievements, whether domestic or foreign policy, are directly linked to the figure of Vladimir Putin. Maintaining stability in Chechnya, is linked to Kadyrov. In both cases, we are dealing with specific individuals and not with the system of government. Consequently, it is difficult to say whether or not the model of governance in Chechnya or in Russia as a whole is in the interests of the Russian Federation in the long run.

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