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The Two Faces of Chechnya

By Alexey Malashenko

Chechnya is changing, but just how irreversible is the process of peace and reconstruction? What are the grounds for hope and for concern?

The War is Over

The war in Chechnya has ended. Reports on the number of military casualties have given way to reports on the number of amnestied insurgents. The amnesty that began when Akhmad Kadyrov was in power has been repeatedly extended, the more so after Shamil Basaev, long considered a symbol of the insurgents' invincibility, was killed in July 2006, making the rebels more willing to cooperate.

The broad amnesty makes it possible to get a sense of the scale of the Chechen resistance and to estimate just how many insurgents there actually were in Chechnya. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov has said that 7,000 people have left the ranks of the illegal armed formations in the republic. Former Chechen President Alu Alkhanov has said that 5,000 people have laid down arms since 2001. A number of different estimates put the total number of insurgents killed in the two Chechen campaigns at 15,000. Thousands more were taken prisoner. The overall figures also need to take into account those who periodically fought for brief periods, returning home in between times. The tally runs into the tens of thousands. Put in this context, the Russian federal forces and their allies were in combat with far more than just some gangs of Wahhabite mercenaries, and the two-act drama that was the Chechen war takes on a completely new historical interpretation.

The amnestied rebels have been incorporated into local law enforcement and security bodies, practically making up their foundation. They are loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov and help to ensure his hold on the republic.

The amnesty will be continually reinstated until the last insurgent lays down his arms because the only alternative is a never-ending struggle against the opposition. Kadyrov has no desire for such battles because stability and peace throughout the republic are one of his main trump cards in relations with the Kremlin — a trump card that has become even more important now that Sochi has been chosen to host the Olympic Games.

Not all the fighting has ended, however. Reports of conflict are still a regular occurrence. Who can say exactly how many insurgents are still active today? The number often cited is 450. Alash Masaev, the head of the criminal investigations department of the Chechen Interior Ministry, says that 150 people are actively continuing the armed struggle, backed up by 350 "sympathizers." That makes a total of 500 people.[1] Colonel-General Arkady Yedelev, head of the North Caucasus regional counterterrorist operational command, gives a figure of 37 armed groups with a total of up to 450 fighters.[2] They are joined from time to time by young men who have not found a place for themselves in the Kadyrov administration and feel resentment over this. Chechen Mufti Sultan

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Mirzaev recently poured shame on 20 young men who had taken the risky decision to join the ranks of the "resistance."

It is unclear how many of the most influential field commanders are still alive. In any case, the most well-known among them, Doku Umarov, has not yet been caught.

The general state of affairs in the North Caucasus still leaves much to be desired. Ingushetia has been going through troubled times, and the situation is still complicated in Dagestan. Everyone agrees that things will become even worse as the parliamentary and presidential election campaigns get underway. Opposition "diehards" will want to seize the chance to show their strength, and it is entirely possible that the local police, who are supposed to display particular vigilance and professionalism during this critical time, will give them further incentive.

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In July 2007, deputy Russian prosecutor general Ivan Sydoruk said that "an analysis of the latest bombings and attacks on law enforcement officers in the North Caucasus shows that this is just the preparatory phase. We need to prepare our resistance." For his part, Dmitry Kozak, presidential envoy to the Southern Federal District, noted that "the work of the security bodies in the Southern Federal District is far from ideal." Will it be possible to avoid election campaign "surprises" in Chechnya?

Ramzan Kadyrov's Regime: Present and Future

Ramzan Kadyrov has built a political system capable of ensuring stability in Chechnya. This system is formed from and held together by three closely interwoven cables: a regime of personal power, a clan-based structure and loyalty to Moscow.

As the Kremlin sees it, no other system is possible in Chechnya. The system that has emerged fits into the general authoritarian trend in Russia and is in some ways exemplary, showing what one can achieve even in Chechnya if the vertical of power is competently put in place.

Many see the relatively swift emergence of this system as nothing short of a miracle. Ramzan Kadyrov's emergence as a leader was unexpected even in Chechnya itself. In the words of journalist Vadim Rechkalov, Chechen politicians and commanders were getting ready to "look after the orphan," but the youthful Kadyrov relieved them of this responsibility at the very outset. The medieval Arab writer Abu Faradj, told a tale in which the young heir of a shah who has just passed away emerges from the mourners and appears before the court. "Which of us did the Shah entrust with looking after you?" the courtiers ask. "He entrusted me with taking care of you," comes the heir's reply.

Kadyrov quickly got the better of his potential rivals — all those who, in his view, were insufficiently loyal, thought themselves cleverer than he was or counted on particular support from the Kremlin. Former Chechen President Alu Alkhanov, former Chechen prime minister Vladimir Abramov and former chairman of the State Council Taus Djabrailov, to name just a few, were removed from the scene. Essentially, a soft age barrier was installed. The 30 year old Kadyrov did not see much need for 60 year old post-Soviet wise men. Kadyrov used the carrot and stick method to take control of the famous Zapad and Vostok battalions. The murder of opposition figure Movladi Baisarov in Moscow — a murder that has gone unpunished — amply illustrated the fate that awaited those who refused to give in.

Kadyrov has taken on the stature of a national leader. Even his fiercest critics and opponents recognize his energy. Odes Baisultanov, his successor as prime minister of Chechnya, remarked after his appointment in April 2007 that "Following in the footsteps of a predecessor of such initiative, I am going to have a hard time carrying out my duties." Indeed, all initiative in Chechnya comes from Kadyrov. There is no longer any need to refer to him as Kadyrov Junior. People simply call him Kadyrov, or just Ramzan — as Saddam

Hussein was often referred to as simply Saddam.

The easiest reproach to make against Kadyrov is that he has surrounded himself with relatives close and distant (prime minister Baisultanov's father, for example, is Kadyrov's maternal uncle) and super-loyal people — one and the same thing, more often than not. Controversial though it may seem, if Ramzan had proceeded on the principle of avoiding all nepotism when putting together his administration, he would never have been able to form a government in the republic at all.

It is difficult to apply the criteria of a modern political system to Chechnya, but Kadyrov's regime is working and its potential is far from exhausted.

Kadyrov is an exemplary populist. He stays in constant touch with the public, promising and distributing houses, hospitals and money. Several families in Itum Kale recently received 100,000 rubles each from the president's own hands.[3] Kadyrov has appealed to the police force to "be more humane towards the most vulnerable groups of the population if they have inadvertently committed some sort of insignificant crime."[4]

Oleg Orlov, the head of human rights organization Memorial, agrees that the number of kidnappings has dropped considerably in Chechnya. Only 16 people were abducted between January and March 2007, as compared to 53 over the same period in 2006.[5] Human rights activists themselves admit that when trouble comes, people turn not to them now but to Ramzan — and Ramzan really does help them. The human rights problem is being resolved in a family way, so to speak.

In general, Kadyrov is the kind of person Moscow needs. Some analysts say that after Kadyrov Senior was killed in 2004, the Kremlin decided to give Ramzan a trial period, which he completed successfully. There have been no doubts about his loyalty to Moscow and to President Vladimir Putin in particular over this time. The paternalist approach suits both men and was sincere on both sides. Gradually, the Russian and Chechen presidents became hostage to one another. Kadyrov could not act without support from Putin, and Putin could not imagine Chechnya without Ramzan Kadyrov.

Why did I choose the image of a cable to describe the sturdiness of the political system in Chechnya? I chose it because a cable is designed to bear a calculated weight. If the cable is burdened with a weight beyond its capacity, it snaps.

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Kadyrov's solid position does not depend on relations with the Russian presidency in general, but with Vladimir Putin personally. This explains Kadyrov's desire to see Putin remain president for as long as possible — a desire indirectly highlighted by his worries about making friends with Putin's successor. As festivities were being prepared for July 14, 2007, to mark the first hundred days of his rule in Chechnya, Kadyrov proposed for the umpteenth time that Putin's term in office be extended. Kadyrov is entirely tuned into Putin and cannot adjust to the prospect of life once the current Russian president has departed. This exemplifies the dangers of personalized politics and excessive reliance on informal contacts.

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Kadyrov today faces the almost impossible task of maintaining good relations with all politicians, and especially with potential successors to Putin. Timur Aliev, editor of the

newspaper *Chechenskoye Obshchestvo*, has written that the most convenient successor in terms of Kadyrov's future political career would be current deputy prime minister Dmitry Medvedev. Aliev also suggests that Kadyrov has the backing of the principal official Kremlin ideologue, Vladislav Surkov.[6]

In the future, and perhaps even the not too distant future, Chechnya will need a system of checks and balances because the current system of absolute power that Kadyrov has built could one day capsize the whole of Chechen society.

But there is complete silence when it comes to Sergei Ivanov, the other highly-touted prospective successor to Putin — despite the fact that, while still defense minister a year ago, Ivanov ordered the Federal Agency for Special Construction, a government body under the Defense Ministry's jurisdiction, to clear the streets and help rebuild the Chechen capital city of Grozny district by district. The problem is that Ivanov comes from a security and law enforcement background and is a "friend" of the security and law enforcement agencies, while Kadyrov's relations with these agencies have always been tense — so tense, in fact, that the two sides have sometimes dispensed altogether with attempts to conceal their antipathy.

Ramzan's cherished dream is to free himself from federal overseers. At a meeting of the Chechen branch of the party United Russia (which he heads) in 2006, when he was still prime minister, Kadyrov said that the activities of the Russian Interior Ministry's Operations and Investigations Bureau (ORB-2) should be investigated. The reason he gave was that disappearances of people and unlawful investigation methods were the work of this agency itself. Without either agreeing with or refuting this assertion, I note only that ORB-2 carries out its activities independent of Kadyrov's agencies, which gives it the power to monitor Kadyrov's men and carry out its own investigations. ORB-2's independence from Kadyrov and his people comes across as a challenge. In February 2007, then President of Chechnya Alu Alkhanov met with federal security officials and the heads of the regional FSB and ORB-2 in Grozny, and Kadyrov's people were not even invited.

Kadyrov has not yet succeeded in shutting down this agency, but in July 2007 he managed to put a relatively reliable man — Colonel Isu Surguev, whom the Caucasus International forum lists as an FSB-GRU agent [7] — in charge of it. Kadyrov did not succeed, however, in getting rid of Akhmed Khasanbekov, the previous head of ORB-2, who was appointed deputy head of the Interior Ministry's main directorate in the Southern Federal District (where he will be responsible for overseeing his former subordinates).

The risk in relying only on an "inner circle," clan ties and nepotism is that the administration and the entire power system in general may cease to be professional. Loyalty to Ramzan is no substitute for professional competence. Chechnya needs specialists who can express their opinions independently, regardless of what the leader thinks. The Soviet system disintegrated in part because everyone was too busy licking the right boots. Kadyrov is obviously too young to have learned this lesson yet. Perhaps he is inspired by the examples of older colleagues in Moscow.

Even with closest friends and family, trust always has its limits, and Ramzan seems to feel this instinctively. It is not by chance that he abolished the post of deputy prime minister for law enforcement and security services. Kadyrov finds it easier to oversee them all personally. Indeed, he never let the main security force — the 2000-strong "oil regiment"— out of his hands.

For a society that has just gone through a bloody conflict, a dictatorial-populist model can be a blessing in some ways, but only a temporary one. The public's fervent enthusiasm for their leader sooner or later fades. This is all the more true in Chechnya, where a system centered on a single leader or dictator has never been a feature of the local political culture. In the future, and perhaps even the not too distant future, Chechnya will need a system of checks and balances because the cur-

rent system of absolute power that Kadyrov has built could one day capsize the whole of Chechen society. That the "main bolt" holding the system together could come loose represents a danger that could also give rise to unexpected problems. But will Ramzan prove able and willing to see the moment when he will have to give up total responsibility and place some power in the hands of political institutions, or even share a little of it with the more capable and not too ambitious among his colleagues?

The Economy: Pluses and Minuses

Whatever one thinks of Kadyrov's regime, its economic results are self-evident. Paradoxically, the very stability that is often synonymous with stagnation in Moscow provides the foundation for action in Chechnya.

Houses are being built and reconstructed, and not just on the central streets. Roads are being laid and repaired. Traffic lights are working once more. Underground pipeline and cable networks are slowly being replaced, and some mountain villages have been connected to the gas pipeline network, something that was not done even during the Soviet period.

Production of much-needed construction materials is being organized, and renovated markets are up and running. Kadyrov has even begun talking about organizing "elite tourism" — inviting tourists to come visit the "Chechen Switzerland," the districts of Shatoi, Itum Kale and Vedeno.[8] One of my acquaintances could not suppress an ironic smile at the words "elite tourism," but it is too soon to laugh: if the venture is properly organized, a fair number of foreigners could well prove willing to pay to visit "the lairs of the wild mountain dwellers." Tourists fly into space, after all. The whole question is how to organize the business.

The Chechen legislative assembly plans to send a draft law on special conditions for business activity in the Chechen Republic to the State Duma. As Kadyrov has explained, Chechnya should not rely on subsidies from Moscow but first and foremost on itself, and in particular on its oil. "Shipping out crude oil is not profitable," Kadyrov maintains. "Refining the oil would make it possible for us to raise the price of the fuel we export six to eight-fold."[9]

I seem to be writing a veritable panegyric, but this can perhaps be forgiven from someone who has only seen Chechnya in ruins.

Despite these signal economic successes, however, a modern economic sector is not emerging in the republic — and it is unclear whether such a sector ever will emerge. The necessary infrastructure is non-existent. Unemployment reigns in Chechnya, and it will not be overcome in the near future.

The future of Chechnya's oil is also not clear. The local authorities have not succeeded in transferring it entirely into Chechen hands during Putin's time in power, and it is highly unlikely that Putin's successor will be any more flexible in this respect. Finally, rebuilding the scattered and stolen pieces of the republic's oil refining industry is not even on the agenda.

In the long term, the task could be not so much to rebuild the economy as to create a new economy altogether; but the money for such a project is lacking, as Moscow keeps a tight hold on the purse strings. Specialists are also lacking. Specialists can be brought in from outside, of course, the more so as Kadyrov says it is his policy to encourage Russians who fled the republic to return, though this policy is more about ethnic relations than professional skills.

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The project for creating a special economic zone in Chechnya, outlined in the republic's Concept-Program for National State Policy, will probably never see the light of day. The federal authorities do not want yet another financial black hole in their books.

Kadyrov's time margin is not great. The people who rejoiced at small steps forward during the initial reconstruction period will gradually begin to demand more, and their young leader will have to try to satisfy their

growing list of demands. Ramzan is hostage to his own success. He can wave a magic wand to build a house or even a street, but building a sustainable economy will take something greater — and it is hard to say how long the Chechen public's patience will last.

Islam and Traditions

Tradition has gained in influence under Kadyrov. He has turned above all to Islam. The aforementioned national state policy concept, for example, contains a chapter on developing spiritual life, 12 paragraphs of which are devoted to Islam. In Ramzan's words, "He who does not believe is a dangerous person,"[10] and whoever is "an enemy of Islam," in his view, is also an "enemy of the people."

The Chechen muftis have the task of spreading the influence of traditional Caucasian Islam, which is to provide a stronghold against foreign Islam, the Islam that comes from the Middle East and has been given the name Wahhabite, or simply "Arab" Islam. The Chechen authorities see traditional Islam as one of the key factors for ensuring stability in society and preserving its identity.

Islam is becoming an additional instrument of political control over society, which for understandable reasons does not fit with the vision of a large number of Chechens who grew up in a secular environment.

Being faithful to tradition has connotations beyond the role of religion. Kadyrov proposed closing orphanages in Chechnya because, as he sees it, there cannot be unwanted and homeless children in the great Chechen family. "We are Chechens and our traditions categorically prohibit us from putting our children or our old people into homes,"[11] as the president put it. Relatives, no matter how distant the blood ties, are obliged to take orphaned children into their homes.

There are plans to improve the way the Chechen language is taught in schools and expand its use in teaching in general.

But the return to tradition is in many ways an ambiguous process. It implies, for example, strict observance of the Islamic code of behavior and the prohibitions of Sharia law. Kadyrov supports legalizing polygamy, which he says would compensate for the number of young men killed during the two Chechen wars. (He is not alone in this, as a number of politicians in other parts of the North Caucasus also favor polygamy.)

The virds — defined by Islamic scholar Vakhid Akaev as religious groups that form the Sufi tariqats (brotherhoods) Nakshbandia and Kadyria [12] — have also become more active in Chechnya. Only a few years ago, the vird structure was being called an archaic relic with no chances of revival; but in large part thanks to Kadyrov's efforts, it is undergoing a renaissance today. True, this concerns above all only one vird — the kunta hadji vird — which the Kadyrov clan belongs to. The stubbornness and political and religious fervor shown by the members of this vird, and the political support they get from the Chechen authorities, cause resentment among the other religious groups, who feel they have been left out in the distribution of political and spiritual roles in Chechen society today.

Islam is becoming an additional instrument of political control over society, which for understandable reasons does not fit with the vision of a large number of Chechens who grew up in a secular environment and who are irritated by the increasing emphasis on religion.

For all his respect for tradition, Kadyrov takes a utilitarian approach to it and is aware of the dangers of making it an absolute. He is resolute in stamping out the custom of blood feuds, for example — something that is also in his personal interests, as he has made enemies of his own over the years of war and struggle for power. While putting an end to the tradition of blood feuds, he is busy reviving another tradition, that of respect for one's elders. This tradition was lost during the war years, when the young insurgents held center stage and elders saw their authority crumble. Now, young Kadyrov has remembered these elders and appealed to them to help keep hostilities at bay by acting as mediators between the conflicting sides.

The Foreign Policy Aspect

In treating the foreign policy aspects of the current situation in Chechnya, I will depart a little from the standard Briefing style ("On the one hand…but on the other") and simply note a few facts.

Moscow has won a victory over separatism and has heeded the calls from abroad, albeit in its own extravagant way, to sit down at the negotiating table with the insurgents. Ultimately, it is not so important who found himself negotiating with Putin — Akhmad Kadyrov, Dudaev's former mufti who once declared jihad against Russia, or Akhmed Zakaev, one-time performer at the Grozny Drama Theater. Putin and Kadyrov bested their opponents from abroad in the "Chechen round." Talk of Chechen independence sounds like an anachronism these days, and the Chechen opposition in emigration does not represent any real political force.

For that matter, no one ever sat down and seriously examined what would have happened if Moscow had recognized the separatists. Or what an independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria would actually look like.

Victory in this war, in spite of the methods used, has ultimately raised the federal authorities' standing in the eyes of the Russian public, dampening the ambitions of the heads of certain Russian regions and those of some of Russia's neighbors at the same time. The decision to award the 2014 Winter Olympics to Sochi is also evidence that the Chechen conflict is now beginning to fade into the past.

As a Russian region, Chechnya is gradually developing ties with Muslim countries, and Ramzan Kadyrov, with his Islamizing drive, seems able to get more from the Muslim world than could Djokhar Dudaev and Aslan Maskhadov, both of whom rightfully complained in their time about apathetic demonstrations of Islamic solidarity.

Putin and Kadyrov bested their opponents from abroad in the "Chechen round."

The late Akhmad Kadyrov, Ramzan's father, said that it would take 20 years to settle the conflict in Chechnya and bring a lasting and durable peace to the region. Peace has come quicker than that, but it is still a fragile peace.

The Briefing reflects the author's personal views and should not be seen as the view of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace or the Carnegie Moscow Center.

BOX 1

The situation in Chechnya could worsen for several reasons:

- Weaker personal ties between Kadyrov and Putin's successor in the Kremlin
- The possibility of the Chechen leader demanding too much from the federal authorities
- A gap between the pace of reconstruction and the growing demands of the Chechen population
- The sudden disappearance of Kadyrov from the political scene (such a scenario is possible)
- Revival of an irreconcilable opposition
- Negative influence from outside

This last reason is only possible, however, if the internal situation favors such a development.

Notes

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