

Analysis

War and Peace in Chechnya: The Role of Ramzan Kadyrov

By Laurent Vinatier, Paris

Abstract

The Chechen war is over, but the peace within the republic remains fragile. Then Russian President Vladimir Putin appointed Ramzan Kadyrov president of Chechnya in March 2007 and he now concentrates vast powers in his hands, making all the important political decisions, controlling the financial flows from Moscow, and ruling over a large number of security forces loyal to him. The situation in Chechnya has greatly improved over the past two or three years, but the challenges to establish an effective peace remain. Kadyrov did not manage to completely eliminate the old guerilla resistance, which is still able to carry out attacks against Russian and pro-Kadyrov forces. Also, there is a danger that the simmering clan struggles within the republic could intensify and erupt into open conflict. Violence might occur if, for example, Moscow decided to shift its support to a leader other than Kadyrov, which might ultimately result in changes to the power configuration within the republic.

The Rise of Kadyrov

Irony abounds in today's Chechnya. President Ramzan Kadyrov governs the Chechen Republic with a high degree of autonomy from Moscow. Kadyrov, who was appointed president by the Kremlin in March 2007, has great discretion over the funds he receives from Moscow, and although Moscow still has tens of thousands of troops stationed in Chechnya and the North Caucasus region, it is Kadyrov's forces that control the streets and provide security. In a manner that causes great discomfort in Moscow, the current state of affairs resembles the situation in Chechnya during the time of its de facto independence from Russia under Dzhokhar Dudayev (1992–96) and Aslan Maskhadov (1997–99). After two bloody wars, Chechnya still enjoys a degree of autonomy that is unparalleled in the context of the Russian Federation. Of course, the comparison with the 1990s is not correct insofar as the situation inside Chechnya is not one of open warfare and the socioeconomic situation has vastly improved. Still, the question remains whether Ramzan Kadyrov is the right man to bring lasting peace to Chechnya, and whether Chechnya's arrangement with Russia can hold.

Ramzan Kadyrov is the son of the late Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated in May 2004. During the first Chechen war (1994–96), Ramzan Kadyrov fought against the Russian forces. The Kadyrov clan later defected to Moscow and in the second Chechen war, beginning in 1999, he fought alongside Russian troops against Chechen rebels. After the death of his father, Ramzan became deputy prime minister and later acting prime minister of the Chechen Republic. As soon as he turned 30, and thus was old enough to be eligible for the post of president accord-

ing to the new Chechen constitution, the Kremlin appointed him president – an act which the Chechen parliament approved.

Kadyrov carries out what Moscow calls the process of “Chechenization.” First and foremost, Chechen forces provide security within the republic in the place of Russian federal troops. Likewise, the Chechen state is building up the capacity to be able to carry out essential political, economic and social functions. Russia basically agreed to provide money and political support, but wants to reduce to a minimum its direct involvement in Chechnya, as well as its military presence on the ground. It remains to be seen whether this strategy, which is essentially focused on the person of Ramzan Kadyrov, proves successful. There have been substantial improvements in the economic and sociopolitical life in Chechnya, but anyone following events on a daily basis knows that the conflict in Chechnya is not entirely over. The old guerilla resistance has not disappeared. Rivalries among different Chechen clans remain virulent and have the potential to turn into conflict. This article describes these different problems, underscoring how they greatly complicate the chances for a sustainable peace.

Economic Revival

Russia only began to undertake serious efforts to improve daily life in Chechnya in 2004. Before then, Moscow's only real objective was to crush the Chechen guerilla forces. The turning point, it seems, came after the Beslan tragedy in September of that year, when the Russian authorities became increasingly aware of the necessity of giving the people in the troubled North Caucasus hope for a better future through improved

living conditions. Russia increased financial help substantially and tried to make sure that the federal funds allocated to the republic actually reached their destination.

By 2008, the situation in Chechnya had improved considerably. Large scale stabilization projects are currently under way in the economic and social spheres. Kadyrov distributes and supervises the federal funds and other resources issued for reconstructing the republic, such as the compensation payments for those who lost their property during the wars. He thus benefits from the important financial assistance flowing from Moscow, which amounted to some 20 billion Russian rubles (roughly \$740 million) in 2006, according to First Deputy Chairman of the Chechen Government Odes Baisultanov. He also manages additional money flows related to local oil and petroleum product concerns and the construction and transport businesses, which are channeled through the Akhmed Kadyrov Fund without transparency. There is no public information on the amount of money these sources generate. Another source of income is from taxes. Recently, the Chechen government obtained the right to control a proportion of its domestic tax revenues, which amount to not more than 500 million rubles annually (\$18.5 million). In July 2008, the Russian Federal government approved the Federal Targeted Program "Socio-economic Development of the Chechen Republic for 2008–2011," the total funding of which amounts to about 120 billion rubles (\$4.4 billion).

Given that his political survival greatly depends on support from Moscow and also because he wants to remain popular among the Chechen population, Kadyrov is keen to appear as the guarantor of political and economic stability. He launched a battle against corruption in order to make the allocation of funds more efficient, an area where Kadyrov seems to have had some real success. The bazaars are again functioning, offering a large variety of goods, from vegetables to mobile phones. Since 2005, electricity, gas, and water have been restored, at least in the center of Grozny. Buildings are being reconstructed at great speed, including, of course, official ones.

Nevertheless, while foreign observers agree that life in Chechnya is slowly returning to normal and living conditions have greatly improved, serious problems remain. The unemployment rate, for example, remains an extremely high 70 percent. Many people survive only thanks to a thriving black market and because of strong family support.

From Large Scale War to Low Scale Conflict

During the last four years, there has been no large scale conflict in Chechnya. Nevertheless, the rebels, reduced to a few fighting units organized under the leadership of Doku Umarov, are still active and carry out deadly attacks. In October 2008, for example, there have been 13 attacks reported on the Russian forces and their local allies in Chechnya: 18 servicemen have allegedly been killed, and another 14 wounded, according to independent Chechen press agencies (notably *Kavkazki Uzel*). Fighting the guerillas is difficult since the conflict long ago spread to other republics in the North Caucasus and is not confined within the borders of Chechnya any more. For example, during the same month, in Ingushetia, militants launched at least 29 attacks on the Russian Army and local police, killing 15 people and seriously wounding 16. Nine attacks were reported in Dagestan in which seven people were killed, and two attacks occurred in Kabardino-Balkaria. Even in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, a relatively quiet part of the North Caucasus, there was a gunfight on October 2 between a group of local militants and security forces.

It would be an exaggeration to attribute the improvement in Chechnya to Ramzan Kadyrov alone. Certainly, the Russian army presence and the spread of the conflict to other republics helped to improve the security situation in Chechnya. But Kadyrov's role was nevertheless crucial. The economic and social renewal makes the separatist groups in the mountains less attractive for the young generation. Corruption and nepotism did not disappear, but the possibilities offered by the Chechen government in education, administration and business-related areas (such as reconstruction) offer real opportunities to rising cohorts. Additionally, arbitrary arrests and police pressure are declining. Individuals now feel more secure, proving that the Chechen security forces under Kadyrov's direct control are more effective and better behaved. There is a clear contrast with the first years of the second conflict, when the Chechen people suffered terrible abuses by Russian soldiers and pro-Russian Chechen militias. Given the extensive unemployment, there are still numerous potentially discontent young people, but the number of volunteers for *Jihad* is not as high as it was in previous years.

Kadyrov is restoring his authority through economic reconstruction and enhancing overall security. Yet a sustainable peace can only be reached if there is a solution to the problem of fundamentalist and radical tendencies within Islam, which manifests itself in its most extreme form in the militant units operating from bas-

es in the mountains of Chechnya. Kadyrov needs to win the battle against Chechen militants, but in order to win broader support among the population, he also needs to find a way to reach a political solution to the Islamist question in Chechnya, which would ultimately strengthen his legitimacy as the ruler of Chechnya.

The Problem of Insurgency

Despite significant losses in the ranks of the Chechen separatist movement in recent years (the last major setback was the killing of Shamil Basayev in June 2006, who was the most respected, but also most notorious, leader of the Chechen military wing), Chechen rebels are still carrying out attacks on Russian and pro-Russian Chechen forces on a regular, almost daily basis. One of the most spectacular attacks occurred on October 19, when a troop column was ambushed in Ingush territory, near the border with Chechnya. Unconfirmed reports claimed that in the subsequent clashes, some 50 Russian soldiers were killed, whereas the Russian military only acknowledged three deaths. A few days before, fighters carried out a series of audacious acts, including the occupation of two foothill settlements – Muzhichi and Yandare – sizeable villages, with populations of more than 1,000 and 10,000, respectively.

According to Internet sources maintained by groups close to Chechen or North Caucasus rebels, these attacks were coordinated by the pseudonymous Emir Magas (probably the Ingush Akhmed Yevloev). Magas is said to have replaced Shamil Basayev as the top military emir of the Caucasus insurgency. It is believed that Magas acts in close coordination with Doku Umarov, the political leader of the Chechen rebels and the heir to Aslan Maskhadov. Although the structure of the North Caucasus rebel network is somewhat unclear, it seems that Doku Umarov represents the nodal point for an insurgency that is today mostly active on the territories of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and sporadically also Karachaevo-Cherkessia and North Ossetia, where at the beginning of November 2008, a bomb exploded in the center of Vladikavkaz. Umarov's coordination capacity among all groups in the volatile North Caucasus region is growing largely thanks to his control over external financial support channels. The possibility remains of greater instability in the North Caucasus, starting from Chechnya and developing in Ingushetia.

The Problem of Legitimacy

Kadyrov's main problem is that his presidency and his power originate in the Kremlin. In order to stabilize

this power, Kadyrov built a system of fear through his security services. Thus, although his popularity has increased due to visible economic and social stabilization efforts, his legitimacy hardly derives from the "classical" Weberian sources of charisma, tradition, or legality/rationality. None of these elements characterize Ramzan Kadyrov's rule. Young when he came to power, he never demonstrated any specific knowledge of religious or military affairs; nor does he embody particular Chechen customs. He cannot thus be considered a traditional leader. He grew up in the shadow of his father and did not show any particular bravery as a military commander, thus he lacks the charismatic aura that comes with being a war hero. Lastly, none of the electoral processes during his time in power can be called democratic. Outside observers declared the November 2005 and the October 2008 parliamentary elections to be neither free nor fair. Accordingly, Kadyrov was not only appointed by the Russian president, he was also confirmed in this position by a Chechen parliament that was not democratically elected.

Kadyrov thus finds himself in a dangerous situation. As long as he has to rely on his security forces to maintain peace and control opposing clans and parties, disenfranchised youth will join the ranks of radical Islamist groups. Interestingly, the same phenomenon is evident also in other North Caucasus republics, where power is concentrated in the hands of a few. Joining the rebels is a way to protect oneself against the regime, and, if necessary, to die an "honorable" death. In a situation where the law is used arbitrarily and serves the interests of those in power, people have to play by the same rules or take measures to fight and protect themselves.

This is exactly what recently led to the clash between President Kadyrov and the Yamadaev brothers – Ruslan and Sulim. The former is an ex-member of Russia's State Duma, the latter a high-ranking colonel in the Russian army and former commander of the "Vostok Battalion", which is officially under the jurisdiction of Russia's Ministry of Defense. In September 2008, Ruslan Yamadaev was assassinated in his car in Moscow and the killer has yet to be identified. A few weeks later, Sulim Yamadaev, who had sworn to find his brother's killer and avenge him, saw his Vostok battalion officially dissolved and was being removed to another high-level military position in Rostov, several hundred kilometers away from Grozny. The fate of the Yamadaevs are obvious sources of future conflict and considerably undermine the long-term authority of the Chechen president whom many believe is behind the killing of Ruslan and the removal of Sulim.

Conditions for a Sustainable Peace

There is no doubt that Ramzan Kadyrov has successfully managed to bolster his domestic power position. After making economic and social improvements, he is now trying to build up his legitimacy by reviving traditional Islam and Sufism in Chechnya, thereby also counter-acting other Islamic tendencies imposed from outside (usually called “Wahhabism”). Kayrov’s priority is to appear as a local ruler with his own local bases of power, as opposed to a Russian puppet. He has had some successes with this project, but they have not been sufficient to build a durable peace in Chechnya.

Sooner or later, the Kremlin will have to allow free and fair elections, and he will also have to involve separatist leaders from abroad or even from Chechnya into

the political process. There is no other way to solve Chechnya’s dilemma between independence and security. Ideally, as a goodwill gesture towards the separatist side, the Russians should exclude Ramzan Kadyrov from the process, but in return, the rebels must abandon the prospect of a Chechnya outside Russia, at least in the immediate future. Akhmed Zakaev, the self-declared head of “Ichkeria” (the unofficial name for Chechnya), who lives in a London exile, could be allowed to take part without pressure, as well as some Chechen businessmen living in Moscow. For a sustainable peace in Chechnya, some potential keys are to be found within the recent and dynamic new emerging Diaspora.

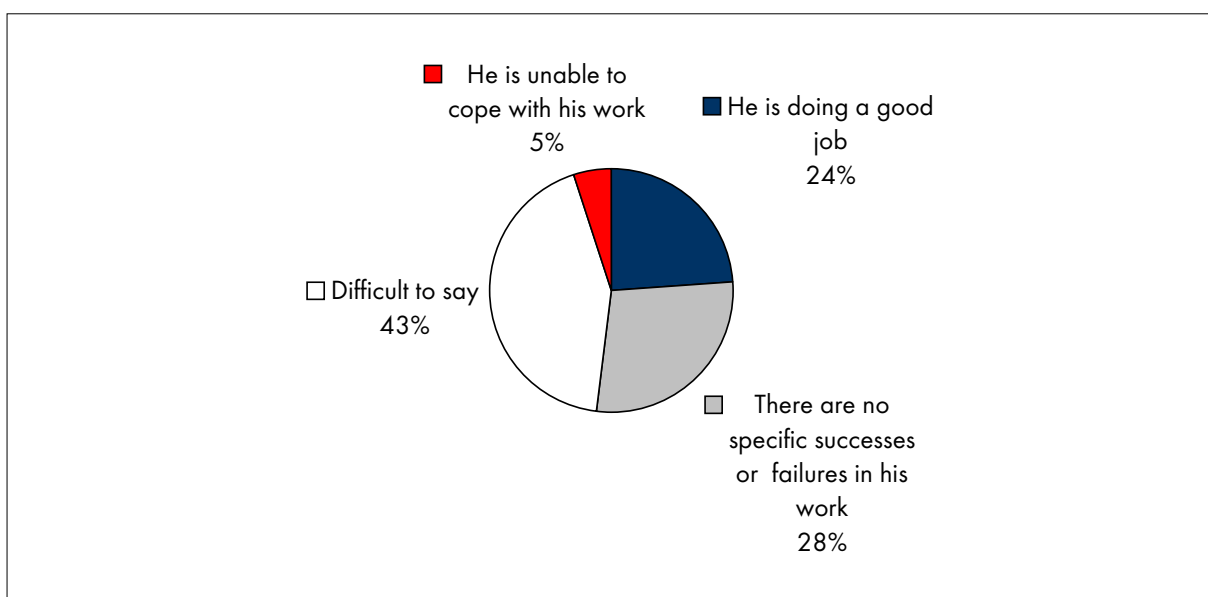
About the author:

Laurent Vinatier studies at the Institute of Political Studies of Paris where he recently completed his PhD entitled “Guerre en Tchétchénie, exil et diaspora. Etudes des structurations communautaires tchéchéennes à l'étranger entre 1997 et 2007” (“War in Chechnya, Exile and Diaspora: Study of Chechen Community Building Abroad Between 1997 and 2007”). He also authored two books on Russia and the North Caucasus, *Russie: l'impasse tchéchéne*, (Armand Colin, 2007, 180 pages) and *La Russie: de Poutine à Medvedev* (Unicomm, 2008, 220 pages).

Opinion Poll

Russian Views of Kadyrov

How Do You Rate the Work of Ramzan Kadyrov As Chairman of the Government of the Chechen Republic? (VTsIOM, 2007)



Source: http://wciom.ru/arkhiv/tematicheskii-arkhiv/item/single/4061.html?no_cache=1&cHash=f4d62da1b8, February 2007