

## Analysis

# Chechnya After the Cancellation of Counter-Terrorist Operations

By Aleksei Malashenko, Moscow

## Abstract

After Moscow lifted the counter-terrorist operations regime in Chechnya in spring 2009, the situation in the Caucasus deteriorated dramatically. The leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov has now eliminated all of his most important competitors. Ramzan has achieved considerable success in rebuilding his republic, though he has not been able to completely quash the armed fighters who continue to threaten the republic's fragile stability. In order to ensure his continued rule, he has used Islam as a way to control Chechnya's population. While Ramzan is now fully in charge, he faces extremely dangerous conditions.

## Kadyrov Unopposed

Since March 2009, when Moscow canceled the special regime providing for counter-terrorist operations, an unanticipated deterioration of the situation took place in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus. This turn of events once again demonstrated that the region exists in a situation of instability and raised questions about the effectiveness of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's policy.

As recently as April 2008, there was an armed clash between Ramzan and the only armed group that he did not control – The Vostok special battalion headed by Sulim Yamadaev. The Yamadaev Clan was the only one in Chechnya that openly opposed the Chechen president. The confrontation lasted less than a month and ended in victory for Ramzan: the Russian Defense Ministry ordered the restructuring of the Vostok battalion. In 2009, Yamadaev was assassinated. This year there was an attack on his brother Isa as well. In 2008 a third brother, Ruslan, a former member of the State Duma was shot in Moscow.

After the elimination of the Yamadaev clan, Ramzan has no more competitors either in Chechnya or among the diaspora. There is no one left who can stand up to him or even present themselves to Moscow as an independent force.

## Successes

In some ways, Ramzan has earned the trust that then-President Vladimir Putin placed in him after the death in May 2004 of Ramzan's father, the first Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov. Ramzan became president in 2006 after a short transition period under the leadership of Alu Alkhanov. Ramzan's rise to power gained a boost from the very beginning from his informal, trust-based relations with Putin, whom he has the exclusive right to call directly on the phone. The fact that Putin visited the grave of Ramzan's father during his visit to

Chechnya testifies to the family-like nature of the relationship between the two men.

The super-ambitious Ramzan announced during his first days serving as Chechnya's deputy premier that he was the only person who could realistically rule Chechnya. In fact, he has accomplished much since his father's death. He has rebuilt Grozny, laid new roads, and repaired infrastructure, bringing natural gas and water into apartments. Earlier, he restored the electrical grid. Now stores and restaurants are operating. In addition to Grozny, he has rebuilt other cities and villages. He also brought natural gas lines to several mountain settlements for the first time.

In the capital and all the major cities, it is now safe to walk in the streets. In 2008 Kadyrov issued an order preventing police and other security officers from operating in masks, as had often been their practice. This change was important for local residents who frequently suffered when anonymous people broke into their homes and took hostages. According to the data of the Memorial human rights group, in 2007, 35 people were taken hostage, compared to 187 in 2006 and 325 in 2005. The Memorial activists point out that in trying to return their relatives, Chechens generally appeal directly to Ramzan and the people around him rather than to the human rights groups.

In recent years, Ramzan has evolved from being the "son of his father" into a charismatic national leader in his own right. He is especially popular among the youth who see him as a symbol of success. He represents the possibility for young people to quickly rise up the social ladder, skipping steps and ignoring the patriarchic traditions of society. All of Russia's leading national politicians have visited Chechnya and noted the special services of Ramzan and his father in imposing order and rebuilding the republic. He has been decorated with Russian orders and in the fall of 2009 he was promoted to the military rank of lieutenant-general.

## Problems

Nevertheless, Ramzan's success does not mean that everything in Chechnya is well. The republic's stability remains fragile despite external appearances. Ramzan has not been able to completely destroy the armed opposition. In 2006, the number of fighters who would not accept the amnesty offered to them exceeded 1,000 men. On the eve of Russia's decision to cancel the counter-terrorist operations, Ramzan claimed that only a few dozen fighters (*shaitany*) remained. But in January 2009 he admitted that some of the young fighters came from families of his own government's bureaucrats. He vowed to punish the families, including removing the public servants from their positions. If some of the fighters come from the Chechen establishment, then one can only guess how many fighters ordinary Chechen families send to the mountains. Some Russian soldiers claim that hundreds of fighters remain in the republic's most remote reaches. One sign of the strength of the Islamist opposition was the occurrence this year in Chechnya, including in Grozny, of numerous attacks on policemen and bloody terrorist acts. One of them almost killed Ramzan himself.

Chechen Islamists (Wahhabis) make up the most organized segment of the North Caucasus opposition. The leader of the Chechen Islamists Doku Umarov, although not as influential as the most famous Chechen "general" Shamil Basaev (killed in 2006), has influence and coordinates activities with like-minded individuals in other republics – Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria. He has even claimed responsibility for the November 2009 explosion on the Moscow-St. Petersburg train, which killed 27 people.

Paradoxically, Ramzan has an interest in prolonging the tensions to some degree. As long as the situation remains unstable, it is easier for him to show Moscow that only he can counter the fighters and his victory over them is only a question of time.

Nevertheless, the threat to stability is increased by the fact that only one person guarantees this stability – Ramzan Kadyrov. If for some reason he is not able to carry out his role as a guarantor, the republic could return to crisis.

Catastrophe could come from anywhere. Ramzan has numerous enemies in Chechnya seeking bloody revenge. Similarly, many in the Kremlin and the government do not support him.

If Kadyrov suddenly disappears from politics, then there are three possible scenarios for future developments. According to the first scenario, no major changes take place. Tired of war and the endless quarrels, the Chechens

ignore his disappearance and agree to any leader sent to them from Moscow. In the second scenario, there could be a battle for power among the pro-Russian Chechen clans which could lead to a civil war. According to a third scenario, Kadyrov's police and soldiers, former fighters, could return to the mountains and then launch a third Chechen war for independence.

It is curious that Chechens, both in Chechnya and in the diaspora, believe that the first peaceful scenario is more likely, while Moscow politicians and analysts give greater credence to the second and third scenarios.

It is important to remember that authoritarianism, whether personal or through clan leadership, is not characteristic of Chechen political culture. The regulation of internal relations is based on consensus – balancing between clan interests.

The methods of direct repression, which Ramzan uses, and which are encouraged by Moscow, were needed immediately after the military conflict. However, with time it is becoming obvious that their extensive use cannot continue forever. Ultimately, the success of Ramzan Kadyrov will depend on dialogue with the opposition and a wide amnesty granted to those who oppose the authorities.

## Ramzan Maneuvers

Beginning in 2007, Ramzan has sought to establish control over society with the help of Islam. Both father and son Kadyrov opposed Salafi (usually called Wahhabi) Islam. Differences with the Salafis and the refusal to build an Islamic state in Chechnya were the main reasons for Akhmad Kadyrov, who had served as mufti under General Dudaev's separatist regime, to switch to Russia's side. Akhmad supported the Caucasus version of Islam, which emphasized the Sufi schools of Islam, the most important of which in Chechnya are Kadyriia and Nakshbandiia.

Ramzan has not rejected the views of his father and effectively is politicizing traditional Islam. Kadyrov is trying to turn the Kunta-khadzhi brotherhood to which he and his clan belong into an instrument for consolidating all Muslims. The brotherhood supports the ideas of its founder, the authoritative sheik Kunta-khadzhi, who preached in the middle of the nineteenth century that jihad against Russia was dangerous and harmful. Instead he argued that the main goal was to preserve the Vainakh (Chechen) people. However, Ramzan's approach antagonizes the followers of other brotherhoods, who believe that he is suffocating them.

Positioning himself as a true Muslim, Ramzan demands that people closely follow Sharia laws. He requires

women to wear appropriate clothing, particularly head scarves, even awarding prizes to female students who do so, supports polygamy, bans the consumption of alcohol, and forbids gambling. He is building many new mosques and their number in Chechnya has already exceeded 400. In 2007 Grozny opened the largest mosque in Russia and Europe, with room for 10,000 faithful. Following the norms of Islam, Ramzan in 2009 even ordered the removal of a statue of his father from the center of Grozny since Islam forbids making images of people.

In the 1990s, the idea of politicizing Islam in the Caucasus was associated exclusively with radicals. “Now – as was noted in the ‘Islam in Chechnya: History and Contemporary Times’ seminar which took place in June 2008 in Chechnya – Islam is becoming one of the legitimate factors in the social and *political* [my emphasis – AM] life of the Chechen Republic. The secular authorities appeal to its basic principles and values, thereby confirming their religious identity.” The secular authorities are personified in Ramzan.

Ramzan took control of Chechnya’s mosques as part of his efforts to control society, particularly young people. The history of the North Caucasus makes clear that mosques have been the bastion of the opposition. Ramzan has established double control over the mosques – they are subordinated to him spiritually and personally. In 2008 at a meeting of Muslim judges, Chechen Republic Mufti Sultan Mirzaev declared that several mosques “lacked the appropriate order” and that it was necessary “in all mosques in the republic to install a responsible person who would ensure that discipline and order were maintained.” Additionally, he recommended conducting quarterly educational, religious seminars in the republic’s middle schools. The main goal of these seminars would be to inculcate devotion to the main Chechen saint and current president.

In effect, the republic is attempting not only to spread Islam, but to introduce Sharia law to society, which could lead to the fracturing of society rather than its consolidation. (Former State Duma Deputy Ruslan Yamadaev said that the Vostok battalion fighters prevented Ramzan from building a Sharia state.) The middle aged and older generations, born and raised in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan after being deported from Chechnya in 1944, are indifferent to religion. The youth, having gained life experience during the Chechen wars, the anti-Russian jihad, and under the influence of the Middle East, are more prepared for Islamic indoctrination.

In Moscow, where they are mostly worried about Ramzan’s political loyalty to the federal government,

they do not recognize the seriousness of the evolving situation or the meaning of Chechnya’s ideological and cultural drift from Russia. Clearly, the Moscow politicians are hypnotized by the results of the 2007/2008 presidential and parliamentary elections, and the 2009 local elections, in which the ruling United Russia party won more than 90 percent of the votes.

Seeking to strengthen his position, Ramzan in 2009 attempted once and for all to break the “external opposition” of the Chechen diaspora in Europe, which continues to claim that the battle for Chechen independence continues. Ramzan offered its leader, the London-based Akhmed Zakaev (who served as Chechen prime minister in 2006) to return to Chechnya as the minister of culture. Ramzan bet that Zakaev’s return would make possible an intra-Chechen consolidation and make a positive impression on the Russian humanitarian elite. Zakaev is a talented actor who once worked in the Grozny theater. The Russian authorities are well inclined to Zakaev’s return though they have said nothing about it officially and the prosecutor put him on the wanted list in 2001 for crimes allegedly committed during the first Chechen war.

Upon learning about the possible return of Zakaev, the leaders of the virtual Caucasus Emirate, part of the radical opposition, sentenced Zakaev to death. At one time they had also sentenced Ramzan Kadyrov to death. In some sense this sentence equalized the Chechen president and his main foreign opponent, creating additional, though somewhat extravagant, preconditions for them to find a common language.

Through intermediaries, including the head of the Chechen parliament Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, there were negotiations which ultimately produced nothing. Zakaev worried that he would play only a secondary, decorative role under Ramzan, and that he was still threatened with arrest since Moscow had not declared an amnesty. Ramzan eventually became irritated at the non-compliance of his partner and after several months he stopped trying to convince Zakaev to return to Chechnya. In October 2009, at an extraordinary conference of the regional branch of United Russia, Ramzan called Zakaev a “chameleon, hypocrite, and liar.” The argument with Zakaev effectively ended Ramzan’s efforts to position himself as a leader of all Chechens, a concession he was not happy to make.

Ramzan has not given up the hope of appearing to those around him not only as a powerful and ruthless leader, but as someone who is flexible and contemporary. In 2009 he did not shun giving interviews to the liberal media, such as Radio Liberty, talks frequently

with a variety of journalists, and values contacts with the Russian artistic elite.

At the same time, he does not have good relations with human rights organizations. These activists pose obstacles for Ramzan as do the Russian authorities. In 2009, he forced them to leave Chechnya. The murder of the famous human rights defender Natalia Estemirova in July 2009, hardly helped him, as many of his opponents accused him of being behind it. He did not need this problem. The murder slightly spoiled his image in the eyes of Moscow and even caused irritation. One cannot exclude the possibility that the murder of Estemirova was carried out by Ramzan's enemies.

### What Next?

The ending of counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya did not bring stability. Moreover, over the course of the year, it was necessary to restore such operations in some parts of the republic.

The end of the operations allowed Ramzan to feel that he is completely in charge in Chechnya, something that he always wanted. While remaining inside the Russian Federation, Chechnya is becoming more au-

tonomous and quasi-independent. In my view, Ramzan will never support separatism (which some politicians and experts have recently claimed) because he is comfortable to be self-standing within the framework of the Russian Federation.

The end of the counter-terrorist operations took place within the context of the economic crisis, when the federal government had to delegate greater power, rights, and responsibility to the country's regional leaders. Subsidies from the federal budget are shrinking everywhere and in Chechnya as well. In compensation for the diminishing subsidies, Kadyrov won international status for Chechnya's airport, making it a chief source of additional income that is not controlled by the federal government.

The official end of the counter-terrorist operations in Chechnya does not mean the achievement of quiet and stability in the whole region. Chechnya has difficult neighbors – Ingushetia and Dagestan – which are far from stable. The North Caucasus and the Caucasus in general is a system of interconnected units around which at times flow potentially explosive political “fluids.”

#### *About the Author:*

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## Analysis

### Ingushetia: on the Road to Overcoming Social-Political Instability?

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#### Abstract

Although it is the smallest region in the country, Ingushetia has been in the news thanks to its seemingly unending cycle of violence. The appointment of President Yunus-bek Yevkurov just over a year ago provided some hope for change, but the situation remains unstable. Yevkurov's predecessor violated civil and human rights in his campaign against terrorists, creating a secular and Islamist opposition. Yevkurov has brought a new approach to governing by opening dialogue with the republic's civil society, but his efforts and the attempt on his life demonstrate that one man cannot solve all the problems alone. A comprehensive policy is needed.

#### A Difficult Situation

The North Caucasus Republic of Ingushetia, located right next door to Chechnya, frequently has been at the center of attention. Only in June 2009, terrorist attacks killed Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court Aza Gazgireeva and republican vice-premier Bashir Aushev,

the former republican police chief who was in charge of law enforcement agencies. On June 22 there was an attack on Ingushetia President Yunus-bek Yevkurov and on October 25 the famous human rights defender Maksharip Aushev was shot dead in his car. After the August 19 explosion at a Nazran police station killed