

CHECHEN ELITES: CONTROL, COOPTION OR SUBSTITUTION? By John Russell (Bradford)

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The emergence of an autocratic leader in post-conflict Chechnya, traditionally structured on polycentric elites from clans and regions, has been just one outcome of Putin's 'Chechenization' policy. The deal struck between the two leaders of their respective dualist states effectively marginalised the opposition in Chechnya, the Chechen diaspora in Russia and abroad as well as international organisations seeking a just and lasting peace. Kadyrov's strategies and tactics in deflecting international pressure while controlling, by coopting or neutralising the respective Chechen elites, together with an examination of an emergent domestic elite based on personal loyalty, form the basis of this analysis.

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In Russian politics one may speak in terms of differing and, to some extent, competing elites; national restorationists, neocommunist, Slavophiles, statist and Westernisers.¹ While accepting Lane and Cameron's emphasis on how a new political culture shapes elite behaviour,² Chechnya today does not lend itself so easily to such theoretical approaches. This is arguably because, in a possibly unique conjunction of factors, political power at this point in time rests firmly in the hands of Ramzan Kadyrov and his associates in a society that is experiencing something of a reassertion of national and cultural identity and relative socio-economic well-being after a nearly two decades of brutal violence. Just this week, the young Chechen president categorically denied that there existed in his realm any forces, let alone elites, that sought to separate Chechnya from Russia:

*'There are no Chechen separatist organizations. There are no forces wishing to separate Chechnya from Russia either. The republic had a referendum seven years ago, and local residents clearly pronounced their wish to remain within Russia. Russian laws are in effect in Chechnya, and all the constitutional power bodies are operating there. It is impossible to disconnect Chechnya from Russia.'*³

The degree of truth in this brash assertion and the extent to which a single all-powerful grouping, headed by an uneducated part-warlord, part-playboy, part-dynastic nation builder, qualifies as a political, rather than a criminal, elite at all are moot points that will be examined further here.

However, given the essentially competitive nature of politics and crime, as well as their interlinking in both Chechnya and Russia, Metz's observation that 'it is nearly impossible for a single entity, whether a state or a nonstate player, to monopolize power'⁴ implies that the current situation may not be long-lived. Moreover, insofar as Chechnya under the rule of Ramzan represents a region that is *de jure* in Russia although *de facto*,⁵ ethnically and quasi-religiously, not always with Russia (the opposite of the secular Chechen separatist movement that sought an 'Ichkeria' not in, but on most issues with Russia), it is worth examining the extent to which Chechen 'elites' (in Chechnya, in Russia and abroad) have been controlled, coopted or substituted for by Ramzan. The position of elites in Chechnya before and after the first Russo-Chechen war will be examined briefly, before turning the focus of attention to the period after the second war in an attempt to test, in a classically Weberian approach, the sources, if any, of Kadyrov's legitimacy.⁶

¹ Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009, pp.53-74.

² David Lane and Cameron Ross, *The Transition from Communism to Capitalism: Ruling Elites from Gorbachev to Yeltsin*, New York: St Martin's Press, p.184.

³ *Itar-Tass*, 8 June 2010.

⁴ Steven Metz, 'New Challenges and Old Concepts; Understanding 21st century Insurgency', *Parameters*, (Winter 2007-2008), pp.20-32.

⁵ For a discussion of Chechnya's status within Russia, see Mark Feigin, 'Malen'kii Alzhir' (Little Algeria), *Yezhednevnyi zhurnal*, 25 August 2009, <http://www.ej.ru/?a=note&id=9374>

⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: an Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, New York: Bedmaster Press, 1968, p.954.

In the six years since the assassination in the Chechen capital of Grozny in May 2004 of Ramzan's father - Akhmet – produced the last power vacuum in Chechen politics, Kadyrov has effectively circumscribed the influence within Chechnya of all other competing elite structures: the Russian federal authorities (political, military and economic), the separatist and fundamentalist wings of the Chechen opposition, other pro-Moscow Chechen warlords and prominent Chechens living in other parts of Russia or abroad.

The list of the leaders of these elites thus sidelined (or in some cases physically eliminated) is impressive: Sergei Abramov (former Chechen prime minister), Dmitrii Kozak (former governor of the Southern Federal District), Aslan Maskhadov, Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, Akhmed Zakaev (Ichkerian separatist leaders), Shamil Basaev, Said Abu Saad Buryatskii, (Chechen Islamist rebels) Alu Alkhanov (former president of Chechnya), Aslanbek Aslakhanov, Akhmed Khasanbekov, Bislan Gantamirov, Ruslan Khasbulatov, (Moscow-based Chechen political/security figures), Abubakir Arsamakov, Malik Saidullaev, Khusein Dzhabrailov, (Moscow-based Chechen businessmen) Movladi Baisarov, Said-Magomed Kakiev, Ruslan and Sulim Yamadaev, (former associates of Akhmet Kadyrov on the pro-Russian side) a veritable who's who of elite personalities with Chechen connections in the last decade. If one adds to this the murders of outspoken Kadyrov critics, Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and Chechen human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, then Ramzan's purge of his opposition appears near total.

Despite these successes, however, Kadyrov's position can hardly be said to be secure. His main backer, former president Putin, does not seem to be so willing to go out on a limb to protect him as he once was; Dmitrii Medvedev is clearly less comfortable with Ramzan's extravagant style of rule than was his predecessor, Russian and international human rights groups and eminent members of civic society worldwide keep the excesses of Kadyrov's rule in the public spotlight; influential sections of Russia's political, military and cultural elite hold him in low regard; and even elements of his own population appear to resent his policies but keep quiet for fear of reprisals.

Of course, this degree of potential opposition accentuates the paradox that such an omnipotent 'vertical' of power should be dominated by just one man in a nation noted for its horizontal clan structure. Stanislav Belkovsky, from Russia's Institute of National Strategy wrote in 2006 that:

the model of one-man management, as history shows, has never been successful in Chechnya; only a polycentric model, a parliamentary republic ensuring a balance between the most influential clans, is appropriate there'.⁷

The Chechen 'Eurasianist' Khozh-Akhmed Nukhaev justifies this by claiming that the Chechens were 'not Europeans or Asians but Caucasians', calling for a government structure headed by a *Mekhl Khel* (Council of the Country), drawn from the heads of Chechnya's *teips* (clans), along the lines of

⁷ *Itar-Tass*, 7 February 2006.

Afghanistan's *Loya Jirga*.⁸ This apparent anomaly has been interpreted by some as a guarantee that his reign will be both short and unworthy of imitation, in Chechnya or elsewhere in the North Caucasus. Regional expert Aleksei Malashenko famously stated that Ramzan had only a 50 per cent chance of celebrating his 40th birthday (in 2016).⁹ On the contrary, however, it could be argued that Kadyrov has achieved in spectacular fashion the centuries-old aspiration of the Chechen people for self-determination in choosing to live under the traditional customary norms of *adat*, free from the perceived alien, oft times brutal and generally suffocating occupation of their homeland by Russians and from the overly rigid strictures, for most Chechens' sensibilities, imported by the Wahhabis.

Chechen elites in the run-up to the first Russo-Chechen war

This long tradition of resistance to Russian rule, combined with a history of repression by the central authorities, culminating in the deportation of the entire Chechen nation by Stalin in 1944, has often been used to explain the failure, until the very last years of Soviet power, of an indigenous political elite to develop in Chechnya. As Dzhabrail Gakaev points out:

'The political distrust of the Soviet leadership towards Chechens was reflected in the low representation of this titular people...in the communist nomenklatura. In contrast to other national republics, the Chechen nomenklatura was small in numbers and was relatively newly-formed and had thus not taken root in Chechen society'.¹⁰

Indeed, it was not until 1989 that Doku Zavgaev, became the first Chechen to lead the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the Chechen Ingush Autonomous Republic. By way of comparison, Khasuka Magomedov - the last Chechen *abrek* (mountain bandit of honour) — had been killed only 13 years previously 1976.¹¹ Paradoxically, the CPSU August coup in 1991 against Mikhail Gorbachev determined the fates of both Zavgaev and the most prominent Russian politician at that time of Chechen nationality – Ruslan Khasbulatov. While the latter opposed the putsch and emerged with the victorious Yeltsin team as Speaker of the newly-independent Russian parliament, the former failed to condemn the plotters and was opportunistically removed by Dzokhar Dudaev, head of the All-National Congress of Chechen People in September 1991. Khasbulatov subsequently was to fall out with Yeltsin and lost power in the attack by troops loyal to the Russian president on Moscow's White House in October 1993, rendering him unsuitable to the Kremlin as a much-needed popular compromise candidate between Dudaev and Zavgaev when hostilities broke out in 1994.

⁸ Vakhit Akaev, 'Religious-Political Conflict in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria', Central Asia and the Caucasus Press, <http://www.ca-c.org/dataeng/05.akaev.shtml>.

⁹ Quoted in Claire Bigg, 'Chechnya: Is Kadyrov Maintaining Hold on Power?' *RFE/RL Features*, 27 April 2008.

¹⁰ D. Gakaev, 'Chechnya in Russia and Russia in Chechnya', in R.Sakwa (ed), *Chechnya: from the past to the future*, London: Anthem Press, 2005, p.24.

¹¹ Laurent Vinatier, *Russie: l'impasse tchéchène*, Paris : Armand Colin, 2007, p.3.

Gakaev labels Dudaev and his supporters as 'outsiders':

'The most dangerous consequence of the new spirit, born out of the Chechen revolution accompanying the seizure of power by Dudaev and his outsider groups, was the development of a dismissive attitude to work, to accumulating personal and public wealth through honest labour. Easy criminal ways of making money through financial manipulations, robbery of Russians in the towns and other forms of banditry, fabulously enriched thousands of people without kith or kin or any occupation very quickly, creating a 'new elite' out of yesterday's poorly-educated outsiders. They became the social basis of the new regime. The foundation of an enormously rich elite destroyed the foundations of the traditional way of life and the culture of Chechen society. It should be stressed that the criminalization of Chechnya has nothing to do with the national peculiarities of the Chechen people. The phenomenon can be seen throughout the post-Soviet space'.¹²

Gakaev goes on to identify the root cause of the conflict in Chechnya as:

'The conflicting interests of criminal mafia groupings and the political elites of the federal centre and the Chechen Republic supporting them, and these interests focused above all on oil'¹³

These perceptions by insiders like Gakaev that this was a contest between greedy criminalised factions were shared by outside commentators too, best characterised by General Aleksandr Lebed's comment that it represented a 'mafia squabble at state level'.¹⁴ Hinting that the situation had not changed much in the intervening decade and a half, as recently as 27 May 2010, Aleksandr Khloponin, Medvedev's plenipotentiary in the North Caucasus, announced that so-called local 'terrorism' was 'but a smoke-screen for the process of redistribution of property under way in the region'.¹⁵

In addition to the criminalisation of the new Chechen 'elite', two other distinctive features of the civil confrontation in Chechnya in the period 1991-94 are worthy of mention:

1. The effective de-Russification of Chechnya, in particular, and the North Caucasus in general, a trend which had important ramifications for elite competition in the region, as this comment from a leading Russian expert on the Caucasus illustrates:

¹² Gakaev, *op.cit.* p.24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.25

¹⁴ R. Zaripov, 'Interv'yu s generalom Aleksandrom Lebedym', (Interview with General Aleksander Lebed), *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 19 March 1996.

¹⁵ Vladimir Mukhin, Natalya Bondarenko, 'Terroristicheskii klaster' (Terrorist Cluster), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 28 May, 2010.

*'In the early 1990s, the administrative and bureaucratic elites of the North Caucasus republics (as was their remit) did practically nothing to prevent the de-russification of those federal Russian entities. The de-russification of the North Caucasus is not only a violation of the existing balance in the social, economic and labour spheres, but is also a significant step toward the de-modernization and archaization of life in the Caucasus republics. In other words the Russians, being to some extent an instrument of state policy, have played the role of agents of modernization. But the Russians who left the region of the "internal abroad" (a brilliant term introduced the Russian demographic historian Vladimir Kabuzan) did not become more tolerant towards "Caucasians" after their departure. Swelling the ranks of the Stavropol, Krasnodar or Moscow police and civil service, they also opted for the creation of special immigration rules" for residents of the North Caucasus.'*¹⁶

2. The fact that Dudaev's supporters, including initially the Kadyrovs, belonged generally to the Qadiriya *tariqat*, with more adepts in rural areas, but specifically to the Kunta-Hadji *wird* (brotherhood), whereas most of the pro-Russian camp were Naqshbandiya, traditionally the more intellectual, urban, sophisticated *tariqat*. The exacerbation of this division within traditional Chechen 'people's Islam'¹⁷ pre-dates the more fundamental division between Sufism on the one hand and Wahhabism (or Salafism) on the other.¹⁸ As the Chechen academic - Vakhit Akaev - explains:

*'The North Caucasus Wahhabites call themselves 'unitarians' or 'salafs' (followers of pure Islam, the Islam that existed at the time of the Prophet and under the reign of the four pious caliphs) and their organizations – jama'at. Wahhabism is contrary to Sufi Islam, which is traditional for the north-east Caucasus'.*¹⁹

However, after the Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994, the overwhelming majority of Chechens belonging to the Naqshbandiya *tariqat* fought alongside their Qadiriya compatriots, albeit under their own local warlords.

Thus, at the outbreak of the first war, elites led by outsiders such as Dudaev and Aslan Maskhadov, who had both served as senior officers in the Soviet armed forces, were joined by those led by local warlords such as Shamil Basaev, Arbi Baraev, Salman Raduev and Ruslan Gelaev. The pro-federal Chechen elite, along with the hitherto dominant Russian-speaking section of the population, were fast losing ground. The ferocity and intensity of the war, in the perception of many observers, not only had a profound weakening

¹⁶ Sergei Markedonov, 'Russia's "Internal Aliens"', Prague Watchdog, 11 July 2009, <http://www.watchdog.cz/?show=000000-000024-000004-000008&lang=1>

¹⁷ See Emil Souleimanov, 'Chechnya, Wahhabism and the Invasion of Dagestan', *Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs*, 9:4, December 2005, p.53.

¹⁸ See Julie Wilhelmsen, 'Between a Rock and a Hard Place: the Islamisation of the Chechen Separatist Movement', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2005, 57:1, pp. 35-59; Joanna Swirszcz, 'The Role of Islam in Chechen National Identity', *Nationalities Papers*, January 2009, 37:1, pp.59-88.

¹⁹ Akaev, *op.cit.*

effect on the traditional clan structure,²⁰ but also demonstrated that the Sufi structures were less able to counter the brutality of the Russian federal attack than those adhering to Wahhabi doctrines.²¹

From war to war: the Chechen elites from 1996 to 2004

The second period of *de facto* Chechen independence lasted only from 1996 until the outbreak of the second Russo-Chechen war in 1999. The comprehensive victory of the first war had led to a severe dilution of influence in the republic of Chechen and Russian elites loyal to Moscow. In their place emerged a diverse group of ‘winners’ ranging along a broad spectrum from separatist freedom fighters to fundamentalist Islamic *jihadists*.

Young Chechens, disillusioned by the patriarchal nature of Sufism, with its emphasis on respect for elders, were attracted by the accessible, coherent and rewarding (both financially and ideologically) aspects of Wahhabism. The success achieved by militants such as the Jordanian – Khattab - during the war, not only attracted these younger Chechens to *jihadism*, but, even more importantly, appeared to win over such key warlords as Shamil Basaev, the architect of the Budennovsk hospital siege, in June 1995, that changed the course of the first war. The high-profile role played by the *jihadists* in the final rout of the Russian forces in Grozny in August 1996 further strengthened the popularity of the extremists.

After Dudaev’s assassination by Russian forces in April 1996, Aslan Maskhadov emerged as the leading secular figure within the separatist movement, even though Zelimkhan Yandirbiev, who temporarily took on the role of acting President, belonged along with such high-profile field commanders as Basaev, appeared to belong to the more radical wing of the religious divide. There has been some debate over whether even Basaev was a separatist or an Islamic radical extremist. Laurent Vinatier claims that ‘his political programme is neither Islamist, nationalist, nor an Islamo-nationalist admixture. According to his own words, he is fighting to “defend freedom and independence, to stop the undisguised genocide of the Chechen people”. His only clear political aim is the withdrawal of the Russian forces.’²²

The Chechen people’s preference for the moderate Islam of Maskhadov over that of Basaev was reflected in the presidential elections of January 1997, in which the former polled 64.8 per cent of the popular vote against the latter’s 23.5 per cent.²³ Basaev was hailed as a national hero for his exploits against the Russian occupiers and any action against him would be regarded as

²⁰ Francesca Mereu, ‘Russia: War Destroyed Chechen Clan Structure (part 1), *Johnson’s Russia List*, #606, 5 January 2002, <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/6006-13.cfm>

²¹ This concept is explored in John Russell, *Chechnya - Russia’s ‘War on Terror’*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2007.

²² Laurent Vinatier, ‘Political v Military power: Contrasting Basaev and Sadulaev’s Roles, *Chechnya Weekly*, 6:36, 29 September 2005.

²³ Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War. The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (with a preface by Anatol Lieven), Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Publishing Group, p.132.

unpatriotic in the Chechen national creed. However, he was not widely trusted amongst ordinary Chechens, who clearly preferred a leader such as Maskhadov much more than they did Basaev or other leaders of the Wahhabite persuasion. Akaev cites an opinion poll from *Groznensky rabochy* (Chechen Worker), in which 'nearly half of the 1,200 people polled trust A. Maskhadov, while only 6 per cent trust S. Basaev'.²⁴ This ambiguity in the popular attitude towards Basaev was to present both the warlord and his president with a dilemma that effectively stymied the latter's attempts to fulfil the basic need of the Chechen people: to build a sustainable and prosperous state in Chechnya-Ichkeria.

Rather than accept the people's verdict, and anxious to retain as much power, resources and influence in a ravaged post-war Chechnya-Ichkeria that had been cut off effectively from the outside world, many Chechen field commanders instead behaved more like Afghan warlords, opposing their president with arms as well as ideology. As a result, an orgy of criminality, hostage-taking, intimidation and killing (of foreign nationals as well as of Russians) not only isolated Maskhadov's regime, as the world recoiled in horror at ritual beheadings, public executions and blood feuds, but forced him to make major concessions to the religious radicals, led by Basaev, ranged against him.

Although Maskhadov was supported by the leading Sufi amongst anti-Wahhabi Chechens - Akhmad Kadyrov, the Grand Mufti – he was caught between the irreconcilables on both the Russian and fundamentalist sides, who had no interest in assisting the beleaguered president of Chechnya-Ichkeria in his attempts at rebuilding his shattered country. Indeed, Russia's then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yevgeny Primakov, persuaded Yeltsin to obstruct Chechen independence by all means, including the threat to sever diplomatic relations with any country that recognised the Maskhadov regime.²⁵ In the event only the Taliban in Afghanistan did recognise Chechnya-Ichkeria. The basic needs of the fledgling state – security, stability and structure in the political, economic and social spheres - were thus absent, making any construction of a law-governed state improbable.

As it was, Maskhadov had to rely on the support of Kadyrov and the local warlord Sulim Yamadaev to beat off a serious assault in July 1998 by Chechen Wahhabites, led by Arbi Baraev and Abdul-Malik Medzhidov, in Chechnya's second city - Gudermes.²⁶ Only the intervention of Vice-President Vakha Arshanov and Shamil Basaev and the neutrality of Khattab saved the extremists from total annihilation.²⁷ In 1996, after Dudaev's assassination, acting president Yelimkhan Yandirbiev had replaced secular courts of justice with *Sharia* courts.²⁸ On 3 February 1999, in order to counter a pre-emptive

²⁴ Akaev, *op.cit.*

²⁵ Anssi Kullberg, 'The Background of Chechen Independence Movement IV: The Internal Power Struggle in Chechnya', *The Eurasian Politician*, 6 October 2003.

²⁶ Mairbek Vatchagaev, *The Chechen Resistance: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, The Jamestown Foundation, 14 September 2006. p.23n5.

²⁷ Mairbek Vatchagaev, 'The Dagestani Jamaat (Part 1)', *Chechnya Weekly*, 13 December 2007.

²⁸ Akaev, *op.cit.*

move by Basaev to establish his own fundamentalist 'military- patriotic' administration, Maskhadov finally announced the establishment of a *Sharia* government. This further alienated the struggling republic from its supporters in the West whilst providing a victory for Islamic radicals throughout the Muslim world. This move also left Akhmad Kadyrov, hitherto one of Maskhadov's strongest allies, (they were still addressing rallies together in early 1999)²⁹, in a vulnerable position, both politically and physically (he had already survived an assassination attempt in October 1988).³⁰ As Sakwa notes, Kadyrov: had 'been appalled by Maskhadov's toleration of the emergence of Islamic fundamentalists (the so-called Wahhabis) in Chechnya'.³¹

The Wahhabi elite's highpoint of influence came in August 1999 when Basaev, Khattab and ideologue Movladi Udugov, led the assault of Islamist troops into neighbouring Dagestan, an event that not only brought Vladimir Putin to power, but also triggered the second Russo-Chechen war. Having failed to stiffen Maskhadov's resistance against the extremists, Kadyrov recognised early in 1999 that his only chance of survival was to throw in his lot with the Russians.

Such an opportunity arose early in the second Russian assault on Chechnya, in November 1999, when Kadyrov and the Yamadaev brothers surrendered the republic's second city – Gudermes – to the federal troops without a fight. As early as 1995 Russian presidential adviser, Emil Pain, had recommended 'Chechenising' the conflict, his plan being rejected because the Kremlin was unable to identify an acceptable Chechen leader with whom to implement this policy.³² Putin recognised that there now was such a leader in Akhmet Kadyrov and moved skilfully to exploit the division in the Chechen ranks between traditional Chechen Sufi and Wahhabi elites. Although Chechen and Russian factions who had been loyal throughout the conflict naturally resented Putin favouring a former opponent, Putin was quick to realise that Kadyrov offered the only real alternative to talks with the 'moderate' Chechen opposition.³³

Putin, in fact, had relatively little room for manoeuvre for, as regional expert Sanobar Shermatova explained as the second war dragged on.³⁴

Corrupt Russian army officers and local Chechen officials have a financial stake in keeping the war going, getting rich from black market

²⁹ See photograph in Simon Saradzhan, 'Chechnya Vow Cast a Long Shadow' *The Moscow Times*, 26 February 2008.

³⁰ Akaev, *op.cit.*

³¹ Richard Sakwa, 'Introduction: Why Chechnya?', in Sakwa (ed), *Chechnya: from past to future*, London: Anthem Press, p.19.

³² As reported by Liz Fuller, 'Look Back in Anger – ten years of war in Chechnya', *RFE/RL Features*, 11 December 2004.

³³ Peter Lentini, 'Campaigning Under the Shadow of Martyrdom: the 2004 Chechen Presidential Election and the Cult of Kadyrov', *CERC Working Papers*, 2005:2, Melbourne.

<http://www.cerc.unimelb.edu.au/publications/CERCWP022005.pdf>

³⁴ Quoted in Jeremy Bransten, 'War in Chechnya Out of Sight, Not Necessarily Out of Mind, Prior to Vote', *RFE/RL Features*, 13 March 2004.

deals on everything from oil to weapons sales. On the other side, many Chechen field commanders long ago stopped answering to Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov. With whom, then, can the Russian government negotiate?

The paradox of the situation in Chechnya by the end of the second war was that Akhmet Kadyrov had made great strides in containing the influence of both Wahhabi and separatist elites among the Chechen opposition while curtailing also the direct influence in the republic of Russian military and political elites. His rule was neither peaceful nor popular, but it did both provide an element of stability and serve the interests of powerful elites in the Kremlin as well as his own. His assassination in May 1994 not only threatened to derail Putin's policy of Chechenisation, but also to spark a violent struggle for power amongst competing Chechen and Russian elites.³⁵ The resultant power vacuum was filled only by March 2007, when his son Ramzan became president and thus completed his meteoric rise from rebel thug to the most powerful man in the Chechen nation.³⁶

The Kadyrovisation of Chechnya, 2004-

The Beslan school siege of September 2004 was characterised by its organiser – Shamil Basaev – as his vote in the election of a Chechen president to succeed Akhmet Kadyrov. Being not yet 30 years old, and therefore barred under the Chechen constitution from holding the post, Ramzan had to step aside and allow Alu Alkhanov - a local police chief with a record of unbroken loyalty to the Kremlin- to temporarily fill the position. From the outset, however, Ramzan, not only displayed political acumen, but through his control of the *kadyrovtsy* troops and the proceeds of the Akhmet adyrov Memorial Fund, monopolised military and economic funds in the republic.

As Laurent Vinatier points out, it was only after Putin's visit to the North Caucasus after the Beslan school siege in September 2004, that Russia began 'to undertake serious efforts to improve daily life in Chechnya'.³⁷ Beslan also marked a turning point in that, henceforward, the main anti-Russian statements in the region emanated, in the words of Sergey Markedonov, 'not under the slogans of self-determination or even secession, but under the green banner of radical Islam'.³⁸

Fortune smiled on the young pretender in that the legitimate leader of the separatist movement – Aslan Maskhadov – was assassinated by federal

³⁵ Simon Saradzhan, 'Power Vacuum in Chechnya', *The Moscow Times*, 11 May 2004.

³⁶ For a full examination of Ramzan Kadyrov's role in Putin's strategy, see John Russell, 'Ramzan Kadyrov: the Indigenous Key to Success in Putin's "Chechenization" Strategy?', *Nationalities Papers*, 36:4, September 2008, pp.659-687.

³⁷ Laurent Vinatier 'War and Peace in Chechnya: the Role of Ramzan Kadyrov', *Russian Analytical Digest*, 51/08.

³⁸ Sergei Markedonov, 'Severnyi Kavkaz – 2009: v zone povyshennoi turbulentnosti' (The North Caucasus – 2009: In the Zone of Heightened Turbulence), <http://www.politcom.ru/arc/2009/11.html>

forces in March 2005 and the truly charismatic leader of the Islamist insurgents – Shamil Basaev – shared his fate in July 2006, robbing the two indigenous elites not loyal to Moscow of leaders with more legitimacy amongst their followers than Kadyrov could claim among his own.

By the time he reached his 30th birthday, in October 2006, therefore, Ramzan, in control of the military forces directed at the Islamists, with proceeds from his father's fund now being richly supplemented by increased subsidies from Moscow, and, critically, with the personal support of then president Putin, was in a powerful position to optimise his political strength and make a bid for the presidency. This he did with a combination of political guile and brutal violence, calibrated to have maximum effect within Chechnya and yet raise relatively little concern in Moscow or beyond. This has led some experts, such as Laurent Vinatier, to conclude that:

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.³⁹

I would take issue with my French colleague here in that, in the context of Chechnya today, Ramzan does possess an element of charisma (in that young Chechens, in particular, admire his glitzy life-style, whilst conservative elements appreciate his efforts in restoring traditional elements of Chechen culture). The legality of his rule is less likely to be questioned while Chechnya enjoys the unprecedented luxury of very generous handouts from the Russian treasury, which Ramzan is free to dispense with as he will. In that he has proven quite skilful in not favouring his clan or followers alone and has clamped down on cases of excessive corruption, he has managed to keep local and religious elites relatively happy.

The construction of Europe's largest mosque in the middle of Grozny remains a potent symbol of Ramzan's positive impact on Chechen society, far outweighing the irritating decrees emanating from the 'cult of personality' by which he is surrounded.⁴⁰ In February 2009, Chechen's Grozny TV staged a remarkable show in which Ramzan questioned former leaders of the Chechen separatist movement who had been persuaded to throw in their lot with Kadyrov. In the warrior culture that maintains an influential hold on Chechen society, the young president emerged as a clear winner.⁴¹

Moreover, on the crucial issue of Vladimir Putin's personal support, as recently as August 2009, Putin stood alongside Ramzan at his father's grave in Chechnya, as demonstrators gathered in Moscow to protest at the death of

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Liz Fuller and Aslan Doukaev, 'Chechnya: Kadyrov uses "Folk Islam" for Political Gain', RFE/RL, 6 December 2007, <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1079237.html>

⁴¹ Dzhambulat Are, 'The Discrediting of Ichkeria', *Prague Watchdog*, 23 February 2009

Natalya Estemirova.⁴² On the other hand, by January 2010, at a meeting in Pyatigorsk with the heads of the seven regions in the North Caucasus federal district, Putin warned the leaders to 'do everything to ensure the normal work and functioning of human rights organizations whose activities do not contravene the constitution of the Russian Federation.'⁴³

Putin's latest implied criticism of Kadyrov appears more in line with that of Dmitry Medvedev, who clearly is anxious to rein in the rampant corruption and cronyism that characterises much of the North Caucasus, although even he is careful not to single out Ramzan Kadyrov as the worst example. A few days before Putin flew to Akhmet Kadyrov's grave, Medvedev was characterising the problem in the North Caucasus thus:

*The roots of the problem are in the makeup of our lives: in unemployment, poverty, in clans who do not give a whit about the people, but simply divide the cash flows arriving here among themselves, who fight for contracts and then with each other to settle scores, and in corruption, which, indeed, has become very widespread within the law enforcement agencies, too.'*⁴⁴

That Ramzan Kadyrov regards Medvedev's appointment of Aleksandr Khloponin as an attempt to curtail Chechnya's 'special status' with Moscow is evident from the statement made by the Chechen parliament critical of the head of the North Caucasus Federal District immediately following the Moscow metro bombings,⁴⁵ followed up by an appearance by Kadyrov on Russian television a week later, on which he claimed that 'there was no need to deploy bureaucrats, police and Federal Security Service (FSB) personnel to Chechnya from elsewhere in Russia'.⁴⁶ Khloponin has hit back, however, by criticising Chechen officials, including Kadyrov, for travelling to Middle Eastern countries as ambassadors without coordinating their activities with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁴⁷.

Finally, as the Moscow metro bombings demonstrate, the Chechen (now the North Caucasian) opposition is by no means inactive. On 26 January, Reuters carried a report in which it was claimed that 'senior members of the Chechen Republic secretly channel funds to the insurgency as insurance in the event that the latter succeeds in overthrowing Kadyrov's government'.⁴⁸

⁴² Steve Gutterman, *AP*, 24 August 2009.

⁴³ 'Is Ramzan Kadyrov's Star on the Wane', RFE/RL, 1 February 2010,

<http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1945572.html>

⁴⁴ http://eng.kremlin.ru/speeches/2009/08/19/1857_type82912type82913_221060.shtml

⁴⁵ 'Chechen Legislators Target Federal Envoy', RFE/RL, 31 March 2010,

<http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/2001071.html>

⁴⁶ 'Kadyrov Picks a New Quarrel with Moscow', RFE/RL, 9 April 2009,

http://www.rferl.org/content/Kadyrov_Picks_A_New_Quarrel_With_Moscow/2007851.html

⁴⁷ Kevin Daniel Leahy, 'Medvedev's New King-Makers in the Northern Caucasus', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 13 May 2010.

⁴⁸ 'Is Ramzan Kadyrov's Star on the Wane', RFE/RL, 1 February 2010,

<http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1945572.html>

An elite struggle is clearly under way in the region, generally, and in Chechnya, in particular. Clearly, Kadyrov's position is less secure under Medvedev than it was under Putin. However, given the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the members of Russia's ruling 'tandem', it is difficult not to agree with Lyudmilla Alexeyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group:

*The impunity and omnipotence of Ramzan Kadyrov depends on the support...of Putin. As long as Putin supports him nobody will touch a hair of Kadyrov's head, even if he kills us all.*⁴⁹

Conclusion

Clearly, there is evidence aplenty that there exist interest groups ('elites') beyond the control of Kadyrov in Chechnya, the North Caucasus, in the Chechen diaspora in Moscow and abroad and among the Russian political and business elite. However, it would appear that, currently at least, the threat of major instability in Chechnya is deterrent enough to seek the enforced removal of Ramzan. While there remains the threat that Kadyrov could, should he so wish, push for *de jure* independence for his people, there is every indication that he sees that he can have his cake and eat it by remaining nominally within the Russian Federation. The 'legitimate' separatist movement has lost virtually all of its support, so the Islamic radicals remain the haven the dissident Chechens (and North Caucasians).

The alternative elite, one which would combine Russian secular values with a more sensitive understanding of the specifics of Chechen culture, seem as far away from power as ever they have been. The following genuine plea from a Russian observer sums up the dilemma of those in Moscow who wish to maintain territorial integrity in the North Caucasus:

There is only one reliable way to prevent new terrorist acts from the Caucasus. It is necessary to accept as an axiom that the Caucasus cannot be conquered. Archaic societies are not conquered, not even by military superiority. Colonization is the only way. Cultural expansion and gentle compulsion. Where is Russian culture in the Caucasus, these days? All it comes down to are visits of the performers Ramzan Kadyrov likes but they have little to do with culture.

We grew accustomed to thinking that the Caucasus is different, a world in itself, and that attempts to Russify it will only result in casualties. And yet, it was its Russification by the Soviet regime that made the region relatively stable. Sure, there was deportation of the Chechens as well, but there was more to the Soviet policy regarding the Caucasus than that. There was the university in Grozny and there were theaters in Makhachkala

⁴⁹ Quoted in Amy Knight, 'The Kremlin's Chechen Dragon', *The New York Review of Books*, 27 May 2010.

and publishing houses in Ordzhonikidze and Vladikavkaz. It is a fact, as much a fact as thoroughly negative connotations of the term "nationalism". Being a nationalist was disgraceful while respect for archaic traditions was touching. Blood vengeance was not regarded as cultural legacy or tradition back then. It was regarded and treated as a crime. Bribes were regarded as something shameful rather than traditional. There was intelligentsia to withstand the archaics, intelligentsia that recognized no clannish traditions. Had someone started talking Shar'iah law in the Caucasus back in the 1970s or even 1980s, it would have set listeners laughing rather than caused awe. Some people probably dreamed of the Wahhabi rule then, but they were few. It never occurred to most residents of the region to wish for this medieval set of rule. Most Chechens and Dagestanis regarded Wahhabi ideas as degradation and not as restoration of historical truth.

The Caucasus will never be Russian unless it itself decides that it wants to be Russian. No suppression, no governors or top managers transferred from Krasnodar will solve the problem. It is impossible for two systems of values to exist within one and the same country. Either we live in a secular state with one legislation, or we breed in the southern regions a den of savagery torn by ethnic discord, a pit where young women are brainwashed into donning a shahid belt to die and murder the innocent.

Either the Caucasus becomes part of Europe or all of Russia becomes part of Asia - medieval Asia, that is.⁵⁰

Time will tell whether Ramzan Kadyrov is nothing more than a medieval-style sultan or may transform into an enlightened leader of his people. Given the tinder-box nature of politics in that part of the world, however, time is not necessarily, on Ramzan's side.

⁵⁰ Dmitry Bykov, 'Return to the Caucasus', originally published in *Trud-7*, No.55; reproduced in *Johnson's Russia List*, #64, 1 April 2010.