

War in Ukraine: a boon for Ramzan Kadyrov's political future?

Description

The Russian intervention in Ukraine is a godsend for Ramzan Kadyrov, who sees it as a means of granting himself more political autonomy. Through his use of the media, the Chechen president is trying to strengthen his popularity, perhaps even legitimizing national ambitions. The conflict in Ukraine seems to be changing the relationship between the Kremlin and the Kadyrov clan and could, in the long term, change the political balance.

In recent months, the Chechen leader seems to have taken advantage of the conjuncture offered by the war to widen the margins of autonomy granted to him by the Kremlin. Through his political maneuvers, Ramzan Kadyrov has never seemed so close to breaking the glass ceiling of independence, demonstrating his aspiration for a new status within the Russian elites. For example, in August 2022, he participated in discussions on the future of Russian-Turkish relations during President R.-T. Erdogan's visit to Sochi⁽¹⁾, overriding his current status within the Federation with the agreement of Russian President Vladimir Putin.



Confirming the historical distinction between the army and Kadyrovtsy

The videos from the Ukrainian front relayed by R. Kadyrov highlight the distinction between the regular Russian army and the *Kadyrovtsy*. Visually, the latter stands out first by their beards, ceremonies, and equipment, which differ from the practices and equipment of the Russian army, as seen in the film *The Occupant*⁽²⁾. But the distinction goes further and is particularly evident in the doctrine of the use of forces. Unlike the essentially armored Russian army, the Kadyrovtsy have only troop transport vehicles, BRT-80s. The tactical specificity of the *Kadyrovtsy*, urban combat, also differs from the strategy of the Russian Chief of Staff, General Gerasimov, who advocates bypassing high-intensity fights. The singularity of the *Kadyrovtsy* is also apparent in the fact that they are the only ethnically-based military force in Russia. This particularity, the result of V. Putin's policy of Chechenisation of law enforcement forces to emerge from the Chechen wars, has allowed the development of a local armed force that is autonomous from the federal authorities. Thus, the Chechen successes in Ukraine are an opportunity for R. Kadyrov to confirm his specificity and operational autonomy in the conduct of operations, even if it means creating disagreements on the ground⁽³⁾.

Winning in Ukraine to stay in power in Chechnya

Since Kadyrov came to power in 2007, the supporters of Itchkeria and their Islamic rivals *Emarat Kavkaz*⁽⁴⁾ have repeatedly expressed their desire to overthrow the Kadyrov clan militarily, wherever it may be found. The intervention in Ukraine is a factor in prolonging the intra-Chechen struggles, as these groups are the last form of opposition to the autocratic leader's power. Therefore, the Chechen

presence in Ukraine is a godsend for R. Kadyrov, allowing him to weaken his opponents under the guise of the Chechen Republic's participation in the Russian war effort. Kadyrov, providing him with an excellent opportunity to weaken his opponents under cover of the Chechen Republic's involvement in the Russian war effort. Eliminating these dissident Chechen groups is a strategic objective for both R. Kadyrov and V. Kadyrov. Kadyrov and V. Putin, while the Russian territory has been hard hit by Caucasian terrorism for more than a decade, attacks demonstrate R. Kadyrov's incapacity to regulate the Islamist insurrection in his republic. The intervention in Ukraine is thus an opportunity for him to keep his political opponents and local jihadists away by forcing them into volunteer battalions⁽⁵⁾.

The Kadyrovtsy, a lever for the federal promotion

In May 2016, the Kremlin announced the partial reorganization of the federal Ministry of the Interior's forces with the creation of a national guard, the *Rosgvardia*⁽⁶⁾. Still underway, this reform aims to bring all the militarized forces of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) under the control of the Russian President. Units previously controlled by different ministries of parties are thus grouped, and the missions of the National Guard are subject to presidential decisions. These measures to improve the work of Russian law enforcement agencies also apply to the *Kadyrovtsy*. This reflects a desire to regain control over R. Kadyrov's military forces, which are considered too autonomous, particularly since the indictment of certain cadres involved in the murder of Boris Nemtsov⁽⁷⁾. However, the implementation of the *Rosgvardia* only really started in 2018 and is still stagnating.

On the other hand, the successes of the *Kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine allowed R. Kadyrov to present his units as model armed forces compared to the Russian army, which is considered less efficient and less motivated. R. Kadyrov uses his warrior image as a negotiating lever with Moscow to maintain his status in the context of national reform. Thus, the successes of the *Kadyrovtsy* in Ukraine allow, by extension, to present the forces of the Chechen Ministry of the Interior as model armed forces. This communication campaign is also a way of getting through the restructuring of the command initiated by the reform of the *Rosgvardia*. R. Kadyrov is thus consolidating his control over the Chechen *MVD* forces, the forces that have enabled him to lock in his power in Chechnya. To strengthen his image and go beyond his filial relationship with V. Putin, R. Kadyrov confirmed the arrival of Chechen "volunteers" in Ukraine to reinforce the regular army⁽⁸⁾. This regimentation occurs within the framework of feudal domination exercised by the Kremlin over its vassal Kadyrov. This mobilization allows the Chechen leader to demonstrate his capacity to adapt to the new challenges of contemporary warfare. Thus, promoting his good results in Ukraine could allow R. Kadyrov to gain legitimacy to obtain a federal post in a ministry or even to become the incarnation of the National Guard.

Social networks are a tool to overcome the condition of regional leader.

In July 2022, R. Kadyrov published a video staging V. Zelensky's fake surrender: the Chechen leader poses as a victor behind the Ukrainian president's look-alike, whom he forces to sign the act of sacrifice, while he repeats his slogan "*Akhmat Sila*" ("*Akhmat is strength*," in homage to his father). The purpose of this platform is to present him as the spokesperson and warlord of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine to build his legitimacy. In contrast, he has been systematically given as the simple protégé of V. Putin until now. This aggressive promotion of the intervention in Ukraine allowed him to become one of the most influential figures among the "war supporters" and to get even closer to V. Putin, whether the latter wanted it or not. Kadyrov's skill lies in his ability to communicate spontaneously on social networks and manipulate reality to promote his image: that of a supposedly charismatic leader both in Russia and on the international scene. Not without success, since the

number of subscribers to his *Telegram* account has risen since February from 60,000 to 2.5 million⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, he can appear to the Russians as a significant political figure, determined and qualified to win. However, it would only be a step until some consider him indispensable and want him to be promoted to federal office, becoming, by extension, irremovable upon the possible departure of V. Putin.

By positioning himself on the right wing of the Russian President, R. Kadyrov was able to take advantage of this time of war which inaugurated significant changes on the Russian political scene. The Chechen leader understood that the opportunity was ideal for redefining his political status. As a result, two future scenarios seem to be emerging concerning his future status:

- Moscow's opponents of the Kadyrov clan can no longer stand the Chechen leader's criticism and are putting pressure on V. Putin to redefine the contract terms between Grozny and Moscow. Putin to redefine the terms of the contract between Grozny and Moscow. R. Kadyrov could be reminded of the political line set by Moscow, in exchange for which he would be reappointed as head of Chechnya and supported by Moscow on local issues.
- Kadyrov intensifies his criticism of the decisions of the Russian political-military elites. Pressed by a context increasingly unfavorable to him, V. Putin is obliged to negotiate a revision of R. Kadyrov's status, giving him access to a federal post to avoid a total rupture. As the Chechen leader's personality is particularly divisive, he could be placed in a position of eminence grise within a federal ministry or at the head of the Rosgvardia to galvanize the troops. In Chechnya, power would pass to Adam Delimkhanov, Kadyrov's cousin and current head of the Chechen branch of the Rosgvardia, which has strengthened its legitimacy through its presence in Ukraine. Due to his new mandate's federal, legal and permanent nature, R. Kadyrov would become almost untouchable if V. Putin were to disappear. Putin was to disappear.

The Chechen model of autonomy shows the fragility of the system that created it, but it may now prove unable to control it. This evolution, which took place on the occasion of the war launched by Russia in Ukraine, raises questions about the hyper-personalization of the Russian political system.

Notes:

- (1) "[Kadyrov na vstreche Poutina i Erdogana soglasilsya otpravitsya v Tourtsiyu](#)" [Kadyrov agreed to travel to Turkey during the meeting between Putin and Erdogan], *Kavkazskiy ouzel*, 6 August 2022.
- (2) "[The Occupant/?????????. ?????? ? ??? ? ????????? ?????????????? ????????](#)" [The Occupant: War and peace in a Russian soldier's phone, *Ukrainska pravda/Youtube*, 11 May 2022.
- (3) "[V Kremle prokommentirovali zaïavleniye Kadyrova o neoudatchakh na voïne](#)," [The Kremlin commented on Kadyrov's statement on the failures of the war], *Kavkaz realii*, 12 September 2022.
- (4) "[Kadyrov: tot, komou prichlo v golovou ougrojat Rossii, boudet unitchtojen](#)" [Kadyrov: Whoever had the idea to threaten Russia will be destroyed], *RIA Novosti*, 3 September 2014.
- (5) Oleg Syssoev, "[Vezout na oubiï. Mobilizatsii v Tchetchne net, no rebiat otpravliaïout na voïnou](#)" [There is no mobilisation in Chechnya, but the guys are sent to war], *Kavkaz realii*, 23 September 2022.

- (6) Viktor Zolotov, "[Federalnaïa sloujba voïsk natsionalnoï gvardii Rossiïskoï Federatsii](#)" [Federal Service of National Guard Troops of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardia), *Russian government website*, April 2016.
- (7) "[Soud otkazal v doprose Ramzana Kadyrova po delou ob oubiïstve Nemtsova](#)" [Court refused to question Ramzan Kadyrov in Nemtsov murder case], *BBC Russia*, 14 October 2015.
- (8) Ivan Karguine, " « [Lioudeï obmanyvaïut.](#) " [Kak i zatchem Tchetchnya otpravliaïet 'dobrovol'tsev' v Oukrainou](#) " ["People are deceived." How and why Chechnya sends 'volunteers' to Ukraine], *Kavkaz realii*, 26 April 2022.
- (9) Lisa Haseldine, "[Chechen warlord Kadyrov mocks Zelensky in spoof video](#)," *The Spectator*, July 2022.
- (10) Ekaterina Bezmenova, "[Programma ot Kremlya: kak telegram-kanal Kadyrova stal rouporom voïny](#) ," [Kremlin agenda: How Kadyrov's Telegram channel became the mouthpiece of the war], *Kavkaz Realii*, 4 September 2022.

Vignette: Ramzan Kadyrov in Saudi Arabia, during the signing ceremony of Russian-Saudi agreements as part of the Russian President's state visit to Riyadh (October 2019). Source: website of the Russian Presidency.

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