

THE CHECHEN CHOICE: THE PRICE OF PERSONALIZED RULE IN MODERN RUSSIA

Christopher Peterstam



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Chechnya, known just as much for its open defiance of Moscow as for its towering mountain ranges, is once again caught at a political crossroads. With frequent reports of its leader, Ramzan Kadyrov's deteriorating health, speculation remains rife as to what path the autonomous republic of the Russian Federation will take. Not wanting a repeat of the violence of the 1990s, Moscow undoubtedly views a smooth transfer of power as being of the utmost importance. However, as the region operates not through institutional frameworks, but instead on the basis of personal relationships and force of personality, appointing a successor may prove to be more challenging than observers may think. This then poses a danger to the unity of the Russian Federation, as well as to the broader Transcaucasian region, should political instability once more affect the Chechen Republic.

Introduction

Chechnya, the North Caucasian region long known for its rebellious tendencies toward Moscow's centralized power, is quite possibly undergoing its most significant political shake-up of the 21st century. Ramzan Kadyrov, the current head of the autonomous republic, who has ruled the region as his own personal fiefdom since 2007, has been reported by several sources as being seriously ill.

This creates a potentially existential issue for the Kremlin. Not wishing for a repeat of the incredibly violent period during the 1990s, ensuring a moderately smooth transition of power if Kadyrov were to die or resign in the future is tantamount to ensuring stability. This small republic has repeatedly defied Moscow's authority and has been an example to other Russian republics that the central government can be challenged, putting the entirety of the Russian Federation at risk should separatist violence begin once more.

Background

Ramzan Kadyrov, born to the former Mufti (Islamic Jurist) of the separatist Republic of Chechnya and Ichkeria, Akhmad Kadyrov, fought against the Russian Federation alongside his father during the First Chechen War. However, following the outbreak of the Second Chechen War, both defected to the Russians due to ideological splits within the Chechen resistance movement. After the Russian victory, Akhmad Kadyrov was appointed President of the Chechen Republic on October 5, 2003. Less than a year later, he was assassinated during the annual May 9 celebrations in Grozny.

Following his father's assassination, Ramzan Kadyrov was appointed deputy prime minister. It was understood that Kadyrov was the informal leader of the Chechen Republic, but due to

him being under 30 years old, the minimum age to hold a regional office in Russia, several regents were put in place. On February 15, 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov was formally made Head of the Chechen Republic.

During his reign, Kadyrov implemented reforms to the Chechen legal code such as codifying Sharia Law as the central aspect of Chechen governance. His regime has been accused of rampant corruption, nepotism, and human rights abuses. Chechnya, being a highly tribal region where membership of a *teip* (clan) is of central importance in the social system, has seen Kadyrov appoint members of his own *teip*, the Benoy, to nearly all top positions within the republic.

Kadyrov's Illness

Issues regarding Kadyrov's health have been known since at least 2019. Numerous reports have pointed to ongoing issues related to his kidney function, with Ukraine's Defense Intelligence indicating kidney necrosis.¹ Reports of a serious illness seem to be corroborated by Kadyrov's decline in public engagements, as well as his declining physical appearance, with notable bloating in his face and abdomen, restricted physical movement, and gloomy, unexpressive facial expressions. Kadyrov has attempted to offset these through planned media appearances designed to show that he is still functional and healthy, such as a video released on his Telegram channel showing him exercising and lifting weights.²

However, public engagements and stunts of physical prowess cannot erase evidence of several health scares and hospital visits. These include his being placed in a medically induced coma in September 2024,³ and another incident in which he almost drowned in the resort town of Bodrum, Turkey, in July 2025 due to losing consciousness shortly after entering the water.⁴

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It has been said by Kadyrov himself that he has asked President Vladimir Putin for permission to resign numerous times and that each time the request was rebuffed.⁵ Putin is potentially trying to position a favorable succession outcome should Kadyrov be able to maintain his hold on power for a further length of time. However, there remains the question of who would be able to fill his position.

Possible Successors

While no obvious individual presents himself as a successor to Ramzan Kadyrov, there are several possible candidates that, due to their stature in the Chechen Republic, their relationships to the Kadyrov family, as well as their working relationships with Moscow power brokers, can be examined.

Akhmat Kadyrov (20), Ramzan's eldest son, has held several high positions in the Chechen government. His father elevated his image by arranging for Akhmat to meet President Putin following his marriage ceremony. It has been reported that compared to his other male siblings, he possesses calm and intelligent traits. However, Akhmat is said to have an intense fear of public speaking, a trait that greatly hinders him in the Chechen political system that relies greatly on charisma and personal charm.

Adam Kadyrov (18), Ramzan's third-oldest son and described as being his father's favorite, is said to be the most similar to his father. Brutal and impulsive, Adam first made a name for himself by appearing on video beating Nikita Zhuravel, an ethnic Russian who burned a Quran and was subsequently extradited to Chechnya. This video was quickly shared online, and Adam was lauded with praise as a defender of Islam. He was awarded Chechnya's highest honor, the 'Hero of the Republic of Chechnya'.⁶ However, Adam has a well-known impulsive streak that could dis-

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suade others from viewing him as a viable succession candidate. It has been reported that this has caused considerable issues between Kadyrov and Putin, as according to sources, while Kadyrov wishes for Adam to succeed him, Putin sees this as a non-negotiable proposal.⁷ For instance, Adam was involved in a car accident in January 2026 and was quickly airlifted to a Moscow hospital.⁸ While the driver of the other vehicle was killed, Adam's injuries were described as relatively minor due to the features of his expensive Western car shielding him from substantial harm. However, he was still airlifted to a Moscow hospital for medical checks, followed by his concerned father who promptly left Chechnya to be by his son's bedside. This shows the extent to which Adam is valued by his father, as even while reports indicate he was relatively unharmed, he was still taken to a top Moscow hospital for a barrage of tests and treatments.

While the Chechen Republic can be described as ruled similarly to a ‘sovereign duchy’, there still remains federal limits on appointing anybody under the age of 30 to head the republic. Thus, it has been speculated that either a regent-like figure could be appointed until one of Kadyrov’s children comes of age or a more permanent head of state would be appointed under the belief such a person could still maintain Chechnya’s allegiance to Moscow.

Magomed Daudov, a former police officer whom Kadyrov refers to as ‘Lord’ apparently due to the black suit he was wearing at his first meeting with Kadyrov, currently holds the position of regional prime minister of Chechnya. According to the republic’s constitution, he would be the

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legal successor should Kadyrov be incapacitated while in office. He has played a central role within Kadyrov’s regime, both acting as an enforcer as well as managing a range of issues, such as the response to COVID-19 and organizing the Chechen volunteer units sent to Ukraine.⁹ It has been reported that, despite his loyalty to Kadyrov, he does not have a substantial power base independent of Kadyrov which would limit him in a succession competition. However, as Kadyrov has become sicker, Daudov has taken over more day-to-day roles which may allow him to form the relationships within the state structure to become a reasonable candidate in the future.

Adam Delikhmanov, known as the ‘man with the golden gun’ for his propensity to carry around a gold-plated pistol, is a relative and longtime confidant of Ramzan Kadyrov. In contrast to Daudov, Delikhmanov holds substantial influence within Chechnya as well as beyond its borders into Russia proper and around the globe. Deeply involved with the Chechen diaspora community in Russia, the Gulf states, Turkey, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe, his networks have been reported to monitor and intimidate Chechen opposition figures.¹⁰ The closeness between himself and the Kadyrov family was further highlighted when Adam Kadyrov was allegedly married to his granddaughter.

An interesting new development has been the rise of Apti Alaudinov, a major general and commander of the Akhmat Chechen volunteer unit. Having recently attracted public attention for his speech at United Russia’s 21st Party Congress in December of 2023,¹¹ his confident presentation, delivered without notes and with no noticeable accent, which is unique for a Caucasian Russian speaker, has led to him being described as the Russian federal government’s preferred candidate to rule the region. Alaudinov has not always found himself in such a promising position. In 2019,

according to a report by *Novaya Gazeta*, he was named as one of the conspirators in a plot against Kadyrov.¹² Although he denied the charges as rumors and threatened the people who made the allegations, Alaudinov left Chechnya for two years and moved to Moscow in what some describe as a self-imposed exile. It was only after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine that Alaudinov was able to redeem himself through his command of Chechen volunteer forces.

Risk to Chechen Stability

Russia has long been a nation where administration and authority is built on personal rule and clientelism. Chechnya is by far the most extreme example of this. The dangers posed to this system should Ramzan Kadyrov step down or die in office are of extreme importance to the stability of Chechnya and to Russia as a whole. Most likely, Moscow has formulated a contingency plan, as it is widely known that Kadyrov's days are now numbered. The question still remains of how to enact a smooth transition that minimizes internal disputes within the divided republic.

Continued personal rule by one of Kadyrov's sons seems unlikely in the near term. While they could be kept close to power, operating in the upper echelons of the Chechen government, none of the children are yet close to the minimum age of 30 required to legally hold office. Also of concern is that none of Kadyrov's sons seem to possess their father's combined set of traits needed to rule. Akhmat, while described as intelligent and thoughtful, lacks his father's charisma and 'the cruelty needed' to maintain control in such a cut-throat environment.¹³ Meanwhile, Adam Kadyrov seems to have inherited his father's penchant for the use of violence but reports of erratic behavior such as drug use and the aforementioned car crash, seem to have drawn comparisons to other well-known unstable children of authoritarian strongmen, à la Uday Hussein.

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Whether or not any of Kadyrov's children are being groomed for rule, an interim head of the republic will have to be appointed anyway due to age restrictions on holding said office.¹⁴ As mentioned previously, Magomed Daudov is now the next-in-line legally. Should this happen, the Kadyrov clan will most likely remain central to Chechen politics. Daudov has a minimal independent political base he can call his own and remains reliant on the legitimacy provided by Kadyrov. However, the legitimacy of his being legally Kadyrov's successor and his lack of a mature power base may tempt the Kremlin to appoint him as head of the republic with the hopes that he will have to grow closer to Moscow to ensure his position remains secure. It must be noted, however, that Daudov does not have a strong relationship with the Kremlin.

Adam Delimkhanov is in a stronger position within the republic, but not necessarily to serve as a successor. A cousin of Kadyrov, he is deeply enmeshed in Chechen domestic politics. With his granddaughter reportedly marrying Ramzan's

son, Adam Kadyrov,¹⁵ the loyalty between him and the Kadyrov family seems all but cemented. What makes him an especially important candidate is his strong international relationship with the sizable Chechen diaspora. Spreading across several continents, this diaspora has served as an informal network that gives the Chechen elite outsized influence. Continual financial assistance from Grozny provided to this informal network has allowed its members to purchase property as well as expand their influence in elite circles across several countries. These ‘cells’ have often served as staging grounds for monitoring, intimidation, and murder of opposition figures and adversaries.

Substantial drawbacks remain with Delimkhanov. Although he has been a parliamentarian for United Russia since 2007 and a recipient of the Hero of the Russian Federation, Russia’s highest

honorary title, his relationship with the Kremlin has been described as tense. He has also been allegedly involved in numerous murders internationally. Most notably, the Dubai police charged him with the murder of Sulim Yamadayev, a rival to Ramzan Kadyrov, who was killed in a targeted assassination in Dubai on March 30, 2009. As of April 2009, Delimkhanov was still wanted by Interpol in connection with the murder. The international issues that will come with a Delimkhanov appointment may be too great for the Kremlin to risk, especially with the Gulf states. It must also be said that with Ramzan Kadyrov’s expanding influence in the Gulf states,¹⁶ the Interpol warrant on Delimkhanov could complicate this important relationship.

Apti Alaudinov has been one of the most interesting figures to rise out of the reshuffling of Russian domestic politics following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. As was previously mentioned, following his alleged implication in a plot against Kadyrov, Alaudinov left the republic for several years and focused on his career in Russia proper. The war in Ukraine proved to be his redemption arc, as he has both proven to Kadyrov and the Russian state his military acumen and loyalty to the cause. What makes him wholly unique is the line he walks between the Kremlin and Chechnya. Following his 2023 speech at the United Russia conference, he became a darling of the Russian media, who praised his calm demeanor and intellect. While not explicitly said, his expertise in the Russian language and his contrast as a demure figure when compared to what Russian elites view as a more ‘stereotypical Chechen’—i.e., the brashness and overt threats of violence exhibited by some of the other figures written about in this piece—make the Russian central state view him more favorably. Of special note is the usefulness that Alaudinov could prove to be in pushing forward the Putin view of Russkiy (русский) vs. Rossiyskiy (российский). To describe this briefly,

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Russkiy describes an ethnic Russian individual. Rossiyskiy is a more civic minded, political, and inclusive term used to describe a citizen of the Russian Federation. A member of any non-Russian (Russkiy) ethnic group within the Russian Federation, such as a Chechen or a Yakut, is not a Russkiy, but is a Rossiyskiy if they are a Russian citizen. Alaudinov has frequently argued this belief, as he stated in an interview, “Let them prove they are Russians. Russianness is not in a passport—it is in the soul and in loyalty. Many so-called Russians ran abroad and threw dirt at their homeland. And we, who stayed and stood up for Russia—are we not Russian?”¹⁷ In a country such as Russia which has significant ethnic divides, especially in the North Caucasus, a figure such as this could prove extremely useful as a means of creating a kind of dual identity across the region and possibly diminishing ethnic tension.

However, risks come with an Alaudinov appointment. His strong loyalty to the Kremlin can be seen as a negative by the independent-minded Chechen people, for even though they are an autonomous republic and the political elite are publicly not in favor of independence, hatred for the Russians remains strong. Chechnya has fought Russia for centuries and virtually every citizen of the Chechen Republic has had friends and family injured and killed during the destructive wars of the 1990s. Such a figure as Alaudinov may be seen as a Moscow puppet and traitor, which may foster resentment. It also has been rumored that he does not have the respect of the Chechen elites. According to reports, he is referred to as “Little Aпти” and “knucklehead” behind closed doors,¹⁸ which in a society that prioritizes personal honor as strongly as Chechnya does not bode well.

Collective Kadyrovism has been floated as a possible solution for the time being. Should Ramzan Kadyrov resign or die in office, the relatives and loyalists that he has placed in all top positions

would rule as a kind of collective oligarchy,¹⁹ with a formal succession of either one of the aforementioned candidates or possibly a minor player not mentioned. This appointment would be a compromise with which everyone within the collective, including the Kremlin, would be satisfied with. The issue remains that the governing system of Chechnya is not built on formal institutions, but instead on loyalty, informal agreements, and promises that Ramzan Kadyrov personally guarantees. Without his force of personality, long dormant feuds and rivalries could reappear.

Regional Stability

A destabilized Chechnya creates risks both to Russia’s internal security and to transnational security, as destabilizing elements could spread into the South Caucasus. Within Russia, Ramzan Kadyrov has frequently been at odds with other North Caucasian oblasts. This has included feuds with both the Dagestan and Ingushetia oblasts, which are both symbolic and material. Kadyrov has sought to expand Chechen power by asserting claims over territory from these regions and having it formally incorporated into the Chechen Republic. This has included the controversial 2018 deal with Ingushetia that saw an unequal amount of territory ceded to Chechnya.²⁰ Kadyrov has even involved the Russian Orthodox Church by having Patriarch Kirill incorporate the Orthodox churches of Dagestan and Ingushetia under the Grozny Bishopric.²¹ These moves have greatly inflamed regional tensions, and in a region where armed confrontation has frequently been used in place of conflict mediation, should there be a power vacuum at the highest office within Chechnya, there could be a push by these two republics to expand their own influence at Chechnya’s expense.

At the international level, Chechnya’s only international border is with Georgia. With the Pankisi

Gorge, a narrow valley connecting Chechnya and Georgia, as the primary route connecting the two, there is a small Georgian-Chechen community, known as the Kist people, who have served as a link between Chechnya and Georgia. During the wars of the 1990s, there were frequent cross-border raids into Russia by Chechen militants which greatly undermined Russo-Georgian relations. A breakdown of centralized authority in Grozny could create an environment where armed groups once again feel that they have something to gain by taking up arms and returning to guerrilla raids, which would undoubtedly involve Georgia as the benefits of setting up bases within Georgia to fight in Chechnya have obvious transnational benefits.

Regarding international terrorism, Kadyrov has frequently made use rhetorically of his Islamic bona fides and portrayed himself as a defender of Islam. While not being a supporter of Wahhabism, the international strain of Islam that is most frequently cited by jihadists as their ideology, it remains clear that Kadyrov has been one of the driving forces behind radical Islam across the North Caucasus.²² Through his strong promotion of Sharia, he has often emboldened fundamentalist and extremist elements within Chechnya and across the region. It must be noted that Kadyrov is strongly anti-Wahhabist, but instead pushes a fundamentalist Sufi form of Islam. Were a breakdown or even a lessening of central control from Grozny to occur, this runs the risk of reduced enforcement against armed jihadist militant groups within the region. There are already established Islamic State cells across the Transcaucasian region, with rising risks being reported in both Azerbaijan and Georgia. Should jihadists have more freedom to conduct operations and feel safe to use Chechnya as a staging ground, the risk of terrorist acts occurring will increase greatly and pose a significant risk of loss of human life across the region. It must be said that counterterrorism

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efforts have been successful across the region. However, what is essential to highlight is that the risk of terrorism in contemporary times does not rely purely on organizational strength and the establishment of terror cells, but has often instead centered on decentralized networks and coercive psychological tactics to convince participants, who, although few in number, have the ability to commit attacks with extremely high casualty rates such as the Crocus City Hall attack and the 2024 Dagestan attacks.

Conclusion

On September 20, 2026, elections will be held in Chechnya. All indicators point to Ramzan Kadyrov being re-elected to his fifth official term as head of the Chechen Republic. The question re-

mains as to how long Kadyrov can continue to function in this role. The illness from which he reportedly suffers is said to be degenerative and can only be mitigated through a kidney transplant, a risky procedure for what appears to be an advanced case of kidney disease.

Were Kadyrov to leave office, there are several events that will presumably occur. A succession plan from the Kremlin is almost certainly in place. Russian federal troops, most likely Rosgvardiya, the Russian National Guard, will be deployed to Grozny to ensure that strategic political sites are maintained under the control of the designated successor. An inference can be drawn that Putin is hoping Kadyrov does not leave office until the cessation of hostilities in Ukraine so that no resources have to be diverted from the war zone. An atmosphere of outward calm will mask the Byzantine power structures that will be working in overdrive as the political vacuum that Ramzan Kadyrov once filled remains empty.

Author –

Christopher Peterstam is a Project Manager at ISDP's Asia Program. His work focuses on contemporary political and security developments across Asia, with particular attention to state narratives, regional power dynamics, and transnational issues. He contributes to the program's analytical output through research, writing, and engagement in ongoing projects.

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