

The Kremlin increases its control over Dagestan

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On 28 January, President Vladimir Putin accepted the resignation of the President of Dagestan, Magomedsalam Magomedov, and appointed him one of the deputy heads of his administration. At the same time, Putin appointed Ramazan Abdulatipov acting president of Dagestan.

Dagestan is the largest and most unstable republic in the Russian North Caucasus. Armed radical Islamist guerrillas actively operate there, as do criminal groups linked to local businesses and the regional government at different levels. During 2012, at least 405 people were killed there in various kinds of attacks and terrorist acts. The republic is inhabited by dozens of nationalities and smaller ethnic groups, and 14 different languages are designated as 'official'. To avoid conflicts in this situation, a system of quotas exists, to ensure appropriate representation in the local government and parliament in proportion to the size of each nationality.

Commentary

- It seems that the main reason for Magomedov's removal (his request to resign was most certainly agreed, and probably suggested, by the Kremlin) were his overly independent initiatives. By taking advantage of the support base he inherited from his father Magomedali (who in 1994-2006 led the Dagestani State Council, then the highest executive authority in the republic), and also thanks to his own personnel policy, the President managed to secure a strong position for himself in the republic. This allowed him to initiate a process of national reconciliation. He set up the Adjustment Committee, which allows the 'rehabilitation' of fighters who have laid down their arms, and initiated a dialogue between the followers of traditional Islam and radical Salafists about a year ago. These moves, together with some recovery in the economy, have led to a small but appreciable improvement for the people. The Kremlin, which opposes the talks with the militants and the Salafists, might have considered such initiatives as setting a dangerous precedent for the entire region. Another reason for the Kremlin's pressure on Magomedov's to resign may be based in the latter's criticism of the federal government's preparations to abandon the idea of holding general elections for regional leaders. At the same time, Magomedov's achievements have assured him a high position in Moscow.

- Ramazan Abdulatipov is the best-known politician from Dagestan in Russia, but he has worked exclusively at the federal level for more than twenty years (he has been a minister for nationalities and an ambassador in Dushanbe). It is expected that as he does not have his own support base in the republic, he will do no more than carry out the Kremlin's instructions. Most likely, this will boost the position of the institutions of force – the army, the Interior Ministry and the FSB (additional military contingents were sent to Dagestan in March 2012). The ethnic situation may also be exacerbated: Magomedov is an ethnic Dargin, while Abdulatipov is an Avar (the Avars are the largest ethnic group in Dagestan, but they are divided into competing clans, which means that Avar politicians usually meet with opposition from their own countrymen).
- Changing the president of Dagestan may be part of the government's preparations for next year's Winter Games in Sochi. The Kremlin, which fears a further destabilisation of the situation and does not trust the local elites, may be moving to 'manual control' of the Caucasus, reinforcing the factor of force in managing the region. In the current situation, the only leader whose position does not seem to be under any threat is Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov.