

Kadyrov attacks the Russian opposition

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On 22 January a demonstration of support was held in Grozny for the President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, which was also targeted at the Russian opposition. According to the Chechen authorities 800,000 people participated, although probably no more than 200,000 were present, most of whom were forced to take part in the demonstration by the the republic's authorities. The demonstrators threatened the opposition with attacks both within and without the law, while at the same time expressing support for Kadyrov and Putin. The demonstration was part of a political offensive by the Chechen leader, who since mid-January has criticised the so-called 'non-systemic' Russian opposition, calling it "the enemy of the nation" and accusing them of acting as "lackeys" to the West. Opponents, human rights defenders and journalists have also been threatened by other Chechen leaders, including Magomed Daudov, the leader of parliament and Adam Delimkhanov, a member of the Duma.

Kadyrov's actions have met with criticism by independent circles in Russia (and even some representatives of the authorities), and the Congress of Russian Intelligentsia has called for him to be sacked. Meanwhile, President Vladimir Putin defended Kadyrov, judging his activities in Chechnya as effective. In turn, the head of the presidential administration Sergey Ivanov said that the Kremlin has no objections to the Chechen leader.

Commentary

- This latest attack on the opposition is probably an attempt to rebuild Kadyrov's position, which has been tarnished in recent months in connection with the investigation into the murder of Boris Nemtsov (15 February). The circumstances indicated that the Chechen leader could have given direct instructions for the crime (which was carried out by officers of the Chechen 'North' battalion). In December 2015, however, the investigation took a favourable turn for Kadyrov; the prosecutors claimed that the murder had been ordered by Ruslan Muhudinov, an officer of the 'Sever' battalion. This was a signal that Kadyrov could now feel safe.
- It cannot be ruled out that Kadyrov's offensive is a covert attempt to blackmail Moscow, aimed at preventing a reduction of subsidies to Chechnya from the federal budget in view of the difficult economic situation in Russia (in 2014 the Republic received grants amounting to 56.8 billion roubles, which represented 81% of its budget). Although there is no indication that the Kremlin has withdrawn support for Kadyrov, his activity may also be a demonstration of strength, just a few weeks before the Chechen leader's term of office

expires – and before his probable reappointment (March 2016).

- Regardless of the current political manoeuvres, Kadyrov's actions fit into the logic of Grozny/Moscow relations. Despite large autonomy and his ambition to play a greater role on the Russian political scene, Kadyrov is reliant on Moscow both politically and economically. His regular declarations of loyalty to Putin and proofs of his usefulness are aimed at keeping the Kremlin's favour and ensuring stable funding. The Kremlin has tolerated similar action by Kadyrov due to his usefulness in Chechnya (the system of governance he has created ensures stability in the republic) and on the internal and international arena (as a fearmonger to political opponents).