

Russia's foreign policy – concessions to Kadyrov

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In the first days of September, Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov spoke in defence of the persecuted Muslim Rohingya community in Myanmar several times. On 2nd September he said that if Russia supported the Myanmar government, which is responsible for the persecutions, he would 'be against Russia'. On 3rd September an unsanctioned demonstration in front of the Myanmar embassy in Moscow took place, with approximately 800 protesters (mainly Chechens). Despite the fact that the gathering was illegal, the police arrived at the scene only after a delay and did not take any action. Furthermore, on 4th September the Chechen government organised a rally in Grozny in support of the Rohingya which brought together, de facto by force, tens of thousands of participants (the local ministry of internal affairs provided the absurd number of 1.1 million participants) and ended in an appeal to President Vladimir Putin to use his authority in order to prevent a 'genocide of Muslims' in Myanmar. A demonstration was also held in the capital of Dagestan, Makhachkala (on 3rd September, with approximately 2,000 participants).

Kadyrov's statements were followed by a visible shift in the Russian government's position on the situation in Myanmar. On 28th August the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had condemned the actions undertaken by the Rohingya rebels (armed attacks on the government forces) and expressed its support for the Myanmar government, but on 3rd September in another communiqué the Russian ministry emphasised the deteriorating humanitarian situation due to the hostilities and appealed to all parties of the conflict to begin constructive dialogue, in fact placing the blame on the further development of the conflict also on the Myanmar government. On 4th September, at the BRICS summit Vladimir Putin together with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi called on the Myanmar government to take necessary measures to stop violence which might lead to the escalation of tensions and terrorism. According to the Kremlin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov, both presidents condemned all manifestations of violence, including those aimed at Muslims. On 5th September Vladimir Putin commented on Kadyrov's harsh words in a conciliatory tone, underlining that each citizen, also the leaders of Russian regions, has the right to express their opinion on the country's foreign policy and that it should not be seen as a sign of a 'schism' against the Kremlin. As for Kadyrov, he thanked President Putin for defending Myanmar's Muslim population and declared his full loyalty to him.

Commentary

- Kadyrov used the defence of the Rohingya community only as a pretext. For a considerable amount of time he has presented himself as a defender of and spokesman for both inhabitants of the Caucasus (in a situation where his attempts to take control of the neighbouring republics are being blocked by local and federal governments) and Muslims – both in Russia and outside the country. For example, after the Charlie Hebdo massacre, the Chechen government organised a demonstration against the distribution of caricatures of Muhammad. Kadyrov also tries to play a key role in relations between Moscow and Muslim countries. For instance, in recent weeks Kadyrov has been carrying out a widely publicised campaign to bring Caucasian children from Syria and Iraq – these are Russian citizens whose parents joined the jihad in the ranks of so-called Islamic State. However, whereas previously he has been satisfied with the role of an intermediary acting in line with the Kremlin’s foreign policy, at present he displays an ambition to actively shape this policy, pursuing his own interests.
- Despite the fact that the Myanmar direction is not one of the priorities for Russian foreign policy, this modification of Moscow’s present official stance places Russia in an awkward position with regard to China which unequivocally supports the Myanmar government (in March this year both countries blocked a UN draft statement on the humanitarian situation in Myanmar’s Rakhine State). Furthermore, it may diminish Russia’s possibility of profitable economic co-operation with Myanmar. A change in Moscow’s position also constitutes a breach in its traditional policy of lambasting all manifestations of ‘interference in the internal affairs of other countries’ and potential ‘revolutions’.
- The shift in Moscow’s stance in its foreign policy due to pressure from the leader of one of the regions is unprecedented. It reveals Kadyrov’s growing power and the Kremlin’s relative weakness since it did not decide to confront the Chechen leader, possibly fearing his potential for destabilisation and his ability to mobilise the Chechen population (and, more broadly speaking, Muslims) both in the North Caucasus and outside it, including in Moscow. The concessions to Kadyrov also seem to have been dictated by the fact that at present he remains an important and useful instrument that the Kremlin (and Putin himself) uses in Russia’s internal policy (intimidation or the physical elimination of the government’s political opponents) and foreign policy (the participation of Chechen fighters in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its intervention in Syria). This ‘untouchable’ status of Kadyrov and his entourage was revealed in the police’s response to the demonstration in front of the Myanmar embassy—the passivity of the law enforcement forces is worthy of attention in the context of their attitude to protests organised by the liberal opposition, where the smallest violations of the regulations provide a pretext to use repression against protesters. The fact that twenty participants of the demonstration held on 4th September (a day after the main protest) were arrested may be seen as the Kremlin’s timid attempt to save face.
- However, in the light of the approaching presidential election (scheduled for March 2018) and possible reshuffles in the Russian elite in the immediate future, it cannot be ruled out that Kadyrov will wish to play an important role on Russia’s internal political scene at the federal level. It seems rather unlikely that this ostentatious demonstration has been used to achieve only tactical objectives of the government in Grozny, such as the negotiation

of an advantageous budget for Chechnya for the coming years (to date Kadyrov has effectively blocked plans to cut funds for the region) or the renegotiation of the conditions of an agreement with Rosneft in the dispute over the control of oil assets in Chechnya.

- The lack of a firm reaction to Kadyrov's attitude may, in the long term, lead to a risky situation for the Kremlin, where Putin's position will be weakened in the eyes of the elite, Grozny's potential to destabilise Russia's internal arena with the use of the ethnic and religious factor will increase and the criminal activity of Chechen armed divisions outside Chechnya will intensify. This may lead to a surge in tension in society. Against the backdrop of the announced economic stagnation, which has been forecast to last many years, and the constantly deteriorating living conditions of Russians, this scenario threatens to contribute to an important drop in the legitimisation of the ruling elite.