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## **Chechnya: the eternal powder-keg?**

In any other country in Europe a huge victory at the polls with a likewise mass turnout of active voters would be the sign of a healthy and vibrant democracy. Not so for the region of the Russia Federation called Chechnya. Last week's seemingly overwhelming approval of former warlord Akhmad Haji Kadyrov by the vast majority of the half-a-million eligible voters in the republic's presidential race does not bode well for the region politically and instead would seem to seal its fate as a centre of political violence and instability.

Despite his past, Kadyrov is known to all as a quisling of Moscow Centre's choosing and as such will bear little weight or legitimacy in the eyes of the Chechen rebel forces. As a former rebel leader and fighter against the Federation, he is most likely taken as a traitor, rather than a politically independent leader able to realise at least partial autonomy for the republic. The fact that of six rival candidates, the three who had a chance of beating Kadyrov mysteriously stepped down – or we stepped down – just prior to the election speaks volumes for the quality of democracy in Russia and its regions. It was such late withdrawals, as well as the general running of the election that led western observers and election-monitoring organisation such as the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to boycott the polling, since a fair election was clearly out of the question

### **A Fragile "Peace"**

The two fully-fledged Chechen wars of the last few years and the numerous low-level conflicts in and around the region have left an approximate 100,000 dead and ten of thousands displaced. This in an ethnic population of just over a million. Beyond the gross level of bloodshed and destruction, Moscow's particularly brutal tactics have also helped recruit Islamicist fighters to the cause of leaders such as Aslan Maskhadov, the former secessionist President (who was elected it should be noted in polls that were OSCE-monitored and far fairer than last Sunday's). Whilst large-scale conflict is for the time being behind the region, low level incidents still occur regularly, from ambushes and bombings to even alleged poisonings, as happened last week to acting President and Kadyrov deputy, Prime Minister Anatoly Popov after he visited a new pipeline facility.

As a result of the region's volatility there therefore remain an estimated 80,000 Russian troops and security personnel in the republic. Supposedly however, according the Kremlin, Kadyrov's landslide election will bring a new stability to the region that will allow for the gradual withdrawal of its troops and for an indigenous Chechen police force to take over. The fact alone that the police force loyal to the new administration will number no less than 15,000 men indicates that the powers-that-be expect further troubles, given the relative small size of the population. (Note that in



Western Europe a ration of 1 police officer to 250 is average to above average and in Chechnya, after the proposed changes the ratio will be nearer to 1to 65.)

It seems therefore, that the recent presidential election may simply represent yet one more sham tactic in a string of attempts to appease the players temporarily. At least until the Federal Presidential elections slated for next March. It is already abundantly obvious that for Putin Chechnya could easily become again a core election issue, especially if young Russian conscripts are loosing their lives by the dozen once more at the hands of Chechen separatists. But even before that, there will another test. According to current plans announced by Moscow, the election of regional president must soon be followed by elections for a bicameral regional assembly, and this represents yet another opportunity for both the rebels to sabotage the process or for the Kremlin to reinforce it already bad image. If Kadyrov's first weeks and months in office fail to demonstrate a sincere attitude regarding the heightening of regional autonomy – as promised by Putin – or if Moscow fails to demonstrate at least the initial steps in a graduated withdrawal, it is not unreasonable to posit a violent destabilisation of Grozny and its environs, or even a return to the tactic of taking the fight to Moscow proper, viz. the Melnyikov Street siege (See TSM, Oct. 2002). There is no evidence to suggest that those who masterminded previous atrocities have been fully decommissioned or otherwise lain down their arms.

The forecast at the moment looks bleak. Kadyrov was quoted internationally around the time of the election as saying: "I am proud of being a Kremlin man." This is clearly not the message one should be sending to the residents of a region that has violently resisted Moscow and St. Petersburg since Peter the Great and before. This non-Slavic, non-Turkic community still has the ability to resist if necessary. The current administration is clearly a one man – or at best two-man- regime. If Kadyrov and his deputy were to be killed then matters could be brought back to square on, and just at the wrong time for Moscow and the Kremlin.

### **Chechnya: Chronology of key events**

- 1858 Region of Chechnya finally conquered by Russia after centuries of resistance
- 1934 Chechen Ingush autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic created
- 1944 Stalin "purges" the republic of its ethnic population: The survivors end up in various republics of Central Asia and Serbia
- 1957 The autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic is re-established by Moscow
- 1991 Dzhokhar Dudayev wins a presidential poll and declares Chechnya independent of Russia.
- 1994 December Russia initiates the first Chechen war. It lasts for 2 years and takes the lives of thousands of civilians
- 1996 Dudayev killed in a Russian missile attack. Soon after Moscow and Grozny sign a peace agreement. In August rebels launch a successful attack on Grozny; another cease-fire is negotiated, this time with Maskhadov.
- 1997 Maskhadov wins Chechen presidential elections.



- 1999 Maskhadov declares Islamic Shari'ah law will be introduced to the republic. During the Summer Chechen fighters clash with Russian troops on the Chechnya-Dagestan border, the alleged aim being the creation of an Islamic state, a Caliphate. By the Winter the second Russian advance begins.
- 2000 Russian troops capture Grozny destroyed many civilian targets. By the Summer former Chechen warlord Akhmed Kadyrov is anointed by Moscow as the new head of the Chechen administration.
- 2001 September – Putin uses the 11 September attacks to justify tougher measures against the rebels.
- 2002 Georgia accuses Russia of carrying out raids in the Pankissy gorge close to Georgia's border with Chechnya. See TSM. Moscow justifies its actions by stating that the area is a haven for Chechen rebels.
- 2002 October - Chechen rebels seize the Melnyikov Street theatre in Moscow. Russian forces storm the building killing many hostages as well as rebels.
- 2003 October - Kadyrov is elected president of the Russian Republic.