



## Vladimir Putin's Newest Major General "Chechnya's Feudal Lord"

by Chief Warrant Officer 4 Charles Davis

### Introduction

On 24 July 2020, *Sobesednik*, a popular Russian magazine, reported President Vladimir Putin had awarded the rank of major general in the Russian National Guard to Ramzan Kadyrov.<sup>1</sup> Kadyrov was not an officer of any rank in the Russian military; he was and remains the current president of Chechnya. Kadyrov also has a highly negative profile within the U.S. State Department. Just days before Putin's announcement of Kadyrov's newest accolade, the United States placed Kadyrov on the restricted travel list, along with his wife and daughters. Kadyrov responded by posting a photo of himself with two AK-47s and a caption stating, "[Mike] Pompeo, we accept the fight. Things are about to get more interesting."<sup>2</sup> Was Putin's action intended as a snub to the United States? And why the need to award a sitting president a military rank and authorities?

### Establishing a Family Dynasty

Estimating Putin's motivations for this decision requires a greater understanding of his relationship with Kadyrov and Putin's desires for Chechnya. Ramzan Akhmadovich Kadyrov is the son of former Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov. The senior formed a militia (much like the mujahideen of Afghanistan) during the First Chechen War, calling for jihad against Russia. Akhmad Kadyrov later supported Russia during the Second Chechen War, and upon Russia's victory, Vladimir Putin installed him as the temporary leader in 2000.<sup>3</sup> Akhmad remained loyal to Russia and was officially elected to the position of president in 2003. In May 2004, when Akhmad was assassinated, Ramzan was 27 years old and serving as the commander of the Kadyrovtsy (his father's former militia group).

On the day of Akhmad's death, Ramzan was flown to Moscow and received personal condolences from Putin, along with an appointment as the first deputy prime minister.<sup>4</sup> In November 2005, he assumed the role of acting prime minister and in March 2006 was officially installed as prime minister. Throughout this period, Ramzan retained the allegiance of and authority over an ever-growing Kadyrovtsy militia group.

One might liken Putin's behavior to the Taliban's acknowledgment of Jalaluddin Haqqani's influence among the eastern provinces and the ultimate placement of his son Sirajuddin Haqqani as the military commander for the Taliban. This comparison is strengthened by the fact that Putin is dealing with a Sunni Islamic state, heavily influenced by Sufism. Tribalism and patriarchal approaches are ingrained in the culture. Similar to the Afghan regional loyalties to their mujahideen heroes, Chechen loyalties are strong and lasting, developing through family and communal ties, especially in the mountainous northern regions of Chechnya.<sup>5</sup>

Putin understands these similarities—leading him to invest in Kadyrov as a family dynasty best equipped to continue to provide Moscow with stability in Chechnya. To this end, Putin removed Alu Alkhanov as president in February 2007 and promoted Ramzan from prime minister to acting president, ultimately securing parliamentary support and instatement as the president in March 2007.<sup>6</sup> This timing is not happenstance. Chechen law requires the president to be at least 30 years old. Ramzan turned 30 in October of 2006.



Ramzan Kadyrov (right) with Russian President Vladimir Putin in February 2008.

### A State within a State

In *A State within a State: the Case of Chechnya*, the author, Hanna Zimnitskaya, references a book about Putin, a self-portrait that sheds some light on the Russian president's personal thoughts and fears regarding the ongoing threat

of insurgency from the region and its effect on the country. To quote Putin—

*If we don't stop the extremists now, then some time later we'll be faced with another Yugoslavia in the entire territory of Russia, the Yugoslavization of Russia...First Dagestan will be overrun. Then the entire Caucasus would separate; that's clear. Dagestan, Ingushetia, and then up the Volga River to Bashkortan and Tatarstan. This means advancing right into the middle of the country.*<sup>8</sup>

Putin's concerns are justified, especially when considering attacks like the 23 October 2002 seizing of a Moscow theater, which involved taking up to 700 people hostage and resulting in the death of many of the 50 hostage-takers along with 120 hostages.<sup>9</sup> The Beslan school siege serves as another example, with Chechen separatists taking approximately 1,000 hostages, resulting in the deaths of 340, many of them children.<sup>10</sup>

Putin has given almost unconditional personal support and tremendous financial resources to Ramzan in an effort to rebuild and stabilize Chechnya. Ramzan has led massive infrastructure developments in the country, which now boasts the largest mosque in the Russian Federation. When asked about his relationship with Ramzan, Putin stated, "I look upon him as a son. We have in recent years developed friendly, really friendly, personal relations, and I am convinced this has played a tremendously positive role in the life of the Chechen nation and for Russia."<sup>11</sup>

during World War II or of GEN Douglas MacArthur in the United States. Ramzan is a demigod for many, including his Kadyrovtsy militia group, which is about 30,000 strong and accountable directly to him.<sup>13</sup> However, he is not without criticism at home and abroad. He is accused of human rights abuses, most recently directed against Chechnya's homosexual population. Additionally, critics assert he directed numerous assassinations of those who challenged his methods.<sup>14</sup>

While accusations of human rights violations continue, and are echoed by the United States, Ramzan endures and is effectively consolidating both military and religious power in the North Caucasus region. Ramzan has co-opted the Qadiriya (Sufi Muslim brotherhood), shifting their message to anti-extremism.<sup>15</sup> In *Ramzan Kadyrov: Insecure Strongman?*, the author, Martin Breitmaier, alludes to Ramzan's effectiveness as Russia's ambassador to the Muslim nations:

*[Ramzan contributes] to diplomacy between Russia and Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In what is rather unusual for Russian regional politicians, the Chechen president has received or visited many senior political leaders of the MENA on behalf of Moscow (the Saudi king or Afghan vice president last year, for example). His role as one of Russia's 'Muslim ambassadors' is especially important since several countries in the region view Russia in a negative light and the fate of Moscow's key regional ally Bashar al-Assad remains uncertain.*<sup>16</sup>



Photo by Vacheslav Argentberg

The Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque ("The Heart of Chechnya" Mosque) at night in Grozny, Chechnya, Russia. The mosque, designed with a set of 203-foot tall minarets, is based on the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul.

## Ramzan's Enduring Influence

Ramzan's effect in Chechnya could be compared to the popularity of General Charles de Gaulle among the French

Ramzan's Chechen militia has garnered a reputation of effectiveness and brutality. As such, during the color revolutions and anti-regime demonstrations in Moscow throughout 2011, elements of the Chechen president's personal body-guard regiment were reportedly stationed in Moscow. Reports indicated the force would be used to dispel protestors near the interior ministry building.<sup>17</sup> Other reporting indicates elements of Ramzan's militia are able to travel armed throughout Russia with little to no restriction.<sup>18</sup>

## The Russian National Guard

In response to Ramzan's consolidation of power throughout the North Caucasus, the Russian Federation attempted to purge his military power through a consolidation of his forces under the Russian National Guard. This element of Russia's military arm has been fully operational only since 2018 and is identified as a security agency structure. In *Kremlin Kontrol: Russia's*

*Political-Military Reality*, the author, Timothy Thomas, describes the structure and responsibilities:


*[The main tasks include] the joint protection of law and order together with the police; the fight against terrorism and extremism; the protection of state establishments and special freight; the protection of the territorial defense of the country; and the assistance to border guards to protect the state border. Powers included the ability to arrest lawbreakers, enter residential premises to conduct searches or arrests, cordon off terrain or residential areas, and use physical force, along with special weapons and equipment.*<sup>19</sup>

The National Guard that reports directly to the Russian president includes the Special Purpose Mobility Unit, Special Rapid Response Unit, and Extra-Departmental Protection Service of the Chechen Ministry of the Interior, and totals about 250,000.<sup>20</sup> The perceived attempt to purge or reduce Ramzan's influence over military elements of his country may be inaccurate, as his cousin Sharip Delimkhanov was selected as chief of the Russian Guard Directorate for Chechnya.<sup>21</sup> In an article titled "Creation of Russian National Guard Could Affect Kremlin Policies in the North Caucasus," the author, Valery Dzutsati, argues that Kadyrovtsy militia ties to the National Guard are not likely to reduce Ramzan's control or influence even as his forces change appearance and formal affiliation.<sup>22</sup>

Establishment of the National Guard and its heavy reliance on Kadyrovtsy militia brings us to the most recent announcement and some insight as to why Ramzan Kadyrov is now not only the president of Chechnya but also one of the most senior officers within the Russian National Guard. Putin has likely experienced some national resistance to leaving Kadyrovtsy under Kadyrov's direct control. This would explain Delimkhanov's selection as chief of the Russian Guard Directorate for Chechnya. It is not likely the Kadyrovtsy militia group leaders took these changes lightly, and in the end, Putin acquiesced and gave Ramzan military rank to ensure there was no degradation of the force.

## Conclusion

Ramzan's reach into emigrated populations of Chechens in Poland, France, and Austria is of significant importance as is the security of the North Caucasus and oil pipelines running from the south. Additionally, the soft power influence Ramzan wields within the Islamic countries opens doors for Putin in a difficult region. Putin has also been a constant supporter of Ramzan and has strong personal ties to the leader, which is openly apparent to Putin's cabinet and staff. Who else would he want under direct control of his 250,000-strong security force in the event critics or the Russian people gain traction in attempts to push him out of office?


From a strategic perspective, it will be important to monitor Putin's deployment of the Russian National Guard and the level of involvement Ramzan Kadyrov maintains in operations and decision making. Ramzan's continued involvement in Russian Muslim politics will also provide insight as to Putin's priorities when it comes to the Arab states. 

## Endnotes








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## Military Intelligence Soldier Heritage Learning Center

The Army Intelligence Museum acts as custodian and repository for artifacts significant to the history of intelligence organizations, operations, and individuals and provides military history education. The museum highlights the role of Military Intelligence within the U.S. Army from 1775 to the present day and honors the achievements of Soldiers acting in intelligence roles. Museum exhibits include a World War II German Enigma cipher machine, a large fragment of the Berlin Wall, a vehicle operated by the U.S. Army Military Liaison Mission during the Cold War, and signals intelligence gear used by the Army Security Agency. The museum also has displays of manned and unmanned intelligence aircraft at the outdoor Air Park on Hatfield Street.

Check out the MI Soldier Heritage Learning Center website at:  
[https://history.army.mil/museums/TRADOC/fortHuachuca\\_MI](https://history.army.mil/museums/TRADOC/fortHuachuca_MI)