



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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Targeted Killing of Chechens in Europe and Ramzan Kadyrov

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On January 30, 2020, Chechen blogger, Imran Aliyev, nicknamed Mansur Stariy, who lived in France, was killed in a knife attack in his own flat.¹ On February 26, 2020, an unidentified man infiltrated the flat of Tumso Abdurakhmanov, another Chechen blogger who lived in Sweden and who was a critic of Ramzan Kadyrov, and hit him on the head with a hammer several times while he was asleep. Abdurakhmanov, however, managed to defend himself against the attacker, neutralize him and hand him over to the police. As the investigation later found, a group of Russian citizens were behind the attack. These two cases highlight a series of attempted or successful targeted murders of ethnic Chechens in exile.

War in Chechnya and an Overview of the Targeted Killings

In the aftermath of the war in Chechnya, thousands of Chechen refugees including former high-ranking officials or military commanders who moved to other countries faced physical reprisals multiple times. An incomplete list² of these assassinations includes: the murder of the Second President of Chechnya, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, in Qatar; the murder of Umar Israilov in Vienna, the killings of Musa Asaev and ten other Chechen veterans in Istanbul and Ruslan Papaskiri (Ali Dabuev), Isa Munaev and Amina Okueva in Ukraine. These incidents were usually either linked directly to the war in Chechnya or subsequent membership of paramilitary movements; however, the list of probable victims has grown markedly in the past few years and even Ramzan Kadyrov's critics have ended up on it. Ramzan Kadyrov, who has singlehandedly ruled Chechnya for years, is intolerant towards diverging opinion both within Chechnya as well as outside of it.

Persecution due to political and differing opinions in Chechnya is nothing new. Many human rights defenders in Chechnya have faced political persecution and repression. One example of this is Natalya Estemirova, a human rights activist, who was murdered in Chechnya and another activist, Oyub Titiev, who was arrested two years ago and released just a short while ago. Furthermore, Elena Milashina, a journalist for *Novaya Gazeta* working in Chechnya, was the subject of an attack by a crowd of Kadyrov's loyalists in downtown Grozny due to her critical articles.³ Apart from this, the practice of so-called "apology videos" is quite widespread throughout the Russian Federation where public critics of Ramzan Kadyrov are forced to retract their statements through threats and violence and apologize to Kadyrov with the apologies made public.

Blogger Tumso Abdurakhmanov has been Ramzan Kadyrov's main target in recent years. Before leaving Chechnya, Abdurakhmanov worked as a public servant; however, due to a personal confrontation with Kadyrov's inner circle, he was forced to flee Chechnya and continue criticizing the leader of the Republic

¹ BBC (2020). "Chechen Blogger Tumso Abdurakhmanov 'Survives Hammer Attack,'" Available at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51656571>

² *Kommersant* (2013). "Gromkiye ubiystva chechentsev v stambule: istoriya voprosa" ["Resounding Killings of Chechens in Istanbul: History of the Case"]. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2195701>; *Ekho Kavkaza* (2017). "Vtoroy front chechenskoy voyni" ["Second Front of the Chechen War"]. Available at: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28747477.html>; *Krym Realii* (2017). "Eto vizov strane: kto stoit za ubiystvom aminy okuevoy" ["This is a Challenge to the State: Who is Behind Amina Okueva's Murder?"]. Available at: <https://ru.krymr.com/a/28826330.html>; *Kavkazskiy Uzel* (2016). "Zelimkhan yandarbiyev abdulmuslimovich" ["Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev Abdulmuslimovich"]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/171845/>

³ *Novaya Gazeta* (2020). "Ya Killer Kadyrova" ["I am Kadyrov's Hitman"]. Available at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/02/15/83940-ya-killer-kadyrova>

online.⁴ At first Abdurakhmanov lived in Georgia; however, after being unable to obtain political asylum, he moved to the European Union. Abdurakhmanov runs a YouTube channel with numerous subscribers and some of his videos have over a million views. One of the most popular videos is the full audio recording of a conversation between Tumso Abdurakhmanov and the Speaker of the Parliament of Chechnya and member of Kadyrov's inner circle, Magomed Daudov, nicknamed Lord, where the latter is threatening Abdurakhmanov.⁵ Apart from this, Abdurakhmanov has also uploaded numerous compromising videos about Kadyrov and his circle. In one of the conversations, Kadyrov stated that Abdurakhmanov is his blood enemy which is practically a death sentence. Abdurakhmanov's relatives were forced through threats to renounce him publicly. One of the main reasons why Abdurakhmanov is threatened with reprisals is his critical attitude towards Ramzan Kadyrov's father, Ahmad Kadyrov. Abdurakhmanov questions the contribution of Kadyrov senior to the history of the Chechen nation and ironically speaks about the concept of the so-called "Ahmad's Way" which is one of the cornerstones of the domestic politics of Kadyrov's regime. Ramzan Kadyrov considers his father to be the founding father of the Chechen Republic and a great Muslim public figure while according to Abdurakhmanov, Ahmad Kadyrov was an ordinary Kremlin collaborationist and a traitor. It is worth noting that Ramzan Kadyrov perceives any kind of criticism towards his father very painfully.⁶

Kadyrov's Death Brigades in the World

Taking all of this into account, it is interesting to note the methods that Ramzan Kadyrov uses to fight against his opponents outside the Chechen Republic. First of all, Kadyrov's regime is practically holding those relatives of Chechens living abroad, who live within Chechnya, as hostages. Given the fact that the circle of relatives in Chechnya in general is quite wide, moving the whole family to Europe is not possible and, therefore, Kadyrov often uses pressure against the family members of his opponents.⁷ As for the persecution of the abroad-living opponents themselves, Kadyrov has a large group of crime-related persons in various parts of the world for this purpose. For the past decades, Chechen criminal organizations have widely gained foothold in both the post-Soviet area as well as in European countries.⁸ Due to a lack of required information, the migration services of European countries are hard

⁴ *Ekho Kavkaza* (2016). "Tumso Abdurakhmanov v begakh iz za nepravelnoy borody" ["Tumso Abdurakhmanov: In Exile for Having an Incorrect Beard"]. Available at: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/27721282.html>

⁵ YouTube (2018). Razgovor s kadyrovskim lordom [A Conversation with the Kadyrovian "Lord"]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFlsC77234s>

⁶ *Kavkazski Uzel* (2019). "Vostokovedy posporili s Tumso o statuse ahmata Kadyrova v chechne" ["Oriental Scholars Contradict Tumso on Ahmad Kadyrov's Status in Chechnya"]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/336585/>

⁷ *Kavkaz Uzel* (2019). "Rodstveniki publichno otreklis ot Tumso Abdurakhmanova." ["Relatives Publicly Renounce Tumso Abdurakhmanov"]. Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/334920/>

⁸ *DW* (2019). "Aktivnost chechenskoj mafii v frg vizivayet trevogu u politsii." ["Activity of Chechen Mafia in Germany Causes Police Concern"]. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D1%8C-%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%84%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%B2-%D1%84%D1%80%D0%B3-%D0%B2%D1%8B%D0%B7%D1%8B%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B5%D1%82-%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%B3%D1%83-%D1%83-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8/a-48673185>

pressed to carefully study the biographies of asylum-seeking Chechens and filter them which means that a large number of supporters of the Kadyrov regime, including criminals, end up in western countries. The members of the Chechen criminal underworld usually extort money from Chechen businessmen who work abroad. However, apart from this, some of them are ready to follow Kadyrov's illegal orders upon necessity and this includes both physical reprisals as well as murder. In order to lobby such groups, several Chechen organizations have been established by Kadyrov's supporters in Europe, helping members of Kadyrov's circle to obtain asylum in Europe and start living there. It is worth noting that these groups are utilizing terrorist threats from the Islamic State towards Europe and actively cooperate with European law enforcement structures. However, the aim of this cooperation is the extradition of desired persons to Russia and consequently, Chechnya.

Apart from the actual world, Kadyrov's regime is also active online. The so-called trolls of the Kadyrov regime, who are active against the social media accounts of Kadyrov's opponents, are definitely worth noting. Also, certain groups search for and reveal the authors of negative comments towards Kadyrov and his circle and threaten them with violence. Furthermore, Kadyrov probably even has a groups of hackers whose main occupation is to reveal the location and addresses of his critics. For example, Tumso Abdurakhmanov, who was attacked, was very carefully hiding his location and it could only have been revealed by illegally gaining access to his digital devices.

Kadyrov and Georgia

Ramzan Kadyrov has been dedicating his attention to the Pankisi Gorge and its population for years. As in some European states, he has also failed to create a network of his influence in Georgia. That said, he will definitely attempt to do this in the future. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that the attitude towards Kadyrov in the Pankisi Gorge is starkly negative. This was confirmed by the incident that took place in 2018, during a horse race on one of the religious occasions, when a small group of Kadyrov's supporters were not allowed to fly flags and banners in support of him.

The leverage that Kadyrov has in the Pankisi Gorge are the relatives of the locals who live in Chechnya. Since the 1990s, many of the inhabitants of the Pankisi Gorge have moved to the Chechen Republic for work and the Kadyrov regime could at any time use these people for pressuring their relatives in Pankisi. Apart from this, Kadyrov will also attempt to increase his influence in Pankisi by funding various interest groups. Despite the fact that the number of his supporters in the Pankisi Gorge is rather few, he will continue working in this direction.

Also, Kadyrov's propaganda machine continues painting the myth of his invincibility and popularizing him in Pankisi. The main narrative of these myths could be the following: "Kadyrov may be brutal but he is a strong leader," "Kadyrov revived the economy of Chechnya and established order," "Kadyrov defends Chechen interests in any part of the world" and "Kadyrov's special forces are so powerful that they can conduct operations anywhere in the world" and so on. Such myths are circulated by both social media as well as the TV channel, ЧГТРК Грозный, which also broadcasts in the Pankisi Gorge. It should also be noted here that the aforementioned TV channel has extremely low ratings in Pankisi.

As for the immediate danger, two categories of persons can become targets of Kadyrov's regime in Georgia. The first such group are activists from Pankisi. For a large majority of them, Kadyrov's regime and its methods are alien and unacceptable. Even if they are not specifically acting against Kadyrov, any expression of civil society among Chechens is perceived as a threat as the activism of Kist people in Pankisi could become an example for the population of Chechnya to express their discontent with the existing political system more actively and clearly.

A second target group for Kadyrov could be the Salafi spiritual leaders in the Pankisi Gorge. Kadyrov is famous for his intolerance towards Salafism. Not only those linked to jihadist groups, but also peaceful Salafists are subject to persecution. The spiritual field on the territory of Chechnya is monopolized by the Kadyrov-controlled Spiritual Board of Chechnya which follows Sufism and considers any other form of Islam, including Salafism, to be its competitor. Even though a large majority of Salafists from Pankisi neither live nor have ever visited Chechnya, their religious preaching in the Chechen language is available through social media. Given the fact that the preachment of the spiritual leaders from Pankisi often contradict the official Chechen narrative, the reaction of Kadyrov's regime to this is very sharp. Furthermore, Kadyrov's regime may use the issue of the conflict in Syria and the participation of Georgian citizens in it and offer the government of Georgia to "jointly fight against terrorism and extremism" which could include exchanging information about Islamist activists in Pankisi and other actions.

And finally, there also is a danger that Kadyrov's methods will be imported into Georgia. The first publicized case of this was that of the former Mayor of Marneuli, Temur Abazov, when he humiliated his critic by forcing him to apologize and record a video of the humiliating act.⁹ A similar case was observed regarding one of the teachers of Gardabani Municipality Public School – Hamid Sadih. The teacher protested the attempt of the forced marriage of one of his female students due to which the population of the village verbally insulted him and recorded the process on video.¹⁰ Despite a timely reaction from the state, there is a risk that the so-called "apology videos" that are Kadyrov's tried method could spread more widely in criminal circles in Georgia as well as among regional business and political elites.

Conclusion

Kadyrov's Chechnya is one of the most brutal authoritarian regimes in modern Europe. Political persecution and the use of illegal means against opponents has been going on for decades in Chechnya. In recent years, these methods have extended beyond the borders of Chechnya and their usage has been observed in various regions of the Russian Federation and some western countries as well. It is known that Ramzan Kadyrov has certain interests towards Georgia as well and has been unsuccessfully attempting to boost his influence in the Pankisi Gorge for years. This is why it is to be expected that his factor will to a certain extent become more prominent on the territory of Georgia and this problem requires great attention.

⁹ *Liberali* (2018). "Marneuli Mayor Temur Abazov Arrested for Inhumane and Demeaning Treatment." Available at: <http://liberali.ge/news/view/37679/marneulis-meri-temur-abazovi-araadamianuri-da-damamtsirebeli-mopyrobis-braldebit-daakaves>

¹⁰ *OC Media* (2019). "Azerbaijani Georgian Teacher Made to Apologize for Protesting Bride Kidnapping." Available at: <https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-georgian-teacher-made-to-apologise-for-protesting-bride-kidnapping/>