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2016PUTIN HAS NO PLAN B IN
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Ramzan Kadyrov has done it again. With his **threats** against Russian opposition politicians and dissidents, labelling them “enemies and traitors” to the motherland and offering to personally play a leading role in their elimination, the Chechen president has once again embarrassed the Kremlin, which continues to be forgiving of his outbursts.

Ramzan Kadyrov came to power in Chechnya in 2003, soon after his father Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated in a bomb blast in Grozny. Russia’s first image of him was that of a young man, not yet thirty years old, introducing himself to Putin at the Kremlin **in a tracksuit**, and ready to take control in the fractious Chechen region. Since then, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, has unfailingly supported his consecutive terms in office with huge sums of money and *carte blanche* to govern Chechnya, which has become Kadyrov’s personal fiefdom. In exchange, the Chechen leader has managed to keep separatism and radical Islamists in check.

Putin backed Kadyrov while he assembled a vertical power structure similar to the Russian president’s own, though using quicker and more violent methods. To do this, Kadyrov first surrounded himself with former Chechen guerrillas, either offering them amnesty and protection or obliging them to join what would become his private army. With this group of fighters, and shielded by the FSB and Putin, Kadyrov disposed of some potential flies in the ointment of his control of Chechnya: the Yamadayev clan. Ruslan and Sulim Yamadayev, commanders of the “Vostok” battalion, one of the few military units in Chechnya not subordinate to Kadyrov, but to the Russian army and the GRU (the Russian military intelligence services), were assassinated in Moscow in 2008 and in Dubai in 2009, respectively.

Dubai police accused Adam Delimkhanov, then head of the Chechen forces and Kadyrov’s cousin, of organising the assassination of Sulim Yamadayev. Delimkhanov’s name had already come up before that, linked to another murder, that of Chechen colonel, **Movladi Baisarov**, who was reluctant to yield to Kadyrov and condemned the abuses in Chechnya. He ended up riddled with bullets in the centre of Moscow in 2006. But the *krysha* (“protection” in the Russian criminal underworld) of Kadyrov and those close to him remained intact and thus, in December

2007, Delimkhanov became a member of the Duma for Putin's "United Russia" party, where he remains today.

In the past decade, there have been various targeted killings of people critical of the Chechen government. In most cases, the perpetrators of the murders were Chechen hitmen who have since been convicted. But the masterminds of the crimes were never identified. This was the case with the assassination of **Umar Israilov**, a Chechen who had previously served in Kadyrov's special forces and who was about to accuse him of kidnapping and torture at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg when he was gunned down in Vienna in 2009, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, shot dead by a Chechen commando in 2006, and the activist Natalia Estemirova, who was abducted by a group of men in Grozny and found the next day dead from gunshot wounds in a ditch.

The last of these political crimes with a Chechen fingerprint is that of Russian opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, **assassinated in February 2015 near to the Kremlin**. Those suspected of the crime are men close to Kadyrov, all of whom belong to the Chechen security services. The main suspect is Zaur Dadayev, deputy commander of the Chechen "Sever" battalion, who was even awarded the Kremlin's medal for courage. After learning of the arrests, Kadyrov referred to Dadayev as a "**genuine Russian patriot**". Dadayev is also a close collaborator of Alimbek Delimkhanov, commander of the "Sever" battalion and brother of Adam Delimkhanov. Together they make up the group closest to Kadyrov. And yet the police have not come up with the organiser of the assassination. Dadayev and another four Chechens of low profile have been detained and will soon face trial, but the chain of responsibility has not gone higher up. In part, this is because the prosecutors and Russia's Investigative Committee have found it impossible to interrogate certain people in Chechnya.

And it is because in many senses, the federal institutions in Chechnya appear not to work. In April 2015, a police operation on Chechen territory was conducted by the forces of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, in which one criminal died. After this took place, Kadyrov gave his agents the order to "**shoot to kill**" any security force from other parts of Russia carrying out operations in Chechnya. That is to say: Chechnya is his exclusive preserve and nobody can act there without his consent.

Now, with his **recent threats** against the "enemies of the people" and proposing himself as a key figure in their neutralisation, Kadyrov again insists on widening the domain of his fiefdom and making himself indispensable to Moscow once more. He proclaims to the four winds that he is a patriot, swears loyalty to Putin and offers him his force of thousands of "volunteers" ready to go into combat. Several months ago, Kadyrov **assembled** more than 10,000 members of his security forces in the Grozny football stadium and declared: "We are the combat infantry of Vladimir Putin. Now, you and I – and we have tens of thousands of people, specially trained – ask the national leader of Russia to consider us a special voluntary unit". "We fully realise that the country has a regular army", Kadyrov said, "However, there are tasks that can be solved only by volunteers, and we'll solve them." These "volunteers" have already fought against Ukrainian forces in the **Donbas** and, according to Kadyrov, they are also currently fighting in **Syria**, providing ground support to the bombings conducted by the Russian air force and Assad.

But Kadyrov could be playing with fire in seeking to gain importance in Moscow with his "army of volunteers", seizing a space that has traditionally been occupied by other Russian security bodies (interior, defence, FSB and GRU). Putin has allowed Kadyrov to grow and create a pyramid-shaped power system sustained by personal relationships. Many of the men who make up his private army are

former insurgents who fought against Russia and hate it, and therefore feel responsible only to Kadyrov. In turn, relations between Moscow and Grozny are based on the personal Putin-Kadyrov connection and the Chechen leader shows his respect and loyalty to Putin, not to Russia as a whole.

For all these reasons, Putin finds himself in a genuinely difficult position with Kadyrov. If the current fragile equilibrium – which to a degree serves as a containment strategy in the Caucasus – is disrupted, no one knows what will happen. Aware of all this, Putin tolerates Kadyrov possibly because he has no better option. There is no plan B for Chechnya.