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## [Grozny - Moscow: Two rallies, one fear](#)



Russian Muslims are protesting against actions undertaken by the Myanmar authorities who, in their eyes, are responsible for the genocide of Rohingya Muslims. According to official estimates, more than a million people, almost Chechnya's entire population, took to the streets in Grozny, the country's capital, on September 4. Residents of neighboring republics of the North Caucasus also attended the rally. "We welcome our guests from the Russian Federation!" - one of the speakers [said](#). Apparently, he was not aware of the profundity of his greeting and its potentially dangerous implications - a potential violation of the law, according to which punishment can be dished out for "verbal or other attempts to undermine the territorial integrity of the state".

### **Grozny: An Army of Bravehearts**

A rally of a million people cannot go unnoticed. It was accompanied by remarkable speeches. One of Chechnya's religious leaders vowed to deploy an army of bravehearts to Myanmar - an army so huge that whilst its most advanced ranks engage with the enemy, those making up the rear would remain within the shadow of the Grozny mosque named after Akhmad Kadyrov. "Our warriors love death more than you love your worthless lives!" - the speaker added as floods of tears rolled down Ramzan Kadyrov's face. The head of the Chechen Republic also poignantly described the dreadful fate of the Rohingya in Myanmar, drawing comparisons between deeds carried out in the faraway country to those effected by Nazi officers in

concentration camps.

Even before the rally organizers began to read aloud an appeal to Vladimir Putin (Russia's president was asked to use his international gravitas to stop the genocide), participants wishing to slink away began to gather by the exits. They were simply not allowed to leave Grozny's main square, however.

Rallies of such a scale are nothing new in Chechnya. Kadyrov has demonstrated twice before that he is capable of bringing a million people to the streets (during the morning of a working day, as commentators have pointed out sarcastically). Citizens [protested](#) against caricatures of Prophet Muhammad in Grozny in January 2015. A year later, in January 2016, Chechens [protested](#) against "Shaitans" from the liberal opposition who allegedly waged an information war against Russia and Chechnya, attacking the Chechen leader personally.

All this serves to evidence that Kadyrov is the absolute ruler in Chechnya and that he is footloose. And he absolutely is. However, I do expect that an authorized, official, Kadyrov initiated rally would not have prompted such a buzz, were it not for the smaller rally in Moscow.

### **Moscow: A Handful of Believers**

Nearly a thousand Muslims [gathered](#) in Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street, downtown Moscow, outside the Myanmar embassy on September 3, 2017. Participants chanted "Allah Akbar!" and threats against Buddhists, including Russian ones, were vocalized. It was an unauthorized rally. The street had to be closed off. Confused policemen and OMON (the riot police unit) officers who arrived at the embassy did not intervene. Moreover, representatives of the Chechen diaspora approached officers and promised that order would be maintained and that offenders would be dealt with. A crowd of young, angry men looked on menacingly. An image featuring a rally participant with a gun protruding from beneath his clothing was shared widely online. Still, police did not intervene. The protestors demanded to speak to employees of the embassy and were promised an opportunity to do so before it became clear that all the diplomats had been evacuated covertly. Finally, one of the assistants of Adam Delimkhanov, Chechnya's representative to the Russian State Duma, urged protestors to "show respect and disperse". Rally participants did so following a prayer and not one was detained.

It wasn't only policemen who were confused as official propagandists did not know how to react, either. Not a single report on the rally appeared on TV news programs. The state-run RIA Novosti news agency published an article on its website accusing the rally's organizers (who were compared to the ideologists of ISIS which is banned in Russia) of attempting to destabilize the situation. The article, however, appeared online for a mere twenty minutes before the outlet's editorial board decided to simply delete it without explanation (although, of course, the text remains visible on social media and in the cache memory of search engines).

### **Awoken Fear**

The Moscow rally touched a raw nerve in for at least two reasons: the Political opposition points to double standards as unauthorized anti-Putin rallies are dispersed by police within minutes as was the case with rallies organized by Alexei Navalny on March 26 and June 12 - over a thousand people were detained on both occasions. This has become a pretext for slippery political rhetoric: "Here they are, they are allowed to gather in order to exercise their constitutional right of the freedom of assembly. We are strangers in our own city and they rule here". And, of course, a broader, equally popular conclusion: "The authorities do not give a damn about law abiding citizens. They fear those who demonstrate their readiness to use force".

However, the buzz the rally created in opposition social media and blogs may not be the most important thing as, more importantly, politically inactive residents of Moscow and other cities, apparently unconcerned about the suffering of the Rohingya people, perceive the events as an exemplification of the demonstration of the collective strength of those who are subconsciously viewed as ethnically and culturally alien - those who are simply feared. Propagandists have skillfully channeled xenophobic sentiments in recent years: Ukrainians, Americans, and militants deployed in distant Syria have become Russians' main enemies. According to the pro-Kremlin media, migration problems are the misfortune of miserable Europe which has betrayed "traditional values" under US pressure, which "simply could not happen at our place".

However, there are plenty of migrants from Central Asia and the North Caucasus "at our place", especially in

the capital. Real problems caused by migrants were at the heart of heated discussions prior to the conflict with Ukraine. Prominent governmental and opposition politicians didn't hesitate to flirt with the nationalist sentiments of residents of large cities. In fact, these were not mere discussions: one can recall, for example, the 2013 riots in the Moscow district of Biryulyovo which broke out following the murder of local resident Egor Shcherbakov by Orkhan Zeynalov, a native of Azerbaijan.

All of this, however, has been forgotten and continues to be relevant only for devoted political nationalists. The rally organized by Muslims in downtown Moscow has awoken dormant fears in residents of European Russia and has given rise to many uneasy conversations at the dinner table.

## World Leader

And, obviously, it has presented an opportunity to discuss the role Ramzan Kadyrov played in events. Kadyrov called on Muslims to protest via social media. Kadyrov criticized the stance of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) directly. This fierce criticism prompted MFA representative Maria Zakharova to [deny](#) that Russia had [vetoed](#) UN resolutions on Myanmar, although Russia did so in March this year along with China. It is no secret that she has a propensity to lie through her teeth. Informal ringleaders of the Moscow rally also hail from Chechnya. Some believe that Kadyrov harbors ambitions to conduct his own policy and is virtually becoming a *frondeur* when it comes to Putin.

But then, of course, confusion remains. Kadyrov has long been positioning himself as one of the leaders of the Islamic world. He pays official visits to Arab countries and organizes festivals of Quran reciters in Grozny. Moreover, showing contempt for official diplomacy, he conducts direct negotiations, striking deals concerning the return of children whose parents left for Syria to fight on the side of the militants. He has also undergone a blood transfusion, taking onboard the blood of a descendant of Prophet Muhammad in a bid to physiologically entrench his ideological aspirations.

Still, the head of the Chechen Republic does not display any signs of disloyalty. His outright loyalty to Putin, reminiscent of feudal times, is doubtless. Obviously, he is more than *au fait* with the rules of the game: first of all, such loyalty gives him unlimited power in Chechnya (by the way, such power would not last long were it not for support from the center). No opposition to the leader of Chechnya is possible: deeds considered to be criminal offenses in all other Russian regions are regarded permissible for the leader of the republic or his kinship. We are not only talking about "internal" Chechen matters such as torture or murder. For example, the authorities of the republic make it impossible for federal investigators looking into the Nemtsov's case to work there. Kadyrov has fought the federal Ministry of the Interior and federal courts whenever these institutions have attempted to curb the power he enjoys in the region, steadfastly refusing to allow such attempts.

Secondly, he has repeatedly stressed that Islam is the most important thing for him as a true believer. Thus, political considerations pale into insignificance whenever fellow believers are at risk. This is precisely what he demonstrated in the case of Myanmar. Truth be told, he is hardly an oppositionist, since he acted within the framework of the ideology of "traditional values", virtually an officially adopted ideology in the country, and he criticized the MFA from this very position; from the position of "Putin's infantryman".

Putin understands this and has [stressed](#) that every Russian, including the head of the region, is entitled to his own point of view when it comes to foreign policy. He condemned the actions of the Myanmar authorities and Kadyrov, in turn, thanked the leader for his words.

## Old News

Much has already been said about the politicization of Islam in Russia. Currently, this remains a secondary, mildly important issue. Important conclusions which confirm that old truths can be drawn from rallies organized by Russian Muslims in response to the events in Myanmar. First of all, there is a region in the Russian Federation which is not fully controlled by the federal authorities. This region abides by medieval laws and has formed an elite which reacts nervously in the face of criticism. As long as the leader of this region demonstrates his personal allegiance to the president of the Russian Federation, the federal authorities willingly turn a blind eye to developments in the region. However, the stakes are rising with respect to this allegiance. Most importantly, one question continues to strike fear into the hearts of both the Russian

authorities and ordinary citizens: What if there is a limit to this allegiance?

Secondly, the crackdown on political life, civil rights, opposition and public discussion has led to a situation whereby any attempt to exercise one's civil rights is perceived as a catastrophe not only by the state but often by citizens as well. Society is not permitted to discuss problems with migrants or newcomers from Caucasian republics (Putin's thriving Russia can only have external problems brought about by collusion between enemies). At the same time, it becomes petrified of a thousand people gathered in central Moscow while fears and frustrations, which may well be borne out some day, continue to multiply.

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