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Kadyrov's Myanmar offensive and its consequences



The protests by Russia's Muslim population against the oppression of their brothers in faith in Myanmar are somewhat reminiscent of Soviet demonstrations against the wars in Vietnam or Grenada - the form and the essence do not coincide. Judging by their form, the protests are devoted to international problems. When one looks at the essence, they focus purely on the domestic agenda. The actions are meant to testify to the existence of a community which expresses indignation over the events happening abroad. In other words, we are dealing with propaganda and not an authentic social phenomenon. This serves as the backdrop for the analysis of unauthorized protests of Muslims in Moscow and a rally of several thousand people in Grozny; we are witnessing an attempt to construct some form of identity via the use of mass events and propaganda.

This is of particular importance for several reasons. To begin with, one should pay attention to the isolation experienced by the Muslim population in Russia. There is no comprehensive public information policy nor general public policy regarding them. This is partly due to the fact that Russian Muslims have no political identity nor any other kind of common identity; they are split into numerous ethnic groups and religious movements (approximately 80) within the same religion. They are also scattered geographically and are in conflict with each other (ethnic conflicts including). Their elites only have local agendas and identities; they are interested in increased funding, security safeguards and the maintenance of the regional political status quo in relations with Moscow. Even the Republic of Tatarstan is largely preoccupied with solving its own

problems.

The local nature of the political awareness of Russian Muslims is shaped in particular by their traditional way of life due to their belonging to certain ethnic groups and tribal communities (teips) etc. As a result, Russia's Muslims often suffer from infringements of their rights including barriers to a high level of education and living standards. The latter problem is especially acute with respect to a group of migrant workers from the former Soviet republics. This explains why Muslims are far more dependent on the opinions of their community, spiritual leaders and typical sources of information i.e. the Muslim media and messages shared widely on social media. The flipside of this exclusion from the general political agenda is insensitivity to official channels of state propaganda. Its semantic kernel in the form of anti-Western rhetoric and pseudo-national patriarchal-and-Orthodox ideology of the "pan-Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*) does not reverberate with Muslim identities. It is noteworthy that Muslims comprise nearly 20% of the country's population which makes them an extremely significant force in terms of mobilization. There is also the issue of the impact of leaders or traditional Islamic spiritual centers which often exceeds that of maladjusted political propaganda. It is assumed that the anti-Myanmar protests constitute an exemplification of an attempt to consolidate the efforts of Muslims to support Moscow's current policy. However, many observers believe that the protests constitute a laying down of the gauntlet by Kadyrov aimed at Moscow.

The erroneous nature of the interpretation of the recent events in that a split from Moscow policy has occurred is confirmed by a number of facts. Viral posts containing Islamic media messages as well as videos or photos which depict atrocities against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have been targeted at Russian-speaking Muslims residing in the post-Soviet space. The purpose of sharing such content was to instill shock and to trigger the suspension of rational thinking. This goal was achieved although some among the Muslim audience went to the trouble of verifying data and [commenting](#) on the unreliability of many posts. Clips from feature films were passed off as examples of acts of genocide against Rohingya Muslims even though a photograph of the reprisals by radical Islamists against the local Christian community had been shared online. It is virtually impossible to trace the origin of some of the footage used although some of the clips may have been shot in Myanmar. The widespread, coordinated influx of fake news on the Internet and across a range of Islamic resources points to an attack targeted at the Russian-speaking Muslim community.

There is yet another reason to doubt the spontaneity of the Myanmar offensive. The UN has been trying to undertake actions for years while Russia along with China has vetoed the resolution. In fact, the problem was never previously seen as acute from a Russian Muslim perspective: Myanmar used to be one of the regions which served as a testing ground for the radical Islamist international movement, attacked mercilessly by both Russian and Chechen authorities. It is unlikely that the online attack was launched by Islamists; there is no reason for them to bring the issue to the fore. Besides, they have other, far more likely reasons for disseminating such information. There are reasons to believe that what we are seeing is Kremlin military propaganda targeted at the Russia's Islamic population aimed at resolving political problems by referencing the Myanmar atrocities, distant from the Russian reality (a safe issue).

In the case of the Myanmar offensive, we are witnessing an upsurge in mass, specialized but otherwise classical, military propaganda targeted at the Russian-speaking Muslim community in the same vein as the fake news about "the boy crucified" in Ukraine. Since the information is not broadcast by the Russian media but is disseminated by the Islamic social and traditional media, this propaganda becomes extremely influential in the Islamic milieu. The propaganda attack is all the more powerful, since, to a greater or lesser extent, the tragedy of "the crucified boy" does exist in this case. On the other hand, Myanmar is a faraway country, and hence it is easier to demand justice there than to demand a solution to real problems in Russia. An ordinary citizen is responsive to such a focus thanks to his/her affectivity, proneness to simple interpretations and political incompetence. The subsequent reaction to this stimulus is indicative of such an interpretation. The analysis of this line of interpretation can provide an answer to the question about the underlying objective of this information attack.

The structure and essence of the protests were present in a [speech](#) by the main Kadyrov's ideologist - the Chechen Minister on National Policy Dzhambulat Umarov. By the way, Umarov is the author of the book "The KRA (Kadyrov Ramzan Akhmadovich) Factor. Confrontation (*Фактор КРА (Кадыров Рамзан Ахматович). Противостояние*) [presented](#) in the President-Hotel in Moscow in summer 2017. It was well-received by [pro-Kremlin propagandists](#) and Eurasians-[Dugin supporters](#) (proponents of the revival of the Soviet empire). As

can be deduced, Umarov contemplates Kadyrov being the key figure in combating conspiracy plots of Western states against Russia and its interests on the continent. The content of the speech at the rally sums up this concept, yet more ostentatious manipulative techniques are employed. Kadyrov's mythologization is carried out through religious references; Kadyrov is sent by Allah to spread the word of Jihad and to "bring together Muslims to form a fist". And events in Myanmar are a manifestation of the deeds of Dajjal (an analog of the Antichrist in Islam). The essence of this metaphor is rooted in legends about Dajjal, according to which one of the manifestations of the appearance of Dajjal is the appearance of the Mahdi - an imam who will unite all Muslims. This could be yet another flattering epithet for Kadyrov.

Anti-Western mythologemes contained in the speech of the Kadyrov's ideologist adjust Eurasians' propaganda constructs for the Muslim audience. For example, the publication of cartoons by Charlie Hebdo is presented as a universal practice in Europe which purposefully "insults the Prophet" through the pages of a weekly. Naturally, regretful sentiments along with mere mentions of the murderous attacks carried out against the editorial board are conspicuously absent. We also sense implications of conspiracy theory; the notion of democracy is used by the minister as a word directly associated with the Western countries and the chain of events which resulted in the formation of ISIS in Iraq, Libya and Syria and which later led to the genocide in Myanmar. One of the linguistic means employed is the mention of the actions of the West taken against Muslims in a predetermined order, so as to create an impression that they are both consistent and deliberate in essence. It goes without saying that such an interpretation of events lacks truth. However, millions of Muslims who are oblivious to the mechanisms of international decision-making (unlike political scientist Umarov) believe these myths presented as arguments to be more convincing than the coverage of events. Traditional Russian propaganda rich in conspiracy theory concerning the West focuses on providing justification for the confrontation with it as well as the inequality within the country. Umarov's speech reconstructs the Russian propaganda myth, albeit adjusted to suit the Muslim target audience. Other speeches only reformulate these ideas. The event itself serves as the main tool of manipulation. The objective of the rally is to make the ideologeme of a certain Muslim unity led by Kadyrov and capable of expressing its will accessible to feelings and factual representation. Judging by comments posted on social media regarding the rally in Grozny, it is effective across the entire Russian-speaking Muslim community at least to some extent.

Should the attempted consolidation of Russian-speaking Muslims around the Kremlin-managed center prove to be successful across the entire post-Soviet space, it will create strong leverage in Central Asian countries. Taking into account that military propaganda rather than means of manipulating public opinion is used, it can be concluded that Moscow takes advantage of increased archaization and radicalization of society, lower quality of human capital which makes it possible to efficiently use blatant propaganda, to manipulate historical facts and limit access to information.

This strategy is ostensibly fraught with risk. Consolidation entrenched in hostile political identity is somewhat reminiscent of radical Russian nationalism which served as the backdrop for actions of some Kremlin political forces in the early 2000s. The movement got out of control, many nationalist groups were dispersed, some of their most prominent activists ended up behind bars while dozens, if not hundreds, of high-profile crimes justified by nationalistic ideology, shocked the public. Things are much more complicated in the case of Kadyrov. Reinforcement of his gravitas based on Muslim consolidation will create conditions for a policy far more detached from the Kremlin agenda. Kadyrov already has his own small army and a territory uncontrolled by the Russian security forces. He also receives generous funding from the Russian budget. Should he really increase his influence among Muslims representing different confessions and ethnic groups in Russia and abroad, developments could take an unexpected turn. Conditions for further prospective foreign Islamic influence on Russia's domestic and foreign policy may emerge. Currently, there are no forces apart from Moscow which are able to guarantee a status quo amidst unresolved ethnic and political conflicts. However, should the Kremlin continue to promote the role and reputation of the Chechen leader, such an alternative will emerge. Therefore, although the events from early September fit the Kremlin agenda, their long-term consequences are a source of great concern.

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