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## WHY THE MYANMAR CRISIS MAKES RUSSIA CHOOSE BETWEEN MUSLIM AND BUDDHIST MINORITIES INSIDE

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Last Sunday Chechen police declared having registered 1.1 million people participating in the protest against the “genocide” of Muslims in Myanmar held in the center of Grozny (the capital of the Chechen republic). The number of participants may be overestimated, since the Republic's overall population is 1.3 million people, but the importance of this protest for Russia's internal stability and international political agenda is hard to overestimate. Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov himself guided the demonstration in the center of Grozny, inviting the Russian government to take immediate measures to protect Muslims in Myanmar and openly declaring through his Instagram profile his readiness to go against the official position of the Russian Federation if the latter decides to support the oppressive Buddhist regime in Myanmar. The Muslim leaders of the neighboring Caucasus regions with Muslim majorities have expressed their support for Kadyrov's initiative.

The demonstration in Chechnya was preceded by another in the center of Moscow in front of the Myanmar embassy, with hundreds of Muslim participants. Among its

slogans were “Buddhists are terrorists” and “Let's start with Kalmykia” (one of Russian Federation republics with a Buddhist majority”).

Ramzan Kadyrov is definitely the most charismatic political figure in Russia after Putin. He is striving, with considerable success, to become the protector and ideological leader of all Russian Muslims and to play an important part in the international Muslim community, paying regular official visits to Arab countries. Kadyrov's strongly nationalistic and extremist-like declarations and often actions are no news and have always been tolerated in exchange for his loyalty to the regime and his role as Putin's main “knight” (as he defines himself), but this time he seems to have crossed the line, and now Putin's administration is caught between two fires: Muslim and Buddhist communities in Russia. The actual influence of these two communities on the national level cannot be compared, with the Muslims prevailing in number and political weight, but the symbolic component is not to be underestimated. Fifteen per cent of Russia's population is Muslim, without considering the thousands of Muslim immigrants from Central Asia,

many of whom work illegally and are therefore impossible to count or control. These immigration processes have been transforming Russia's ethnic composition profoundly in recent years, encouraging Islamization, ethnic conflicts and terrorism, and the situation seems to be beyond the control of the federal government. The Buddhist minority is only 0,5% of the population, but for a multiethnic country like Russia any open support for one of the ethnicities against another would mean opening a Pandora's box able to destroy in the blink of an eye the social contract created in the beginning of the 90's.

Besides, Myanmar is considered to be in China's geopolitical sphere of interest and Russia will need to consult China before making any move. At the same time, Russia itself would not mind developing military and economic cooperation with Myanmar, especially in the arms and natural resources trades. In a situation of international isolation, Russia cannot allow itself to lose potential partners, and in addition the ethnic conflict in Myanmar, ongoing for years, cannot be interpreted simply as a conflict between "good guys" and "baddies".

In fact, Russia would prefer to remain neutral in this situation, stating through its Foreign Ministry that "both parties have their responsibility and have to find a peaceful solution to the crisis".

Nevertheless, the Chechen demonstration and Kadyrov's statements put the crisis in the public eye and forced Putin to publicly comment on the situation. The Russian President said that "every person has a right to express their own opinion", assuring everyone that this does not mean any provocation from Chechnya. "Everything is fine", concluded Putin.

So, the ethnic conflict in faraway Myanmar threatened Russia with an internal crisis, shedding light on the fragility of the existing balance and the possible power shift from the official center to Chechnya, which proved once again to be the only region in Russia allowed to take initiatives without the federal government's consent. While the fact that Chechnya's internal policy is completely out of federal control is well-known and accepted, this is the

first time that Kadyrov tried to interfere with Russia's international agenda, and this attempt was not blocked by the central government, which means that these attempts might be repeated in future.