Putin’s Willing Executioner

The Kremlin may be losing its grip on a boogeyman of its own making.

He’s like a cartoon villain, except that he’s real.

He can be pretty amusing, except when he’s terrifying.

He’s a bit of a clown and more than a bit childish, but he's also one of the most powerful men in Russia.

It's pretty much impossible to ignore Ramzan Kadyrov—and he knows it. And the rambunctious Chechen strongman seems to be getting more brazen by the day. Kadyrov was at it again this week, posting a video on Instagram showing opposition figures Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Kara-Murza in the crosshairs of a sniper’s rifle.

This comes just weeks after he called Vladimir Putin’s foes “enemies of the people” and suggested in an article in Izvestia that they be placed in a psychiatric hospital in Chechnya—where he promised to double their injections. And, of course, he’s widely believed to be behind the assassinations of the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya, human-rights activist Natalia Estimirova, and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov.

There is little consensus, but a lot of speculation, about whether Kadyrov’s antics indicate that he’s jumped the shark or is right on message, whether he’s Putin’s loose cannon or the Kremlin leader’s loaded pistol. And there is also little consensus about which is worse.

“So, if you’re worried that Ramzan is murdering with impunity and Putin can’t control him, consider the alternative: What if Ramzan is murdering with impunity and Putin does control him?” the British journalist Oliver Bullough, author of the book The Last Man In Russia and the Struggle to Save a Dying Nation, wrote in The Guardian.

When Kadyrov began burning down the homes of family members of suspected Islamic militants, which is prohibited by Russian law, Putin appeared to give his protege a rare rebuke.
“In Russia, everyone must obey the existing laws and nobody is considered guilty until this is proved by court,” Putin said in his year-end press conference in December 2014, adding that “nobody has the right, including the head of Chechnya, to resort to extrajudicial reprisals.”

In the following days, Kadyrov burned down still more homes—and wasn’t reprimanded again. The incident seemed to suggest that Putin is simply unable—or unwilling—to control Kadyrov. Why?

“I have no idea if it is fear or a man crush,” Mark Galeotti, a professor at New York University and an expert on Russia’s security services, said.

The Kremlin leader does, indeed, appear to have a lot of affection for Kadyrov and has said he is like a son to him. But he also has reason to fear him.

Putin has essentially made a Faustian pact with Kadyrov. He’s given him a license to kill—and torture—as many people in Chechnya as he pleases, and has bestowed lavish federal subsidies for him to use as he wishes, as long as the restive republic remains quiet and loyal. And there is palpable fear in the Kremlin that if Kadyrov is removed, then Chechnya could again descend into chaos. But over the past year, the bargain is now being put to the test, with Kadyrov taking his act beyond Chechnya to the streets of Moscow.