

# Working to Save a Chechen Generation

**When five Chechen children visit Italy, they're struck by the ruins around them. But while Rome revels in ruins, war-scarred Chechnya's seeks to put them in the past. • Chatting with these young Chechen visitors to Italy provides insight into the growth and development of the Caucasus republic, where presidential propaganda generated by Moscow-supported Ramzan Kadyrov emphasizes 'good' Islam, urban development, allegiance to the state, and support for the local soccer team.**

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**T**heir birthplace, they tell you, is by far the most beautiful city in the world. It has faced hard times, but the president has pledged that it will soon be modern, glittering, and grand. For Deni, Diana, Adam and two kids named Magomed, Europe has nothing on Chechnya and its capital Grozny.

That's saying a lot, since these five children, ages 10-to-14 years, just saw the likes of Rome for the first time in their lives. They also walked along the seashore for the first time. On the beach, they built a sandcastle mosque and then turned their attention to working on a church ("How does it look? Oh, you mean like that old church in the center down the street...").

Walking through the Vatican and along the Tiber, the kids joked and played, all the while nostalgic for their Chechen home. They missed their parents, or in the case of Deni and Diana their mother. Family problems are among the reasons the five were chosen to participate in the Italian trip, sponsored by "Let's Save the Generation," the NGO that was crippled in 2009 by the death of its founder Zarema Sadulayeva.

Sadulayeva didn't belong to the opposition nor was she an anti-regime journalist. Her sin was being a children's activist who criticized the country's frequent honor

killings and denounced repeated violations in civic values and the rule of law. That was enough to make her an enemy in the eyes of a restrictive state. She and her husband Alek Dzhabrailov were found murdered in August 2009. But "Let's Save the Generation" endures, now taking on more low-profile projects such as the one that brought the children to Rome. The boys particularly enjoyed a visit to "Italy in Miniature," a theme park north of the Adriatic city of Rimini: "We liked that liked the most, all small squares, houses and towers," says Deni, who often seems to speak for the group (even he's the smallest and seems somehow less resolute than his travel-mates.)

And Rome?

"Nice," they say in unison. "It seemed to them also like an amusement park, except made from old buildings." Italy is not so different from Chechnya, they say. They have to concentrate to think of differences. "The monuments, we don't have monuments," says the older of the two Magomedes. "We used to have them but not any more. Before, Grozny was full of parks, there was a beautiful theater, and a circus and large library we were proud of. I know because my mom shows them to me in postcards." Magomed is a common name in the Muslim Caucasus because it means Muhammad.

"Even on TV they show what the city looked like before," continues Diana, the only girl on the trip. She has sweet and wise-looking eyes, as well as a hip defect that produces a slight limp. "We see a lot of movies about the





way things were and what doesn't exist any more. But now, everything is changing. Grozny is modern. There are many new buildings..."

"Don't forget the stadium," Adam chimes in. He has thick glasses. "They're building the biggest stadium in the world." "And the mosque," adds the younger Magomed, "the new and beautiful mosque in the center. Putin and Medvedev have already come to see it." If Adam exaggerated the size of the new stadium, the city's mosque in fact impressive. Recently inaugurated, it is now the largest in Europe. Chechnya's Islamization process is moving full speed ahead. President Ramzan Kadyrov, considered close to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, rationalizes attacks on his enemies as part of an effort to ride the country of "bad Muslims." Most of the population appears to support him, perhaps hoping that religion can glue together one of the most fragile republics on the planet.



"He's studying to be an imam," says Deni, pointing at the younger Magomed junior, dismisses the idea. He's not sure what he wants to do as an adult, he says. He's attended both state and Koranic schools, where he learned Arabic and about the life of the Prophet Muhammad. "I'd love to be as good a person as he one," says Magomed.

"So do we!" shout the others while Diana explains Muhammad's key attributes, to which they all aspire: "To be good, just and honest. All prophets are that way."

**T**he possibility of imam status aside, the younger Magomed is also interested in becoming surgeon. Adam also wants to be a doctor. Deni says he likes food and would make a good cook. They then look at the older Magomed senior, who so far has said little but the others clearly admire. He's taller and stronger-looking.

"He'll be president!" they say,



Why not Diana, the smartest of the group? No, comes the collective answer: She wants to be a singer.

Diana smiles. "I don't know what I want to do but know I'll make a good wife. Yes, I'll wear a veil, but there are also plenty of modern clothes for those who want to be a good Muslim." But music is her first love. Her favorite singers are the same as the other children. All like the "mujawwid," who chant the Koran, "like Abu Bakr Shatri," they exclaim, a Saudi imam famed as a great singer of the holy book. Their hopes for the future suggest that the scars of the Chechen war are healing. Open conflict between Russia and Chechnya began in 1994 and lasted on and off for 15 years, leaving Grozny in ruins. A city with a population of some 500,000 people in the early 1990s was left with half that number as a result of the conflict. Russian shelling of the capital made it resemble a World War II city following aerial bombardment.

"Things are fine now, but until recently I was afraid to go to school because there might be an attack," admits Deni. "I few weeks ago I was walking with my friend," says Diana, "and a bomb exploded on the roadside and the debris grazed face. I know there are dangerous places, such as bars, for example: my aunt was drinking coffee when there was an explosion. When she ran out she saw the head of a man at her feet."

The conflict affected all the children. The younger Magomed moved with his family to Moscow, while his father remained behind in Chechnya. "Last year, in the mountains where I lived before leaving, I heard shooting all night. It wasn't easy to sleep."



What are your hopes now? the children are asked.

This animates Adam: "That Terek wins the Champions League," he cries. Terek is Grozny's soccer team. Adam might eventually get his wish given the amounts of cash Kadyrov is lavishing on the team. This year, Terek is being coached by former Dutch ace and AC Milan star Ruud Gullit, who made his debut on March 8 when his team took on the 2002 Brazilian World Cup-winning squad. All the players were amply rewarded for the Grozny exhibition in which even Kadyrov took the field. The entire performance reeked of shameless medievalism.

But these children still don't know the meaning of the word dictator. Or of paternalism. When it comes to Terek, everyone cheers. When they see the outline of Rome's mosque, the kids rejoice. At last something familiar in the middle of a city that glorified ruins, while Chechnya is trying its hardest to put them in the past. ●