

Imagine Kadyrov in Charge of the North Caucasus

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Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who rights groups accuse of persecuting opponents, has lavishly rebuilt the once war-ravaged republic using large subsidies from Moscow.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov commands considerable respect — or, according to his critics, fear — in and outside the borders of his North Caucasus republic.

When Kadyrov changed his title from president to "head" in 2010, all his peers in neighboring republics followed suit, apparently because no one dared to defy his call that the country should have only one president: the one in the Kremlin.

So it came as little surprise earlier this week when a leading political think tank said Kadyrov was "a clear aspirant for leadership of the whole North Caucasus."

And with strong support from President Vladimir Putin, who has entrusted Kadyrov to maintain control of a simmering insurgency in Chechnya, Kadyrov has signaled a desire

to expand his influence beyond the borders of his republic — a prospect viewed with unease by his neighbors.

The [statement](#) regarding Kadyrov's swelling ambitions is from a report called "[Politburo 2.0](#)" authored by the Minchenko Consulting Group that analyzes the country's informal power structures.

The 11-page report mentions Kadyrov alongside other influential leaders like Tatarstan head Rustam Minnikhanov and Moscow region Governor Sergei Shoigu, but its statement regarding Kadyrov is potentially explosive in the specific context of the North Caucasus.

In the region's six republics, five of which are predominantly Muslim and all of which are inhabited mostly by non-ethnic Russians, politics over the last 200 years have at times been shaped by violent ethnic and religious strife.

The thought of Kadyrov exerting political power beyond Chechnya's borders would not be welcomed by its neighbors.

"I do not think that the people of any of the [North Caucasus] regions dream of that," said Magomed Mutsulgov, the head of Mashr, a human rights organization based in Ingushetia.

Mutsulgov pointed out that the issue has been a hot topic in Ingushetia in recent weeks, after Kadyrov sparred with his Ingush counterpart Yunus-Bek Yevkurov over an explosion in the Ingush village of Galashki.

While Ingushetia authorities said that the July 29 blast, which killed three people, took place while the victims were handling explosives, Chechnya claimed they were Islamic rebels killed during a special operation carried out by Chechen police on Ingush territory.

After Yevkurov publicly contradicted Kadyrov by saying no such operation had been carried out, the Chechen leader issued a furious [statement](#) in which he accused his Ingush counterpart of unwillingness to fight militants and stressed that Chechnya would continue to help.

Yevkurov responded merely by saying that no dispute should mar the holy month of Ramadan.

But Mutsulgov was adamant that Kadyrov's offer was unwanted by Ingushetia. "He should send help for schools and kindergartens, but no special operations," he said by telephone.

Earlier this week, Kadyrov also [repeated](#) his long-standing claim to represent all Chechens — not just those living in Chechnya — when he awarded an S-Class Mercedes, an apartment in Grozny and honorary Chechen citizenship to wrestler Dzhamal Otarsultanov for winning gold at the London Olympics, despite the fact that Otarsultanov is from neighboring Dagestan.

An ethnic Chechen who lives in the Moscow region, Otarsultanov had already been awarded a luxury Audi sedan and 4 million rubles (\$125,000) in cash from the Kremlin along with the country's other gold medalists.

Experts say the North Caucasus by definition cannot have a local leader and that Kadyrov's political influence is mostly rooted in Moscow.

"His political weight is based on his special relationship with Putin," said Alexei Malashenko, an analyst with the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Kadyrov was propelled to power after his father Ahmad, an influential Mufti who had supported Moscow during the second Chechen war, was assassinated in 2004. Since then, Chechnya has seen less violence than its neighboring regions, but critics say that in return for suppressing a simmering insurgency, Kadyrov has been given a free hand to systematically persecute his opponents.

Analysts also dismissed the suggestion that Kadyrov or any other politician could influence the region through the North Caucasus Federal District.

Created in 2010 and administered by Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Khloponin, the district was seen as a step in efforts to halt the ongoing insurgency, but Malashenko argued that it was just an admission of failure.

Khloponin had "absolutely no effect on the situation," Malashenko said.

Kirill Petrov of the Minchenko Consulting Group explained that leadership in the North Caucasus necessarily includes Moscow.

"In essence this is about ties and influence between the region and the federal center," he said, adding that the report's authors were interested in "triggering a discussion."

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