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Regional Bosses Seek New Title

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, center, attending a United Russia meeting in Moscow in March 2009. **Igor Tabakov**

Russia has 83 regions, but not every regional boss enjoys the same title.

For most, the title is "governor," but for others it might be "president," "mayor," "government chairman" or simply "head."

Life could get a lot simpler — or complicated, depending on whom you ask — after Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov announced last week that he no longer wanted to be known as president and suggested a common title for all regional leaders.

The initiative has rapidly gained steam, with the Kremlin, the Federation Council and other North Caucasus leaders expressing support. But some politicians said regions should be allowed to pick their own titles, and several senior Chechen officials declared that Kadyrov should be known as imam.

"The issue of unifying regional leaders' titles has long been on the political agenda ... but it needs to be done voluntarily," an unidentified Kremlin official said Friday, Itar-Tass, Interfax and RIA-Novosti reported.

Kadyrov, who has been accused of running Chechnya like a personal fiefdom, said Thursday that the title of president was deserved by only one leader, in apparent deference to President Dmitry Medvedev.

"I believe there should be only one president in a unified state," Kadyrov said in a statement on his web site.

Kadyrov credited the idea to his late father, Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov, and said he had realized his father's wisdom during a trip with Medvedev to Turkey and Syria in the spring.

“I felt awkward when they announced at meetings, 'president of Russia,' 'president of Kabardino-Balkaria,' 'president of the Chechen Republic,'” Kadyrov said.

On Friday, he said he had agreed in phone conversations with the leaders of several other North Caucasus republics — Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia and Adygeya — to ask the State Duma to pass a law introducing a unified title for regional leaders.

Alexander Torshin, first deputy chairman of the Federation Council, praised the initiative as "right and deserving full support."

But a senior State Duma deputy with the ruling United Russia party said no new law was necessary. "Each subject of the [Russian] Federation can decide itself how to name its head," said Alexander Moskalets, first deputy chairman of the Duma's Constitution and State Affairs Committee, Interfax reported.

Torshin agreed that the regions had enough competence to change the names themselves, although "ideally it would be good to agree on a unified title," Interfax reported.

The question of which title Kadyrov prefers has caused considerable controversy.

Chechen parliamentary speaker Dukuvakha Abdurakhmanov said the options discussed among local lawmakers have included head of the republic, father of the nation (*mekhk-da* in Chechen), and imam.

The possible use of a religious title was widely criticized Friday as running counter to the country's secular status. Torshin warned that a title like imam would pave the way for other "archaisms" like sultan or khan.

Chechen presidential spokesman Alvi Karimov said Kadyrov was open to any title allowed by the Russian Constitution. Asked if imam was constitutional, Karimov replied, "Why not? ... This is a succinct title, easy to write and pronounce," Interfax reported.

The current titles of the leaders of the country's 83 regions reflect various regional traditions and levels of autonomy. While many ethnic republics are led by presidents, others like Karelia

and Mordovia call their leaders merely "heads" or, like Khakasia, "government chairman." Most other regions are led by governors, although Moscow is governed by a mayor, even though its constitutional status is similar to St. Petersburg, which has a governor.

Two North Caucasus republics have changed their leaders' titles in recent years. In 2005, North Ossetia renamed its president as head of the republic, while Dagestan in 2006 introduced the title of president. Previously, the republic had been governed by the leader of the state council, reflecting its multiethnic makeup.

Ingush President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov has asked the local parliament to change his title to "regional head" or "leader," his spokesman Kaloi Akhilgov said Friday, Interfax reported.

Analysts said the title initiative appeared to be a show of loyalty to the Kremlin and expressed bemusement that it had come from Kadyrov, who has amassed more power than any other regional leader since assuming office in 2007.

"Kadyrov can call himself what he wants, but he will always remain powerful, like a tsar, in Chechnya," said Nikolai Petrov, who follows regional politics at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

Meanwhile, Kadyrov's office made it clear that the purging of presidents should include all walks of life, including charities and sports clubs. "Soon there will no more be positions called president in Chechnya," a Kadyrov aide told Interfax.

Kadyrov, who is president of the Chechen football club Terek and the local chess federation, said Friday that he would ask those organizations to change his title.

A title change would also affect Kadyrov's mother, Aimani, who is president of the Akhmad Kadyrov fund, named after her husband, who was killed by a bomb in 2004.

Chechnya's top Islamic leader, mufti Sultan Mirzayev, said Kadyrov would always be president to him regardless of the title of his post, Kadyrov's press office reported.

“For me, Ramzan Kadyrov will remain president with a capital 'P,'” Mirzayev said, adding that he favored "imam" for Kadyrov's new title.

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