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Tatarstan Balks at New Title for President

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Tatarstan gave a cool reception Monday to a proposal to unify the titles of all regional leaders, even as United Russia suggested expanding the unification reform to the names of all regional legislatures.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov raised eyebrows last week when he announced that he had asked the Chechen parliament to rid him of his title because "there should only be one president in the country."

The move won backing from the Kremlin and senior United Russia lawmakers in Moscow, prompting other North Caucasus presidents to voice their support for Kadyrov and announce similar motions in their local parliaments. A Kremlin official said Friday that the issue of unifying all regional leaders' titles had long been on the agenda but needed to be carried out voluntarily.

But a spokesman for Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov said the republic had no intention of voluntarily changing its president's title.

"I have nothing to comment on this. Also, I do not see any substance for comment," the spokesman, Andrei Kuzmin, told The Moscow Times.

He said the title of Tatarstan's ruler was laid down in the republic's constitution. "There are no plans to change the constitution," he said.

The leaders of some republics have been slow to jump on the name-change bandwagon.

Leonid Markelov, president of Marii-El, a Finnic-speaking republic on the middle Volga, was the only one to embrace the proposal Monday.

"Kadyrov's announcement is logical. ... If it is adopted, we will consider it to be the right thing to do," he said, the news web site VZ.ru reported.

But Markelov stressed that it was important to respect and preserve variety and that regions should retain their various labels like republic, oblast or krai.

"People have become used to this over a long period of time. The current makeup should be preserved in the interest of political stability," he said.

The presidents of Bashkortostan, Udmurtia and Chuvashia, all located in the Volga region, remained silent Monday, as did the leaders of Buryatia and Sakha, two Siberian territories that also boast presidents.

A senior Sakha official said any decision should be made in Moscow, the Primamedia.ru news site reported.

Deputy Federation Council Speaker Alexander Torshin met with Bashkortostan President Rustem Khamitov on Monday, but the two did not raise the subject, Torshin told reporters. "It would not have been right to discuss this with the president. How would you feel if you were going to be renamed?" Torshin said.

United Russia, meanwhile, signaled that it wanted to rename more than just regional leaders. Party secretary Vyacheslav Volodin said the speakers of a number of local legislatures, including in the Stavropol, Astrakhan and Tomsk regions, had proposed to no longer refer to their legislatures by the official name "State Duma." He did not elaborate on what the future name might be.

United Russia deputies in the State Duma might consider reforming both the titles of regional leaders and regional legislatures, Volodin said in comments published on his party's web site.

What looked like an initiative by Kadyrov might well have been planned in Moscow, said Sergei Sergeyev, an analyst at Kazan State Technical University in Tatarstan's capital. "To start the process in Tatarstan would not have been wise. ... Therefore they decided to begin the process in the North Caucasus," Sergeyev told the Regnum news agency.

Sergeyev added that Tatarstan might be compelled to follow suit — when all other regions

have abolished their presidents and only a Russian and a Tatarstan president remain. "That would be totally unreal," he said.

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