

Could Kadyrov Replace Putin?

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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The allegations that Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov was connected to or downright responsible for the recent murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov have placed the spotlight on this most unusual of Russian public figures and raised questions about his power. Is he truly, as some suggest, the second most powerful man in Russia — with designs on becoming the boss?

Admittedly, he has some formidable strengths. Chechnya is his personal power base and piggy bank, and the man who holds back chaos in that fractious republic could just as easily unleash it.

The more than 20,000 so-called "Kadyrovtsy," the Chechen security forces, are notionally part of the national Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) structure, but in practice swear a personal oath to Kadyrov. He himself selects their commanders and issues their orders.

Similarly, his personal authority over Chechnya is absolute. He has used this to fill the republican hierarchy with his allies, friends and relatives.

As a result, he has been able to take fullest advantage of the opportunities to plunder the federal subsidies which continue to pour into Chechnya, and also dispense such opportunities to his friends.

Of the \$30 billion in federal funds spent on the North Caucasus between 2000 and 2010, for example, the lion's share went to Chechnya. Downtown Grozny has been transformed with whole herds of white elephant prestige projects, from glittering (and largely empty) office blocks to the huge Akhmad Kadyrov mosque (named for Ramzan's father).

However, behind this apparent renewal lies a reality of massive embezzlement for the new elite and minimal benefit for most ordinary Chechens.

Kadyrov is petulant, willful, vain and unpredictable. When his sports minister aroused his ire, he expressed it by pummeling him in the boxing ring. His collection of supercars includes one of only 20 \$1.25 million Lamborghini Reventons ever made — no mean feat for a man whose reported annual income is around a tenth of that.

However, he was also a crucial weapon during the second Chechen war. Like many of his Kadyrovtsy, he was a former guerrilla. Since then, his regime has been able to maintain a rough grip on the country. There is the occasional terrorist attack, but Chechnya is actually an oasis of calm in a turbulent North Caucasus.

His implicit "nuclear option" is that any effort to displace him would inevitably shatter the cohesion of the administration and security forces alike, given their intimate personal ties to Kadyrov. Chechnya would once again erupt.

However, like any nuclear option, it can only be used for mutual destruction. Besides, we don't know if Kadyrov's cronies should really be considered loyal kin and liege men or else ruthless and greedy opportunists who could be bought into a new regime.

But none of this helps explain why some people are now touting Kadyrov as the second most powerful figure in Russia. Konstantin Kalachev, head of the Moscow-based Political Expert Group, for instance, said that Putin and Kadyrov are the only "two real politicians" in the country. "All the rest only play at politics."

Kadyrov may be seeking a role in Moscow, leaving Chechnya in the hands of his cousin Adam Delimkhanov as his trusted proxy. It is unlikely that he understands Moscow, though, and the realities of power in Russia.

"Big in Chechnya" means absolutely nothing there. Instead, what counts are networks of allies and political value to Putin.

Kadyrov may be guided by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's former political dramaturge-in-chief, but he has precious few friends in Moscow. Quite the opposite.

Already his apparent willingness either to order or at least condone the assassination of Nemtsov (he publicly praised Dadayev for his character) has aroused the ire of the Federal Security Service (FSB), who are assiduously trying to connect him to the case.

Putin looks unwilling to choose between the enforcer he relies on to keep Chechnya under

control and the enforcer he needs for the rest of the country. Nonetheless, the FSB's campaign demonstrates the extent to which Kadyrov has managed to alienate all the security agencies.

The central MVD is bitterly aware that the Chechen MVD is essentially out of its control. The Investigative Committee knows it operates in Chechnya on Kadyrov's sufferance. Even the Federal Drug Control Service cannot crack smuggling rings close to the republican elite.

Meanwhile, the Finance Ministry is well aware that Grozny is stealing from an increasingly tightly squeezed state budget. After the Justice Ministry raised concerns about Kadyrov's plans to victimize rebels' families, even Putin had to warn him against "extra-judicial reprisals."

The irony is that to defeat a secessionist rebellion, Moscow created — and continues to fund — an autonomous local warlord. He may have done the job there, although it may be that Moscow in the future will be unable to fund Chechnya to the same level or turn a blind eye to such plunder.

Beyond that, he clearly either does not understand or chooses to flout the rules of Russian elite politics. This makes him dangerous, not appealing, to the Muscovite boyars.

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