

From German ‘Millionaire’ to Grozny Aide: Meet the Winner of Kadyrov’s Reality Show

We tracked down the winner of Ramzan Kadyrov's biggest PR stunt to date and asked him about the show.

By [Eva Hartog](#)

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Kadyrov_95 / Instagram

At the end of last month, reality television show "Komanda" ended with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov picking a new strategic advisor to his government.

In eight episodes, Russian state television showed sixteen finalists embroiled in a Chechen mix of “The Apprentice”-type business challenges and physical endurance tests designed to impress the Chechen warlord, including boxing, firing crossbows and wading through rivers.

The ultimate winner was Filip Varychenko, described by the show as “a 24-year-old millionaire from Dusseldorf who grew tired of European comforts.” But other than a website listing Varychenko as a member of a theater group of U.S.-based Russian Christians, there is little to no public information on Kadyrov’s new mystery aide.

The Moscow Times tracked down Varychenko to lift the curtain on Kadyrov’s biggest PR-stunt to date in a phone interview from Grozny. Was the show real? What is Kadyrov like behind closed doors? And how did a German-born, American-educated twenty-something with Slavic looks become a mouthpiece for Grozny?

Are you really “a 24-year-old millionaire born and raised in Germany?”

I don’t want to comment on that description, because I don’t want any miscommunication afterwards.

What is your connection to Russia? How come you speak fluent Russian?

I am Russian, my family is Russian and I grew up with a Russian mentality, so to say.

More from The Moscow Times: Is "The Kadyrov Show" a [political strategy for the Chechen leader's long rumored promotion?](#)

How did you end up on the show?

I was working at a multinational company in Germany — I’d rather not say which one — working together with the chairman of the board to develop the business worldwide. It was really fun and interesting; I was traveling a lot. But I wanted to do something more meaningful.

I was looking for a position in the Russian government, but after some research I realized that it’s actually really difficult to get in. It seemed impossible.

Then I read an article online about Kadyrov’s new show. I actually thought it was a joke at first, but I applied anyway.

After a phone interview with the producers they invited me to a casting in Moscow several weeks later. I didn’t believe it was real, so I literally bought my ticket 24 hours beforehand, thinking it was the weekend and if I didn’t like it, I could just leave.

When I got there, I was really surprised to see so many people: men in their 40s and 50s, wearing suits, really professional looking-business people. I was the last person to audition and had to wait eight hours for my turn. But then I got my "golden ticket" — they said: you’re in, you’re going.

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Why did you have to run up mountains, wade through rivers etc.? Why was that necessary for the position of "strategic advisor?" Or was that just for the television?

You have to understand: this is not a joke. What you saw was only half of how [Kadyrov's government] really works: they work 30 hours, no, 100 hours per day. And Kadyrov works even more! I don't know when he sleeps. I've never ever caught him sleeping.

There is no day or night, there is just work time. So you have to be ready. They say that if you have a strong spirit, you have to have a strong body.

There were many candidates who, on the surface, looked more suitable for a position in Kadyrov's administration than you. Why do you think you won?

I think Kadyrov did not want someone who was the same. He wanted someone different — within the boundaries of what is "normal," of course.

When we first met, we were seated around a table and I was actually a little bit nervous. I was thinking: please don't ask me to say something.

We'd just arrived, I had no idea what was going on, and then they had woken us up at 1:30 a.m. to meet Kadyrov. And guess what, they said, here's the guy from Dusseldorf. Talk.

And so I talked: I told him that I should've never been born. I have a twin brother, and in the womb, the smaller embryo often dies early on.

I was not supposed to live but guess what, I was fighting already then. A few years later, at school, I also had to fight. When I was 12 years old, I told my mother that I wanted to study in the United States. She laughed at me, but when I was 16 I did move to California on my own.

The same thing happened at work, when colleagues twice my age or more have told me that I couldn't achieve certain things. I have been able to achieve them.

What I told Mr. Kadyrov was: I believe that if you are passionate about something, with God's help, you can make it possible. I think this touched his heart.

I also told him how I'd earned my first \$10 when I was nine years old. I didn't have to, but I wanted to do something. I think that's what he was looking for. He wanted someone who would not just do what he was told to do, but would develop something on his own.

So then you're suddenly in Grozny. How did it feel?

It didn't sink in until Mr. Kadyrov took me to his personal office at his main residence in Grozny, where he works, without any cameras. And he told me: I chose you when we first met that time over breakfast.

Some people are completely different off-camera than on-camera. But Kadyrov is exactly the same. He's extremely kind, polite and gentle, and has always behaved in a very warm manner toward me.

What is your role? What work do you do?

I first need to get to know everyone, all of the departments or different ministries. I'm still trying to get the general picture and get as much information as possible about the republic, from agriculture to investment.

At the end of November, I had the unique chance to join Kadyrov's delegation to Saudi Arabia.

You look very different and have a very different background to the average Chechen. Have you encountered any animosity there?

That's a real mistake in people's perception [of Chechnya.] People are really hospitable here. It doesn't really matter, whether you're a foreigner, whether you've been living in the West or China or anywhere else.

What matters is that you're a good person, honest, and that you act and live within the boundaries of Chechen mentality. There are certain things that would be allowed in New York that would not be understood here and vice-versa. There's a different mentality, a different mindset, and you have to respect that.

I've never been asked any uncomfortable questions about where I've lived, how I eat, about my religion, or about the way I look. Everyone treats me like a brother here.

I feel like I've become part of a family, not part of a company.

More from The Moscow Times: Russian comedian ["parodying" Kadyrov exposed giving Chechen leader "pre-approval."](#)

You sound like an intelligent and educated guy. Before moving to Grozny, you must have read reports about Chechnya's human rights record and Kadyrov's reputation as a hard-handed leader. How do you feel about that?

A lot of coverage is manipulative, and the media can show what they want to show. For many Chechens, Russian is not their native language: sometimes there is a language barrier, and what they say might be interpreted wrongly. People use that against them.

Before I came here, I did a lot of research. I also read the news and thought a lot, and I was slightly worried. But when I saw Kadyrov the first time, that first day during breakfast, I thought: he's also human, he has a heart. Of course he has to be strong, he built up the entire republic from scratch. He has to show his strength because that's the way a leader has to be.

At the same time I saw a different side [of Kadyrov] when he was with his mother, with his

children. He is real fun, he's a happy guy, he is warm-hearted. He does it because he cares. He cares about everyone in the republic. I've seen him stopping his car in the middle of the street and getting out and talking to people.

In other places, politicians become so unreachable and he is not like that. Kadyrov is always reachable.

• *This interview has been redacted for length and clarity.*

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