

# Why the UFC's 'sportswashing' of Chechnya's dictator is a problem

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## **The presence of Ramzan Kadyrov in the front row of the UFC's first show in Moscow highlights a troubling link between the Chechen strongman and the world's largest MMA promotion**

On Saturday 15 September, Ramzan Kadyrov walked into Moscow's Olimpiyskiy Stadium to watch the evening's fights. Dressed in beige jeans and a white t-shirt with a matching jacket, the notorious Chechen strongman was [surrounded by three of his most loyal henchmen](#) – one of whom has been [accused of torture](#) and [another of plotting an assassination](#) – as he made his way to the front row of the 35,000-capacity arena. Seated just a few feet away from the cage, Kadyrov and his cronies watched the evening's fights in an entirely new setting. Though used to attending mixed martial arts events on a near-weekly basis in his native Chechnya, this was the first time that Kadyrov was present at a Ultimate Fighting Championship show.

Given Kadyrov's well-documented human rights abuses – the most recent of which includes a [deadly crackdown on LGBTQ+ people](#) within Chechnya resulting in [torture and summary executions](#) – his presence in the front row of a UFC event highlights a concerning link between the dictator and the world's largest MMA promotion.

Kadyrov's decision to attend the UFC's first ever show in Moscow is due to the presence of Magomed Ankhaliev, a UFC light heavyweight prospect from Dagestan who represents Kadyrov through the dictator's fight club, Akhmat [MMA](#). That night, Ankhaliev defeated Marcin Prachnio by head-kick knockout in the opening round. During his post-fight interview in the octagon, Ankhaliev thanked Kadyrov for his support and finished off with Kadyrov's now-infamous slogan "Ахмат Сила" (Akhmat Power).

Founded in 2015, the Akhmat MMA fight club consists of an MMA promotion and several training facilities throughout Chechnya and various other post-Soviet states. The fight club is sponsored by Kadyrov himself through his [government's budget](#) and bears the name of Kadyrov's father, Akhmad Kadyrov. Fighters who are signed to the fight club's official roster are paid monthly stipends that cover medical expenses, training costs, and travel fees. Depending on the level of success achieved, fighters are also [gifted with expensive cars](#) and other ostentatious goods.

The Akhmat MMA fight club is operated by Abuzayed Vismuradov, a colonel considered to be [one of the most powerful men in Chechnya](#). Known by his nom de guerre 'Patriot', Vismuradov once fought in the Chechen wars against Russia alongside Kadyrov himself, before being elevated to [commander of the Chechnya's Special Forces](#), the 'Terek' Chechen SWAT unit, as well as Kadyrov's private security detail. Kadyrov's decision to place one of his most influential security figures in charge of his MMA promotion and fight club suggests that the Akhmat fight club is likely an extension of Kadyrov's own government.

Through Kadyrov's patronage and support, the Akhmat fight club has risen to become one of the largest MMA training facilities and promotions within the Russian Federation. The fight club has signed several notable fighters from other MMA organizations and has placed its promotional might and resources behind them. Five of these fighters have moved on to sign with the UFC: Magomed Bibulatov, Abdul-Kerim Edilov, Ruslan Magomedov, Said Nurmagomedov, and Magomed Ankalaev. Four of those fighters remain under contract with the UFC, despite the undeniable link between them and Kadyrov, while Edilov – who [reportedly threatened an HBO journalist in Chechnya](#) – was [reportedly](#) released from his UFC contract in August 2018.

Other UFC fights have established relationships with Kadyrov. For example, in 2015 former UFC heavyweight champion Fabricio Werdum signed a “[lucrative](#)” deal to become an [ambassador for Kadyrov's Akhmat MMA fight club](#). He, too, was [gifted an expensive car for his services to the dictator](#), though has since [deleted the video of the car from social media](#).

Kadyrov's photo-op with Mohamed Salah during the 2018 World Cup was decried by Amnesty International as “pure sportswashing”. Photograph: Karim Jaafar/AFP/Getty Images

Like many strongmen before him, Kadyrov uses sports to enhance his cult of personality and bolster his reputation as a benevolent leader who enjoys sports. Following the end of the Second Chechen War in 2000, the Kremlin reached an agreement with [Chechnya](#) that gave the republic increased financial support and resources in exchange for its complete loyalty to the Russian Federation. When Kadyrov rose to power seven years later, he took reign of a semi-autonomous republic ripe for transformation into his own personal fiefdom. As a result of Chechnya's deal with the Kremlin, as well as Russian president Vladimir Putin's continued support, Kadyrov has ruled over his people with an iron fist. He has also been able to use sports like MMA and soccer to further cement his reign.

For example, during the 2018 World Cup, which took place in various cities across Russia, Kadyrov hosted the Egyptian national team and [posed with star striker Mohamed Salah](#) in front of a large crowd at the Akhmat stadium. While Kadyrov saw the photo-op as a chance to rub shoulders with arguably the most popular Muslim athlete in the world, it was criticized by Amnesty International as “[pure sportswashing](#)”.

This was not the first time that Kadyrov paraded around with celebrities and notable athletes. The strongman hosted the likes of Floyd Mayweather, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Steven Seagal, Hillary Swank, Ronaldinho and countless UFC fighters such as former champions Frankie Edgar, Frank Mir, Chris Weidman, Alexander Gustafsson and current [UFC](#) lightweight champ Khabib Nurmagomedov. By associating with famous celebrities and fighters, Kadyrov is able to enhance his personal image as the embodiment of Chechen ideals and masculinity. This use of soft power helps maintain his stranglehold over Chechnya and distract from the crimes committed by his regime.

While the UFC is aware of the controversy surrounding the Chechen dictator and the UFC fighters who represent him, the promotion has chosen to remain silent regarding this potential public relations nightmare. As of the time of reporting, the UFC has not responded to the Guardian's request for comment. It should also be noted that the only time that the UFC publicly addressed the concern that some of their fighters were consorting with a vicious tyrant was in 2015, shortly after Werdum accepted his role as an ambassador for the Akhmat MMA fight club.

“It is important to note that UFC fighters operate as independent business partners, not employees, and that subject to their contractual commitments to UFC they are free to conduct business and to participate in activities as they choose,” the UFC said in a [statement to Sports on Earth](#). “We do expect, however, all fighters to be mindful that their actions reflect well on themselves, the sport and the UFC organization.”

According to a source close to the event, Kadyrov and his entourage entered the arena with valid tickets. However, while the source went on to add that the promotion undertook added security measures to ensure the safety of those present in the arena, the UFC's continued silence on their indirect association to Kadyrov is troubling.

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