

At Least 10 People Reportedly Killed in Chechen Village Battle

Chechen rebel, pro-Moscow government and independent sources alike reported on March 19-20 that a large-scale battle had taken place in the village of Alkhazurovo in Chechnya's Urus-Martan district. Kavkazky Uzel reported on March 20 that the battle had taken place the previous evening and that rebels had burned down the village administration building and killed five law-enforcement officers along with two civilians. At least six other people, including two women and a teenager, were wounded in the fighting, the website reported. "To all appearances, up to 15 militants took part in yesterday's armed clash in the village of Alkhazurovo," a Chechen police officer told Kavkazky Uzel. "At the moment, actions to find and neutralize this gang are continuing. The militants burned the local administration building, and five employees of power structures (four policemen and an employee of the military prosecutor's office) and two local residents were killed."



According to Kavkazky Uzel, estimates of the number of rebels killed in the fighting varied widely. It was claimed that up to eight rebels were killed, but the bodies of only three were found. An unnamed source told the website that one of the slain rebels had been identified and that he was a native of the Groznensky district village of Chechen-Aul.

The rebel Kavkaz-Center website reported on March 19 that a group of 70 rebel fighters had entered Alkhazurovo and that no fewer than 13 policemen had been killed in the ensuing battle, with 7-10 policemen wounded and several taken prisoner. The rebel website claimed that one to six local residents were accidentally killed by police gunfire.

General Major Vyacheslav Kuzmin, who heads the Temporary Operational Group of the Organs and Units of the Russian Interior Ministry, said on March 18 that under the leadership of the Operational Headquarters in the Chechen Republic, 28 commanders and 164 fighters from "illegal armed formations" were "neutralized" last year. He said that 735 participants in "illegal armed formations" and their accomplices were detained across the North Caucasus. Kavkazky Uzel reported on March 20 that according to the Anti-Terrorist Commission of the Chechen Republic, since last April 28, when the commission came into being, special units of the Chechen Interior Ministry and FSB branch "neutralized" 12 field commanders and 60 rebel fighters, while 444 participants in "illegal armed formations" and their accomplices, including 11 rebel commanders, were captured.

In Dagestan, meanwhile, Gitinomagomeddibir Gamzatov, a 75-year-old Khasavyurt resident who practiced non-traditional medicine, was shot to death by two unidentified gunmen near his home in Khasavyurt on March 16. "There is the suspicion that this crime was committed by members of Askhab Bidaev's gang, who announced that they will be dealing with fortune-tellers and healers, whose work they consider Satanic," a Dagestani Interior Ministry source told Kavkazky Uzel. Bidaev's group, which operates in the Khasavyurt district, has been identified as one of Dagestan's four strongest rebel groups (Chechnya Weekly, February 21). On March 14, four to six alleged militants and two Interior Ministry officers were killed in a clash in Dagestan's Buinaksk district after security forces launched a special operation there, Prague Watchdog and Kavkazky Uzel reported.

On March 20, a car carrying police officers was fired on by unidentified attackers as it was traveling along the Khasanya-Gerpegez road in Kabardino-Balkaria, Kavkazky Uzel reported. One of the officers in the car was slightly wounded by the gunfire, which reportedly came from a wooded area. On March 17, an explosive device detonated near the village of Aushiger in Kabardino-Balkaria's Cherkesk district. No one was hurt in the blast. On March 16, a bomb went off on the side of the road in the village of Khasanya as five OMON officers who were deployed to Kabardino-Balkaria from Nizhegorod Oblast were passing by. No one was hurt in the blast. On March 13, a policeman was wounded in the leg at the Nalchik city hospital after a group of policemen asked two people to show their documents and one of them opened fire. The shooter managed to escape.

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Zyazikov Allies Try to Strike at Critical Media—but Fail

Deputies in Ingushetia's People's Assembly issued an appeal on March 18 that called for broadcasts by REN-TV to the republic to be halted and described the presence of the privately-owned channel's journalists in the republic as "undesirable," Kavkazky Uzel reported. The appeal, which was addressed to both houses of Russia's parliament, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Prosecutor General's Office and the Interior Ministry, followed REN-TV's airing on March 17 of a documentary film about the opposition to Ingushetia's president, Murat Zyazikov.



"The REN-TV television company has intensified its, so to speak, 'creative' activity on the territory of the Republic of Ingushetia," the Ingush legislators said in their appeal to the federal bodies. "Without encroaching in any way on the legal right of media to receive information about events taking place in our republic, we want to draw your attention to the obviously made-to-order and provocative character of the coverage of these events. The provocative, slanderous and tendentious reporting by REN-TV on events in the region that has been appearing on the air for some time suggests that behind it stand forces interested in swaying the situation in the south of our country. ... There is good reason to believe that the reporting by this television company that appears on the air with enviable constancy is directly connected to attempts by certain forces, including from abroad, to destabilize the situation in the region. We have to inform you that we consider broadcasts of programs of the REN-TV television company, as well as the presence of journalists of the company on Ingushetia's territory, to be undesirable."

The new Ingushetian People's Assembly, which was elected on March 2, is widely said to have been handpicked by President Zyazikov.

Isa Kostoev, a Federation Council member from Ingushetia, sent a letter to Prosecutor General Yury Chaika accusing "certain forces" of trying to destabilize the situation in the republic. Kostoev accused REN-TV, Ekho Moskvyy radio, the newspapers Zhizn and Novaya Gazeta and Ingushetiya.ru of being involved in "sabotage-demolition activities with respect to the republic." He also said in the letter that the content of the documentary shown on REN-TV on March 17 was "falsified from beginning to end" and that its depiction of the circumstances surrounding incidents of rioting, arson and looting of "a whole series of establishments and organizations" in the republic was "distorted." Last November, three REN-TV journalists—Artyom Vysotsky, Karen Sakhinov and Stanislav Goryachikh—were kidnapped along with Oleg Orlov of Memorial just before a planned opposition demonstration, which police forcibly broke up. In late January, opposition supporters attempting to hold a protest rally clashed with police and several buildings were set on fire (Chechnya Weekly, January 31).

However, Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov said that the body does not have the power to meet the Ingush legislators's demands for action against REN-TV's broadcasts and correspondents. "Unfortunately, we don't have the ability or the authority to close television channels or to influence their content," Kavkazky Uzel on March 18 quoted Mironov as telling journalists.

The Ingush parliamentarians' demand that REN-TV's broadcasts no longer be shown in Ingushetia followed the Russian Supreme Court's rejection on March 18 of a suit brought by the Ingush prosecutor's office to close the opposition Ingushetiya.ru website, which republican prosecutors have accused of stirring up national hatred and enmity in the republic. Ingushetia's Supreme Court had earlier rejected a similar suit, arguing that it did not have jurisdiction over Ingushetiya.ru because the website is registered in the United States. Ingushetiya.ru, meanwhile, praised the documentary shown on REN-TV, saying that among other things, it exposed Zyazikov's "lie" about the "artificial character" of dissatisfaction in the republic and exposed his program to return ethnic Russians to the republic as "a fiction."

In an action that some observers interpreted as a sign that the federal center may be considering replacing Zyazikov as Ingushetia's president, United Russia named Maryan Amriev the head of its regional chapter in Ingushetia, thereby removing Zyazikov as leader of the pro-Kremlin partys' branch in the republic (see Andrei Smirinov's article below). On March 14, Zyazikov, who shook up his cabinet earlier this month (Chechnya Weekly, March 13), appointed Kharun Dzeitov as Ingushetia's new prime minister. Kavkazky Uzel reported on March 14 that the government shakeup in Ingushetia was connected to the "growing tension" in the republic.

Meanwhile, violence in the republic continued unabated over the past week. On March 19, a police car carrying an Ingush police commander, Mukhazher Yevloev, came under fire in the village of Sagopshi in Ingushetia's Malgobeksky district. A law-enforcement source told Kavkazky Uzel that the attack left the car with several dozen bullet holes but that Yevloev was miraculously alive and unhurt. Also on March 19, a police car was bombed in the village of Ordzhonikidzevskaya in Ingushetia's Sunzhensky district, wounding a policeman. On March 14, an unidentified gunman using a gun with a silencer shot a senior police lieutenant, Magomed Vyshegurov, to death while he was sitting in his car outside a store in Nazran. Also on March 14, three FSB employees were shot by unidentified gunmen in the village of Ekazhevo. The attackers fired from a car at another car in which the FSB officers were riding. One of the FSB officers was killed and the other two were wounded.

Kavkazky Uzel reported on March 16 that Vyshegurov was a cousin of Magomed Mutsolgov, head of the Ingush human rights group MASHR. Rustam Mutsolgov, the 21-year-old resident of the village of Troitskaya who was killed by security forces during an operation in the village on March 12, was also a relative of the MASHR head, Kavkazky Uzel reported.

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Briefs

- Letter Asks Patriarch for Help in Winning Release of Maskhadov's Remains

Newsru.com reported on March 19 that a group of human rights activists and other public figures signed an open letter to the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Aleksy II of Moscow and All-Russia, asking him for help in winning the release of the remains of Aslan Maskhadov, the leader of Chechnya's rebel movement and the republic's president, to his family for burial according to the religious ceremonies and national traditions of Chechnya. The letter also called for overturning the "barbaric medieval norms" of the law requiring secret burials for terrorism suspects. The body of Maskhadov, who was killed in a Russian special operation on March 8, 2005, was secretly buried in April of that year and, in accordance with the law on terrorism, the site of his burial has been kept secret. The letter, which was written by activists of the Movement against War in the North Caucasus, was signed, among others by Lyudmila Alekseyeva, chairperson of the Moscow Helsinki Group; the writer Alla Gerber, who is also a member of the Public Chamber and president of the Holocaust Fund; the poets Vadim Zhuk and Lev Rubinshtein; and the singer Iosif Kobzon. On March 20, Interfax quoted Vladimir Vigilyansky, chief of the Moscow Patriarchate press service, as saying that Aleksy II will not lobby Russian authorities to release Maskhadov's remains to his family for burial.

- Russian Supreme Court Reverses Ruling that Found Balkar Group "Extremist"

Russia's Supreme Court on March 18 reversed a ruling handed down by Kabardino-Balkaria's Supreme Court in January 2008 ordering the closure of the Council of the Elders of the Balkar People on the grounds that it was an "extremist" organization. Kavkazky Uzel quoted the chairman of the council's executive committee, Oyus Gurtuev, as saying that he was happy with the verdict and adding: "We will fight further."

- Former Russian Chechen Friendship Society Head's Office Searched

Police seized the computer servers and cell phone of activist Stanislav Dmitrievsky during a two-hour search of his office in Nizhny Novgorod on March 20, the Associated Press reported. Dmitrievsky, whose previous organization, the Russian Chechen Friendship Society, was ordered closed by the Supreme Court last year for allegedly promoting extremism, said prosecutors told him the search was connected to an investigation into alleged extremism involving The Other Russia, the opposition coalition led by former chess champion Garry Kasparov. However, Dmitrievsky said officials were likely looking for copies of a forthcoming book about political prisoners that his current organization, the Nizhny Novgorod Fund for Tolerance, was involved in publishing. He said that prosecutors told him the servers could be returned in a few weeks.

- Kadyrov Promises Cash for Giving Birth on the Prophet's Birthday

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov will pay \$1,000 to every family that gives birth to a child on March 20 to commemorate the Prophet Mohammed's birthday, Interfax reported on March 20. "Money will be given to mothers of the newly-born today in maternity hospitals and maternity departments in Grozny and other Chechen cities and towns," the head of the republic's presidential administration and government, Abdulkahir Israilov, told the news agency. According to Interfax, Israilov stressed that "Kadyrov pays close attention to children and families and spares no effort to educate children in normal schools and preserve their health."

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Dmitry Medvedev's Chechnya Policy

By Mairbek Vatchagaev

The so-called elections of March 2, which endorsed Dmitry Medvedev as the next Russian leader, were less about whether or not he will be president (that decision had already been made personally by President Vladimir Putin and a small team of his associates who, in the longstanding tradition of the Russian Empire, chose their man long before the elections) and more about conferring on Medvedev as much legitimacy as possible. Not since the time of Peter the Great has the Russian emblem of the double-headed eagle captured the essence of the Russian government system so completely: the two heads of the Byzantine eagle stand for two Russian rulers—Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev.



Dmitry Medvedev's candidacy was not a random or a hasty choice. Vladimir Putin's team long contemplated putting one of the people close to the president on the ballot. From time to time, "leaks" of confidential information were engineered to try out different candidates and test public opinion, including that of the international community.

The advantage of the new president is that he has no team of his own. He does have close ties to Putin's team, as he would not amount to much without it. This will be both his plus and his serious future vulnerability as a politician.

Medvedev's freedom will become his downfall—the lack of his own team will prevent him from acting independently. He will always have to keep in mind those who have made him president. In contrast with his predecessor, he has neither FSB nor military roots and therefore does not represent the law-enforcement powers. So who are his core constituencies? They are liberals and democrats. In Russia, the concept of a democrat is not quite the same as in the West, and therefore Medvedev will be easily able to pass for a liberal Russian politician who looks like a cultured man with no history of bloodshed or black PR behind him.

His politics will be guided by reason, not revenge for all past losses, as might be the case with many Russian officials and politicians who see power as an opportunity to get even for all the misfortunes of their lives.

However, Medvedev—or at least those who were in less than total agreement with Vladimir's Putin actions as president (Medvedev himself doesn't come across as someone capable of acting decisively)—may try to pull together a new team around him in an attempt to keep Putin's people away from shaping the presidential agenda. Should this be the case, Medvedev will have to keep up a double-faced game by professing his loyalty to Vladimir Putin, who will initially retain a very strong position in Russia's political arena, while in the background shifting his personal position away from his former patron and current chairman of government of the Russian Federation.

Those who follow the events in Chechnya will be interested in Medvedev's policy toward Vladimir Putin's appointee, Ramzan Kadyrov. Will Medvedev lend his full and unconditional support to the regime that society sees as less than civilized? What will happen to the earmarks—outside of all plans and budgets—for construction and rehabilitation projects in Chechnya as well as for unrestrained entertainment and extravagant spending on various expensive gifts paid almost out of Ramzan Kadyrov's personal funds, and his truly royal magnanimity toward the needy—a level of spending that no other regional leader can afford?

The first statements made by Medvedev asserting that Ramzan Kadyrov "is handling his job well" and that Chechnya "has transitioned from rebuilding to the development phase" already suggest that his understanding of Chechnya's current state is far from clear (Ura-inform.com, February 4). For instance, as recently as March 12, Ramzan Kadyrov's official website was reporting that the president's "rebuilding program" was still being developed (Grozny-inform.ru, March 12).

According to the cheerful statements made by the Russian leadership, Chechnya has become a place of peace. In order to support that claim, the director general of Russia's Foreign Ministry, Doku Zavgayev, who happens to be a former Communist official of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Republic and Moscow's appointee during the first military campaign in Chechnya (1994–1996), frequently arranges visits by foreign delegations to Chechnya.

Zavgayev serves as a key figure for organizing and promoting these so-called delegations guaranteed by the Russian state, which is prepared to grant considerable concessions to those willing to invest in Chechnya. At the core of these policies is not a shortage of Russia's own investment funds but rather the desire to demonstrate Chechnya's stability to Western leaders.

Without holding anything against the minor achievements that are mainly used for PR purposes, one should also note some inconsistencies between reality and Moscow's public statements.

For instance, all visitors to Grozny last year were shown the restored Victory Avenue (Prospekt Pobedy). It was great to see the city's main thoroughfare reborn and this promotional effort required thousands of people to work around the clock. In the end, the result of their efforts was a beautiful avenue that also happened to be generally unfit for human habitation because the rushed rebuilding job skipped over repairing the water supply and sewer pipe networks destroyed during the war. It is therefore not surprising that a year later, the republic's government and the city mayor's administration decided to shut the avenue down again in order to do something they should have done from the very beginning—to build water supply and sewer systems, as well as try to utilize previously-built telecommunications systems.

The other development that raises questions in the minds of those who monitor the situation in Chechnya has to do with the long-term tours in Chechnya of special police troops (OMON), Special Forces units and other police divisions, which last up to several months. During the first week of March of this year, for example, the following units that are permanently stationed in other Russian jurisdictions and cities were dispatched to Chechnya for a term of six months:

- Mordovia special police unit (Rosbalt.ru, March 4);
- Kostroma special police unit (Kostroma.rfn.ru, March 4);
- Udmurtia special police unit (Susanin.udm.ru, March 4),
- Penza special police unit (Tv-express.ru, March 6);
- Tyumen special police unit (Regions.ru, March 5);
- Pskov special police unit (Regions.ru, February 29);
- Consolidated platoon of Tyumen oblast (Newsprom.ru, March 5);
- Special police unit of the Interior Ministry department in Sverdlovsk Oblast and a consolidated platoon of Sverdlovsk police numbering over 200 servicemen (Nakanune.ru, March 3);
- Others, totaling approximately 70 units from Russia's regions.

These numbers add up to several thousand police troops from various regions of Russia including Vladivostok, a city located thousands of kilometers away from Chechnya (Primamedia.ru, March 11). Of course, these units are not currently deployed on every road in Chechnya to extract bribes from every passing car because Ramzan Kadyrov's police troops respond to any action by outside policemen with as much hostility as jamaat members. Incidentally, the Russian policemen return the sentiment by making no distinction between their Chechen colleagues and the jamaat members, treating them both as rebel fighters.

Why does a place as packed with police and army troops as Chechnya still require additional police and special services units from every part of a country as huge as Russia? Their role is less about maintaining order in Chechnya than about giving the Kremlin's policies in the region a psychological impact. The mere presence of Russian police forces is designed to accomplish several things: first of all, to serve as evidence that Chechnya's Interior Ministry reports to the Interior Ministry of the Russian Federation; secondly, to emphasize the fact that the stabilization of Chechnya is a national effort; and thirdly, to prevent the Chechen police from kicking back and joining the forces of armed resistance to Russia in Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus.

It can be stated with some certainty that Russia's policies in Chechnya will not change much, at least not during the first year of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency. It would be better for Medvedev to deal with Ramzan Kadyrov, as extravagant a figure as he is, than with the multiple issues that would emerge immediately after Kadyrov's removal. Relative calm, even if achieved under an Asian-style dictatorship, is greatly preferable to the possibility of renewed activities of the resistance forces.

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The Kremlin Ponders What to Do with Zyazikov

By Andrei Smirnov

On March 14, the presidium of Russia's governing political party, United Russia, dismissed Ingush President Murat Zyazikov from the post of the party's regional leader. Andrei Vorobyev, the chairman of United Russia's Central Executive Committee, explained this decision by the fact that the Ingush leader was "too busy," that "Murat Zyazikov has organized two election campaigns in Ingushetia, but as the president of Ingushetia he is too busy to be involved in the regular activities of the party," Vorobyev told the Gazeta newspaper. Vorobyev insisted that Zyazikov himself had requested to be dropped as the head of United Russia's branch in Ingushetia (Gazeta, March 16).

This explanation for Zyazikov's resignation is less than convincing given that all of Russia's regional leaders are simultaneously the heads of the pro-Kremlin party's local branches. All of them organize elections in their regions and use whatever means necessary to obtain election results that would please the Kremlin. It should be noted that last year Murat Zyazikov was sacked as the leader of United Russia's branch in Ingushetia by members of the Executive Committee of the Ingush branch of the party but was restored to this position in June with the help of the Kremlin. It was not easy for the Ingush president to return to the leadership of United Russia's branch in Ingushetia. Zyazikov faced a strong resistance from Mukharbek Aushev, an Ingush politician who had replaced Zyazikov as the local party leader. One cannot believe that the president of Ingushetia decided to give up the position for which he fought so hard just several months earlier.

Political observers in Russia regard the decision of United Russia to sack Zyazikov as the first clear evidence that the Kremlin has plans to change leaders in Ingushetia. Among all the republics of the North Caucasus, Ingushetia is the region where the insurgency is getting stronger most rapidly (Chechnya Weekly, January 24) and this fact is causing people in the Kremlin to panic. President Vladimir Putin and his entourage have no idea what to do in Ingushetia. Rebel attacks are increasing but the local branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB) is paralyzed due to heavy casualties and the destruction of its regional intelligence network. This year the FSB has scored just one success against the militants in Ingushetia, who have conducted dozens of successful attacks against policemen, FSB officers and the military.

This winter the Kremlin used every occasion to demonstrate its full support of Murat Zyazikov. In January and February, federal officials, including Vladimir Putin himself, made statements in which they praised the Ingush president's "effective work" and attacked his opponents in the republic who are demanding his resignation. The federal authorities promised more financial support to Ingushetia "to solve social problems" in the republic.

Recently, however, the attitude of the Kremlin towards the Ingush president began to change. Commenting on Zyazikov's resignation from the post of United Russia's local leader, Aleksei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center told Gazeta that "...this is one of the ways that the Kremlin uses to remove people from power." On March 18, the Supreme Court of Russia rejected a demand by the prosecutor's office in Ingushetia for the closure of the main voice of the anti-Zyazikov opposition in the region, the Ingushetiya.ru website. That same day, the State Duma refused to support an appeal by the Ingush parliament for a ban on broadcasts in the republic by the REN-TV channel. Several days earlier, REN-TV had broadcast a documentary on the Ingush opposition.

It is clear that Zyazikov and the local power structures that he controls, including the parliament and the republican prosecutor's office, are trying to step up activities against the political opposition, but the Kremlin, which previously took the side of the Ingush leader in his standoff with the opposition, is now trying to distance itself from the struggle between Murat Zyazikov and his opponents. It looks like the Russian authorities are slowly beginning to realize that it would be better to deal with the legal non-violent opposition in Ingushetia, which can be controlled from Moscow, than with the powerful insurgency, whose aim is to separate, at least de-facto, the republic from Russia and to create an Islamic state in the region.

The Kremlin does not want to sack Zyazikov because everybody would think that it was done under duress. Nevertheless, in the face of active rebel forces, Moscow wants to intensify the search for a possible successor to the Ingush president. Zyazikov completely satisfies the Kremlin because he is a perfect puppet, who never protests or

resists the federal center. However, it is clear to Putin and his team that something needs to be done to improve the situation in Ingushetia and not to allow the rebels to take power there.

The Kremlin is looking for a candidate for the Ingush presidency who can propose new effective methods in fighting the local insurgency but at the same time agree to be a puppet like Zyazikov. It is very difficult to find such a candidate, given that high-profile Ingush politicians are demanding more autonomy from Moscow in order to pacify the region. For example, one of the possible candidates, Mukharbek Aushev, the former leader of United Russia in Ingushetia, told Vremya Novostei that the Russian authorities should “abandon General Yermolov’s methods in Ingushetia [Yermolov was the Russian general famous for his cruelty against civilians during the Caucasian war of the 19th century—AS]. One should get access to militants very cautiously, the way Akhmad Kadyrov did it or Razman does it. Rebels should surrender under reliable guarantees” (Vremya Novostei, January 18).

In other words, Aushev sees only one way to solve the problem of the rebels in Ingushetia: to allow the Ingush themselves to negotiate with the separatists.

Musa Keligov, a former deputy to the presidential envoy in the Southern Federal District who some call the “purse” of the anti-Zyazikov opposition, also says that only military units comprised of ethnic Ingush can find and destroy the guerrillas. “One battalion is needed to destroy the rebels but this battalion should consist of the Ingush only,” he said. “Only the Ingush should restore order in Ingushetia.” Keligov promised to speed up the development of Ingushetia’s economy by building new refineries in the region (Vremya Novostei, February 11).

The Kremlin knows the proposals made by Keligov, Aushev and others very well. The problem is that nobody is certain that, in the event that Keligov or Aushev becomes Ingushetia’s president, they will indeed find ways to change the situation for the better. At the same time, it is also clear that Zyazikov is politically impotent and can do nothing, while the FSB has serious problems in Ingushetia. The result is that nobody in Moscow knows exactly what should be done with Ingushetia now.

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