

Zyazikov Steps Down

On October 30, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree ordering an early end to Murat Zyazikov's term as Ingushetia's president, Itar-Tass reported, citing the Russian presidential press service. Zyazikov, the former KGB general who headed Ingushetia for six and a half years, said that his resignation as Ingushetia's president was absolutely voluntary and connected to his transfer to another job. "I will be working in Moscow," Interfax quoted him as saying. Zyazikov did not indicate what his new job would be.



Medvedev's decree also named Lieutenant Colonel Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, deputy chief of staff in the Volga-Urals Military District, as temporary acting president. The Moscow Times on October 31 quoted the Kremlin as saying that the appointment was based on a recommendation by Zyazikov. The English-language newspaper, citing state-owned Channel One television and the Warheroes.ru website, reported that Yevkurov commanded Russian troops in Kosovo in 1999 and received the Hero of Russia award for his participation in military operations in the North Caucasus.

Few observers doubt Zyazikov was forced to resign against the backdrop of spiraling violence in Ingushetia. Indeed, Kommersant reported on October 31 that, according to its information, Zyazikov had been asked to resign because of "the numerous loud scandals" surrounding him and "his inability to control the situation in the republic."

The move, predictably, was greeted positively by Ingushetia's opposition. Rosa Malsagova, editor of the opposition website Ingushetia.org, told Ekho Moskvyy radio that Medvedev "showed some common sense firing Zyazikov." Malsagova said she was sure the bloodshed would finally end in Ingushetia and that she personally knew Yevkurov, whom she called "a man of a noble character." Malsagova left Russia earlier this year in the face of a legal onslaught waged against the website and has asked for political asylum in France.

The website has publicly accused Zyazikov and other Ingush officials, including republican Interior Minister Musa Medov, of being behind the shooting death of its founder, Magomed Yevloev. The website was previously known as Ingushetiya.ru.

Ingushetia.org stated in a commentary that Yevkurov "is known as an honest and courageous person, for whom the interests of his people are not alien" and congratulated the people of Ingushetia on "this significant day in the history of our nation."

One of the leaders of Ingushetia's opposition, Magomed Khazbiev, said that the opposition is ready to work with the republic's new president. "Yevkurov is a military man, a respectable Ingush," RIA Novosti quoted Khazbiev as saying. "I think he will be able to handle the situation. We are ready to direct all of our energies toward helping Yevkurov. We will stand up together with that person, if he wants that." Khazbiev also said that residents of Ingushetia were "rejoicing" over Yevkurov's appointment as the republic's leader. "Ingush from all over the world are calling me with congratulations," he said. "In Ingushetia itself, people are going into the streets, stopping traffic and dancing lezginka."

Ingushetia's former president, Ruslan Aushev, who was replaced by Zyazikov in an April 2002 election that was widely viewed as rigged, called the change in the republic's leadership a correct decision. "Haven't you heard about the situation in the republic?" RIA Novosti quoted Aushev as saying. "Of course, not all the fault for the situation in the republic is his [Zyazikov's]." Aushev also spoke positively of Yevkurov, adding: "Although he, of course, has been involved in something else— these are two different things [military service and politics-NCW]—but I wish him success," Aushev said. Asked by RIA Novosti whether Yevkurov was the right choice, Aushev said that among those who were available to choose from, "it's a good choice."

Earlier this year, Ingushetia's opposition collected 80,000 signatures on a petition calling Ruslan Aushev to replace Zyazikov as president and forwarded it to President Dmitry Medvedev (North Caucasus Weekly, May 1, May 16, July 11, and August 7).

Gazeta.ru on October 30 quoted Kavkazky Uzel editor-in-chief Grigory Shvedov as saying that Zyazikov's resignation was above all connected with the fact that over the past month, "tension in the republic grew radically" and additional federal troops there "were unable to cope with the situation." He also suggested that Zyazikov's resignation is an indicator that Regional Development Minister Dmitry Kozak has strengthened his position in Moscow. "The actions of the Kremlin were taken along the lines of recommendations made by Kozak when he was still presidential envoy in the Southern [Federal] District, but at that time he was not listened to," Shvedov said.

RIA Novosti quoted State Duma Vice Speaker Oleg Morozov, a member of the pro-Kremlin Unified Russia party, as saying he felt that the situation in Ingushetia has become so "complicated and tense" that Zyazikov himself has decided to step down. Another Duma vice speaker, Communist Party member Ivan Melnikov, called Zyazikov's decision to step down "a recognition of the existence of serious problems in Ingushetia," adding that mistakes made in the republic recently had further heated up the situation there. He added, however, that Zyazikov's resignation would not solve the republic's problems and that much would depend on "how properly, skillfully and with due consideration of the region's special characteristics" the appointment of a full-fledged (as opposed to acting) president of Ingushetia is made.

Another United Russia member, Duma Nationalities Committee Deputy Chairman Arkady Baskaev said that Aushev's removal back in 2002 had been "the correct decision" because, according to Baskaev, many mountain districts of Ingushetia had become "a base for the rehabilitation of Chechen militants." Zyazikov, he added, had "tried to bring order in the republic in that quite difficult situation, also taking into consideration inter-clan relations." Baskaev conceded, however, that mistakes were made along the way and that the situation in Ingushetia had worsened recently and thus something had to be changed.

Gennady Gudkov, the deputy chairman of the Duma's Security Committee and a member of the A Just Russia faction, predicted Zyazikov's resignation would have a positive effect on the situation in Ingushetia. "I know that the situation in Ingushetia was extremely tense, and despite the fact that an opposition supposedly did not exist, in reality it did exist and there were all sorts of problems," Gudkov said. "It was understood that there many problems were unresolved, and it appears ... that preconditions accumulated that led to a change in the republic's leader." Ingushetia's leadership, he said, must try to reconcile the conflicting sides in the republic.

Likewise, Sergei Ivanenko, a member of the Yabloko party's political council, called for "political negotiations" and "political consultations" in Ingushetia and said the question of who will become the republic's full-fledged leader is a "key" issue. Opposition politician Boris Nemtsov stated that Zyazikov's authority in the republic was nil and his tenure had worsened the situation in the republic. Nemtsov said: "The fact that he has resigned is a correct thing," and added, "Better late than never."

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Repression in North Caucasus is Feeding the Ranks of the Rebels

Russian Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev said during a visit to Chechnya on October 27 that 200 rebel fighters have been captured and four rebel gangs have been destroyed in the republic since the start of the year. As Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported on October 28, Nurgaliev said the situation in the North Caucasus remains difficult but that the law-enforcement agencies are keeping it under control.

Chechen Interior Minister Ruslan Alkhanov, for his part, said on October 29 that 46 militants have been killed and 276 arrested in Chechnya in the first nine months of this year, with four "illegal armed formations" eliminated during the same period. According to RIA Novosti, Alkhanov said that 70 militants voluntarily surrendered and that the total number of crimes committed in Chechnya decreased by 21.8 percent compared with the same period last year. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov praised the work of the republic's Interior Ministry. "Dozens of operations, which resulted in the elimination of illegal armed formations, prove that the Interior Ministry of the republic has learnt how to take preventive measures," RIA Novosti quoted Kadyrov as saying.

As the news agency noted, Kadyrov said earlier this year that "the counterterrorism operation in the region has been completed and today we are fighting criminal elements in the Republic of Chechnya." Indeed, Kadyrov said in January that all that remains of Chechnya's rebels are a few dozen "devils" running around the republic's mountains—a number that would not appear to square with the figures of 276 rebels arrested and 46 killed in the first nine months of this year given by Kadyrov's interior minister.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta correspondent Vladimir Mukhin noted that around 10 law-enforcement/military servicemen and officials have been killed so far this month in Chechnya, and that, according to open information, around 25 terrorist acts have been committed and at least 40 law-enforcement staff and servicemen of the Russian interior and defense ministries have been killed in the North Caucasus this month alone. According to Mukhin, 66 Russian servicemen were killed during the Russian-Georgia conflict in August. "But that was a real war," he wrote. "And in the North Caucasus, siloviki and officials are losing their lives mainly as a result of landmines, bombs, snipers 'work' [and] surprise 'behind-the-back' attacks by militants."

Meanwhile, Kavkazky Uzel said on October 27 quoting the Memorial human rights group as saying in a report presented during a meeting between European Union representatives and Russian human rights activists in Paris on October 20 that 29 militants were killed and 75 wounded in Ingushetia while 33 militants were killed and 70 wounded in Chechnya in June-August of this year. According to Memorial, the law-enforcement and security structures of both republics suffered losses similar to those two years ago, when the late rebel warlord Shamil Basaev was active, and the total number of losses in tiny Ingushetia for the first time exceeded the number of losses in Chechnya.

Kavkazky Uzel wrote that while the Russian defense and interior ministries claim the rebels have stepped up activities in Ingushetia and Dagestan because they have been forced out of Chechnya, Memorial says in its report that a local militant underground has emerged in these republics, in no small measure due to the actions of the republics siloviki. The report says that over the last half a year, security forces have shown a preference for summarily executing suspected militants captured during special operations—in many cases, according to witnesses, even when the suspects offer no resistance. In addition, law-enforcement officers sometimes plant weapons on slain suspected militants in front of witnesses. According to Memorial, relatives of those killed then join the rebels in order to get revenge on law-enforcement personnel.

The Memorial report also cites an increase in the number of kidnappings in Chechnya since May of this year, Kavkazky Uzel reported. While before June 2007 many of those kidnapped in Chechnya and Dagestan simply disappeared, nowadays they are typically found by relatives in a police office or remand prison. By this time, however, the abducted person has "confessed" under torture to a terrorist-related crime, the Memorial report states. Another tendency since this summer has been attacks on and persecution of groups that speak openly about rights violations in the North Caucasus. According to Memorial, the Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights, which publicizes kidnapping, torture and falsified criminal investigations and has called on the authorities to investigate and punish those responsible, has been the target of a smear campaign, as has the newspaper Chernovik.

According to Memorial, the Chechen authorities, despite claims to the contrary, have been unable to suppress armed resistance completely and the essentially totalitarian system built in the republic has created a "protest mood" among young people. The authorities, meanwhile, have found a new way to act against relatives of those they accuse of being militants: they burn down their houses (North Caucasus Weekly, October 16). Memorial says it knows of 17 such cases that took place this past summer.

Kavkazky Uzel quoted Memorial staffer Aleksandr Cherkasov that the situation in Ingushetia is bordering on being a civil war, pitting Ingush siloviki against those who have declared a vendetta against them.

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Is Kadyrov “Re-Islamicizing” Chechnya?

Kavkazky Uzel on October 24 quoted Aleksei Malashenko of the Carnegie Moscow Center as saying that Chechnya today is undergoing “re-Islamicization.” The website quoted him as saying that Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov is strengthening and propagating Sufi Islam in order to fight against his religious and political opponents, the Salafis, and is reviving traditional Islamic norms of behavior in order to control society.

“In Chechnya we are observing the politicization of the Kunta Hajji current of the Qadiri order of Sufi Islam (followers of the mid-19th century preacher Kunta-Hajji Kishiev), a representative of which is Ramzan Kadyrov,” Malashenko told the website. Thanks to Kadyrov, Chechnya is experiencing a “second wave” of Islamicization, he said. Indeed, a giant mosque in honor of Kadyrov’s father, Akhmad Kadyrov, was opened in Grozny earlier this month (North Caucasus Weekly, October 24). Moreover, as Kavkazky Uzel noted, small mosques have opened across Chechnya over the last five years.

According to Malashenko, the authorities in Chechnya are extending control over Sufi Islam and using it as an instrument of policy. “The religious factor is becoming an argument in Kadyrov’s political struggle against the Salafis,” he said. “Kadyrov is using religion as a political lever for increasing his own authority. Kadyrov is trying to introduce a system of Islamic education in the schools. The new mufti [in Chechnya] announced the introduction of a quarterly Islamic seminar in the system of higher education. There have been attempts to revive Sharia education. Re-Islamicization has had an especially big influence on youth, who are trying to cultivate old traditional Islamic values. In particular, young women now are dressing in long skirts down to their ankles and wearing headscarves. As before there is no written order to wear headscarves but, nonetheless, they are simply not permitted to enter official establishments in the republic without them.”

Still, Malashenko told Kavkazky Uzel that these traditional Islamic values are not universally accepted by members of Chechnya’s older generation, many of whom are secular people who grew up in Leningrad, Karaganda and other non-Muslim cities in the Soviet Union. Chechen women aged forty wear much shorter skirts, he said, and members of the older generation are apprehensive about the return of traditional morals whose “propaganda” young people are particularly prone to. Over time, this could lead to split between generations, Malashenko said.

Malashenko said he does not see the need for an intensification of the construction of mosques in Chechnya, given that a majority of the republic’s population is “cool” toward religion and, while observing some religious traditions, goes to the mosque only rarely—“for appearance’s sake,” like a majority of the Orthodox Russians who attend church.

For his part, Aleksandr Cherkasov of the Memorial human rights group said that construction of new mosques should not be seen in the context of “re-Islamicization,” Kavkazky Uzel reported. “Joint prayer is unquestionably a very important activity for Muslims, therefore the construction of new mosques is a positive pursuit. The propagation of certain norms of behavior in everyday life with reference to religion, something which might not suit everyone, is a different story.”

According to Cherkasov, mosques in Chechnya are by definition open to Muslims of any persuasion and no one prevents them from praying together. “Of course, there are certain differences between Salafis and Sufis—[over whether] to use or not use prayer beads, how many times to move your fingers according to the number of times the name of Allah is used—but these are not crucial.” Cherkasov said that while Salafis do not worship the graves of their ancestors or saints and their forms of prayer are different from those of other Muslims, “the differences between the different currents of Islam and the struggle between them in Chechnya should not be exaggerated.”

“Most likely, only the amir of a jamaat can forbid Salafis from praying together in the same mosques as Sufis,” Cherkasov said, adding that it is unclear whether the jamaats continue to exist given that they were crushed during the military campaigns in Chechnya and cannot exist openly today. “If there are no mosques nearby, a Muslim can go and pray in a church—a structure built in honor of the Prophet Isa [Jesus] is treated with great respect,” Cherkasov said, emphasizing that Islam is a considerably more peace-loving than is commonly thought.

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Briefs

Dagestani Activist Found Dead

A member of the human rights group Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights, Mustapa Abdurakhmanov, was found dead in Makhachkala, RIA Novosti reported on October 30. Another member of the group, Ismail Butdaev, said Abdurakhmanov's colleagues say it is possible he was murdered. According to Butdaev, Abdurakhmanov went to pick up his daughter from her madrassa (Islamic religious school) on October 29 but disappeared on the way there. His body was found in a morgue on October 30, and Butdaev said an employee of the morgue told him Abdurakhmanov was murdered. The Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights, which publicizes kidnapping, torture and falsified criminal investigations and calls on the authorities to investigate and punish those responsible, has been persecuted by Dagestani authorities (see article in this issue).

Moscow Theater Siege Commemorated

An official ceremony was held in Moscow on October 26 to commemorate the victims of the Dubrovka theater siege six year earlier, RIA Novosti reported. After a minute of silence, white balloons, one for each hostage who died, were released into the sky. Relatives of victims of other terrorist acts, both in Russia and abroad, had been invited to the ceremony. According to RIA Novosti, around 500 people attended the ceremony. On October 23, 2002, about 40 Chechen militants took an audience of around 900 people at a Dubrovka theater performance of the musical Nord-Ost hostage and demanded the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. After three days of appeals and negotiations, Russian security forces used an undisclosed gas to disable the hostage-takers before they could carry out their threat to blow up the hall. The Russian authorities say 39 terrorists were killed in the raid, and 130 hostages died due to the effects of the gas.

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Violence in Ingushetia Continues to Intensify

By Mairbek Vatchagaev

Last week's events saw the wave of high-profile murders rumbling through the North Caucasus continue, with Ingushetia again leading the way.

Valentina Miroshnichenko, wife of the deputy mayor of Ordzhonikidzevskaya, was gunned down on October 24. According to a representative of Ingushetia's Interior Ministry, "unidentified individuals driving a white VAZ-2107 vehicle approached Ms. Miroshnichenko as she was walking down the street, opened automatic fire and fled the crime scene" (Ingushetia.org, October 24). The incident may not have warranted much publicity had it not been for the ethnicity of the victim: the attackers in this case may have specifically targeted a member of the republic's ethnic Russian population.

Back in 2006, nearly a dozen murders and assaults designed to foster intimidation were committed against ethnic Russians in Ingushetia (Kommersant, July 19). Among those assassinated that year was Galina Gubina, deputy head of the administration of Ingushetia's Sunzhensky district, who was killed in Ordzhonikidzevskaya on June 9, 2006 (Chechnya Weekly, June 15, 2006). Gubina was in charge of programs supporting the return of ethnic Russian residents of Ingushetia who had fled the republic earlier due to societal tensions and the surge in rebel actions.

Another high-profile incident that took place on October 24—the same day Valentina Miroshnichenko was murdered—was roundly condemned by the public. An unidentified armed group seized ten to fifteen (according to various reports) patrons in a gambling machine hall on the outskirts of Ordzhonikidzevskaya and took them to an unknown location (Lenta.ru, October 25).

Notably, on October 16, a week before the mass kidnapping, an explosion went off at a similar gaming establishment in Ordzhonikidzevskaya without inflicting any casualties (<http://lenta.ru/news/2008/10/16/blast1/>) and was widely interpreted as a warning from the rebel underground movement, which exhorts people to stay away from gambling and alcohol in its video addresses (see the Ingush Sharia Jamaat's website, <http://hunafa.com/?cat=1>). Like that earlier incident, many believe that the mass kidnapping was the work of the Sharia Jamaat, which apparently decided to move from warnings to meting out punishment to those violating Sharia laws in Ingushetia (<http://lenta.ru/news/2008/10/25/casino/>).

Yet another incident that disturbed the Russian military took place on the afternoon of October 24, when a military helicopter was shot at during paratrooper landing around the settlement of Dattiykh, not far from Ingushetia's administrative border with Chechnya. Although the army reported no casualties among its servicemen, the mere fact of this brazen attack against landing paratroopers indicates that the rebels feel a lot more comfortable and confident in the area than the Russians would like (<http://ingushetia.org/news/16254.html>).

Data released by the office of Ingushetia's chief prosecutor on October 23 revealed that while overall crime levels in the republic have declined, assaults against law-enforcement personnel skyrocketed by 103.4 percent (<http://ingushetia.org/news/16246.html>)—indirect proof that rebel activity in the region is on the rise. Just four days later on October 27, Ingushetia's chief prosecutor Yury Turygin felt compelled to qualify the data by explaining that his statements did not imply that crime was on the increase and insisted that Ingushetia's crime statistics are consistent with the rest of the region (<http://www.yuga.ru/news/137582/>).

On the evening October 24, shots were fired at a government-owned television station located in Nazran across the street from the Assa Hotel. The next morning (October 25), the head of the inter-district department of the Interior Ministry assigned to larceny and vehicle theft, Ahmed Tarshkhoyev, was shot dead at the same spot (Interfax, October 25). The government admitted that Tarshkhoyev's murder was related to his police duties. Tarshkhoyev was killed by sniper fire, and this assassination may well have been committed by the armed opposition, although a gangster-style showdown cannot be ruled out (Itar-Tass, October 25).

In the meantime, relatives of Murat Zyazikov (who resigned as Ingushetia's president on October 30) continued to be targeted for attack this past week. On October 26, the vehicle of Arsamak Zyazikov, a deputy republican Minister of Economics and close relative of the Murat Zyazikov, was blown up in Nazran (Ekho Moskvyy Radio, October 26). Murat Zyazikov's nephew and assistant for public relations, Said Kotiev, was also traveling in the car at the time of the blast (Ingushetia.org, October 27). The bomb went off after both men got out of the car and while they were exchanging greetings with Timur Marziyev, head of Ingushetia's electronic communications network, which probably averted a more gruesome outcome. The republican chief prosecutor's office rejected the blood vendetta version of the story and claimed that the assassination attempt was staged to destabilize the situation in Ingushetia. The government is loathe to have the public see these events as acts of revenge for the murder of Magomed Yevloev, the former owner of the independent Ingushetia.org website, who was murdered on August 30 after arriving in Ingushetia on a flight on which Murat Zyazikov was also a passenger. Yevloev's family called for blood revenge against Zyazikov and Ingushetia's Interior Minister Musa. (Vendettas are common in the North Caucasus as an alternative to the government justice system, which is seen as too corrupt and politicized to be fair.) Thus this latest incident became another link in the chain of assaults targeting Zyazikov's relatives that started in 2007 and are still on the rise.

On October 27, an explosion went off across the street from the state prosecutor's office in Ingushetia's Sunzhensky district, injuring the deputy head of the Sunzhensky district department of the Interior Ministry, Police Lieutenant Alikhan Geroyev, who was on his way to work. Geroyev was hospitalized with multiple wounds and a brain injury (Regnum.ru, October 27).

In the face of the wave of attacks in Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov—in what turned out to be his last week as the republic's president—tried to shift the focus from the republic's political instability to his political statements. Responding to the strong public resistance that greeted the talk about re-merging Ingushetia and Chechnya, Zyazikov was forced to say that it would lead to the "destabilization of the republic. Russian media quoted Zyazikov as saying: "I believe that anyone raising the subject voluntarily or forcibly, consciously or unconsciously, is committing an act of political hooliganism and political illiteracy" (Gazeta.ru, October 25). His Chechen colleague, Ramzan Kadyrov, was a bit more reserved and did not rule out a potential merger, leaving everything to the "will of the people" (Rosbalt.ru, October 27). However, Zyazikov's apparently forced resignation from the post of Ingushetia's president would appear to have returned the idea of merging the two republics to the back burner.

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