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Six Months After Zyazikov's Ouster, Ingushetia Remains Unstable

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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On October 31 of last year, Moscow dismissed Murat Zyazikov, the widely despised president of Ingushetia, and in his place installed Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, a much-decorated Ingush colonel in the Russian Army, in a move that many both in the North Caucasus republic and elsewhere believe marked the dawn of a new day there.

Now, six months later, Caucasus news site Kavkaz-uzel.ru has offered an assessment of what has changed and what has not, concluding that while Yevkurov has been far more effective than his predecessor in working with the population and with Moscow, the republic he heads is still "far from stable" and in some respects may be getting even less so.

Because Zyazikov sought to suppress all independent media, falsified election results and other data, and is widely suspected of ordering the killing of at least one major opposition figure, many Ingush were prepared to see almost anyone else as an improvement. At the very least, they were ready to give the new man the benefit of the doubt.

Yevkurov, the Caucasus news service points out, made the most of this. He "began a dialogue with the opposition" and even appointed some of its members to senior positions in his administration. He developed good relations with the human rights community. And he worked hard to end blood feuds among the Ingush *taips*.

Moreover, Yevkurov purged the organs of power, using charges of corruption as the basis for ousting many of Zyazikov's people. Because of his actions in reaching out to the population and fighting corruption, the current president was far more successful in obtaining federal funds, something that by itself helped him to build authority.

During the last few months, Kavkz-uzel.ru continues, Yevkurov has begun to purge the law enforcement agencies, many of which had become little more than Zyazikov's personal hit squads. Yevkurov set up a hot line for Ingush to telephone in complaints about the violation of their rights by these groups.

Even more important, the new president set up a Societal Commission on Human Rights and included in its membership "deputies of parliament, representatives of the force structures, as well as leaders of non-governmental organizations and ordinary citizens of the republic," an institution that marked a clean break from Zyazikov's approach.

On one of the most sensitive issues, the question of the Prigorodny district from which many Ingush were forced to flee more than 15 years ago, Yevkurov made it clear that he did not intend to try to change its borders but that he supported "the most rapid return of Ingush refugees to the places of their former residence on the territory of North Ossetia."

But at the same time, the Internet news portal continued, Yevkurov "has not yet been able to establish complete control over the situation in the region" or limit the upward trend of some of the most disturbing measures of violence in that republic, which, prior to Zyazikov, was an island of stability but now ranks among the most unstable.

According to the Memorial Human Rights Center, the number of killings is up sharply this year. Since January 1, 21 civilians, 12 officials of local force structures, and six military personnel have been killed, and over the same period, the force structures have killed 20 militants. Moreover, kidnappings have remained frequent.

(Figures from the republic's interior ministry are slightly different but also worrisome. During the first quarter, it reports, the authorities killed 27 militants, losing 18 uniformed law enforcement officers and two civilian officials." In addition, the ministry said, some 44 people on the government side had been wounded during militant attacks.)

But if the statistics tell one side of the story, the attitudes of the population tell another. One Ingush man told Kavkaz-uzel.ru that Yevkurov "really enjoys the sympathy of the population. He travels throughout the republic, tries to listen to all, and gives people the chance to openly express themselves on the most pressing problems."

Those were steps Zyazikov never took, and they are welcome. But now six months into his presidency, many in Ingushetia appear to be concerned that however open Yevkurov is

to contacts with the population, he has not been able to reduce the level of violence. And with each passing week, more of them are likely asking whether openness, however welcome, is enough.

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