

# Ingush Islamists Target Alcohol Sellers

By [Amie Ferris-Rotman](#)

February 03, 2011



A man pouring vodka in Nazran on Jan. 30. Several places were attacked last year for selling alcohol in the area. **Diana Markosian**

NAZRAN, Ingushetia — A masked guard clad in camouflage pokes his AK-47 assault rifle into the shoulder of a vodka-guzzling client in a hotel bar in Ingushetia and orders him to leave immediately.

The state-employed security guard then leads the man and his coterie of quiet revelers out of the dimly lit bar.

"We heard reports rebels are on the prowl again and we want to prevent any damage," said the guard, who wished to remain anonymous.

At least a dozen places selling alcohol in the North Caucasus were attacked with grenades, bombs and gunfire over the last year as armed Islamists bent on installing sharia law have stepped up their battle against those who drink.

Last week saw the latest fatal attack in the town of Khasavyurt in Dagestan, near the border with Chechnya, where a bomb ripped through an alcohol-serving cafe, killing four.

State-run media showed pictures of the wrecked cafe, with only its torched sign, "Karavan," or "Caravan," remaining.

Islamist rebels later said in a statement that "the owners were repeatedly warned, but they were arrogant."

"It is only a matter of time before places involved in the filth of alcohol ... will meet their destruction," they said on the insurgency-affiliated web site Jamaatshariat.com.

An Islamist insurgency fueled by two post-Soviet separatist wars in Chechnya is gaining strength in Russia's southern flank, where rebels stage near-daily attacks.

Authorities blamed insurgents for a suicide bombing that killed 36 people at Russia's busiest international airport, Domodedovo, last month. No one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

While policemen and law enforcement officers bear the brunt of the rebel attacks in the North Caucasus, alcohol-sellers and buyers are also being increasingly targeted. Attacks last year were almost double those in 2009, officials say.

For the smattering of restaurants and shops that do sell alcohol in Ingushetia's largest town Nazran, it is a risky yet lucrative business. Many places are unmarked for fear of being identified by Islamist rebels.

"You have to be very careful here if you want to sell," said Hava, the manager of "Raisky Ugolok," or "Paradise Corner," a restaurant in the center of town. Nestled beside a bread factory, its pastel green fronting has no signage and potential clients are first checked by Hava on her security camera.

A framed alcohol license hangs on the oak-paneled walls of the restaurant, an attempt to give her business the stamp of official approval.

But in Ingushetia, a tiny sliver of land neighboring Chechnya, as in other North Caucasus republics, having official permission to sell alcohol does little to prevent attacks.

"There are types who want to blow us up. Who knows how long we will be able to last," Hava said as she poured chilled vodka into two shot glasses for a pair of young women.

In Malgobek, a town 45 kilometers northwest of Ingushetia's capital Magas, a beer bottle crate sits empty in the window of a small shop facing the main square.

Called "Baltika" after one of Russia's most popular beer brands, the shop was blown up three times last year by rebels, wounding three dozen people and killing one.

It has since given up on selling alcohol and provides a photocopying service and also sells bread and water from under its corrugated tin roof.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, where alcohol was readily available throughout, Russia's Muslim regions have become increasingly dry as they undergo an Islamic revival, honoring Islam's ban on alcohol.

Some officials even speak openly about their dislike of alcohol — echoing the same frustration as that of the rebels — but condemn the violence.

"We are followers of Islam and alcohol is not welcome here," said Malgobek administrative chief Bashir Badiyev.

This has led Moscow to watch uneasily as central power yields to Islamist ideas, a trend that some say can be dangerous.

Many, though, continue to seek out alcohol.

Not far from "Paradise Corner" sits the tiny "Red East" shop. Its Georgian owners furtively sell bottles of wine and spirits between the small timeframe of noon and 2 p.m. each day, double-wrapped in black bags.

"This is the only way for us to have any freedom," said a middle-aged man who did not wish to be named, as he poured some vodka into a plastic cup for him and his friend. "If we are caught outside, we will be in trouble."

Ingushetia's government is split on opinion. "This is part of Russia, so people should be allowed to have it," said Georgy Shlapuzhnikov, who advises Ingushetia's president on safety.

As part of Russia, the North Caucasus republics are allowed by law to buy and sell alcohol, and some analysts say an all-out official ban would violate the Constitution.

Other officials suggest alcohol-seekers drive to neighboring, Christian-majority North Ossetia, to stock up.

"They can go next door and get it," deputy economy minister Akhmed Paragulgov told Reuters. "[Drinking] is no longer seen as something cool. It is just not good for society."

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