

Ultrationalists Given a Tour Around Chechnya

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GROZNY — Ultrationalists made a rare visit to Chechnya this week, invited by local officials seeking to combat growing racism nationwide against people from the North Caucasus.

The head of the banned Slavic Union, whose logo is a stylized swastika, was among the handful of nationalists who toured the tiny republic.

"I was very surprised by what I saw here. You can meet normal people and just chat with them. ... I saw no aggression in Chechnya," Slavic Union leader Dmitry Dyomushkin said on his web site, Demushkin.com, before his departure from Chechnya on Wednesday.

Pictures posted on his site showed the bearded nationalist leader posing in Chechen cities wearing a black and white T-shirt with the words: "I am Russian." He also met local lawmakers and reporters to discuss Chechen culture.

Explaining the invitation to the nationalists, Chechnya's top official for external relations and national policy, Shamsail Saraliyev, said in Grozny, "We don't want to fight with anyone

on nationalistic grounds."

The unlikely visit by nationalists comes amid mounting racial tensions. Violent clashes between natives of the North Caucasus and ethnic Slavs in Moscow have raised concerns.

President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday reassured a group of Muslim spiritual leaders of the need to overcome xenophobia. He spoke in Nalchik in Kabardino-Balkaria, not far from Chechnya.

Dyomushkin offered praise to migrants from the North Caucasus who hold menial jobs in the Russian heartland.

"All the people of Russia should be glad that streets in our Russian cities are clean," he said.

The migrant workers often say they are treated with suspicion by ethnic Slavs and often face racism.

"If you value the fight against alcoholism, drug abuse and gay parades ... then I think [we ethnic Slavs] have common values with Chechens," Dyomushkin said.

But not everyone approved of the nationalists' jaunt to Chechnya.

"I am taken aback that they were invited, but it is good they know what is happening in Chechnya," said Maxim Shevchenko, a television journalist and member of the Public Chamber.

In Grozny for a literature event, Shevchenko said in an interview that he had turned down an invitation to meet them. "I don't want to speak to people who spread fascist ideas," he said.

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