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Chechen Film Studio Unveils First Major Production

By Howard Amos

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Akhmad Kadyrov Mosque in Grozny

The first large-scale film produced by ChechenFilm, the film studio of Russia's North Caucasus republic of Chechnya, went on general release Monday as the region's strongman leader Ramzan Kadyrov looks to boost Chechnya's standing within Russia and abroad.

The 12-part series, titled "Call of the Heart" — of which only the first episode has been released — was filmed in Chechnya with the participation of about 100 actors, and features dialogue in both Russian and Chechen.

"We have the equipment that is used to shoot films like 'Pirates of the Caribbean,' 'Alien World,' and 'The Great Gatsby.' This says a lot," Beslan Terekbayev, head of ChechenFilm, was quoted as saying by LifeNews tabloid news agency.

"Call of the Heart" is the first major production of ChechenFilm, which was set up in 2009,

and marks the revival of a Soviet-era model that supported the existence of regional film studios. ChechenFilm is backed by the local Ministry of Culture, and Kadyrov has repeatedly expressed his interest in cinema, promising earlier this year to star in a shoot-em-up action film.

"Everything was super ... the quality was like Hollywood," Movsar Ibragimov, a local resident who attended the premiere Sunday at a theater in the Chechen capital of Grozny, told The Moscow Times.

"I'm very happy that they will shoot these sorts of films ... all the family can watch it together."

"Call of the Heart" explores a tangled Chechen romance with sporting and criminal subplots. The opening sequence of the trailer shows a young man giving a toy rabbit to a young woman as softly sinister music plays in the background.

"It's a modern story about love, about the friendship between two young people, one of whom dies for the other," said Terekbayev, who was also the director, producer and one of the screenwriters on the film, according to news agency RIA Novosti.

While it was shot in Chechnya, "Call of the Heart"'s post-production editing was done in Moscow and the studio has a close relationship with Mosfilm, the country's leading film-making outfit.

ChechenFilm has been involved in two other productions since it was set up, according to its website: a 2014 film titled "Eternal Like the Mountains," also directed by Terekbayev, and another 2014 movie, called "Security," commissioned by state-owned Channel One.

The studio was criticized in August last year by architectural preservation organization Arkhnadzor for apparently setting alight a damaged 19th-century building in Grozny to provide the background for a film shoot.

One-Man Band?

The nascent Chechen film industry appears to be heavily under the influence of Terekbayev.

As well as key roles in "Call of the Heart," the film's opening sequence thanks advertising company Cometa Media and the Dostoinstvo Foundation for their support. Cometa Media lists Terekbayev as its founder and director, and he is also reportedly the president of Dostoinstvo.

Terekbayev, 35, graduated as a pediatrician from the State Medical Academy in the southern Russian city of Astrakhan before moving into the film industry. He is currently director of the state cinematographic agency under the Chechen Ministry of Culture and his profile on the social media network Instagram suggests he is related by marriage to Chechen leader Kadyrov.

A series of scandals in recent months has propelled Kadyrov to the forefront of Russian politics, and his critics accuse him of turning Chechnya, which was ravaged by a series of separatist wars in the 1990s, into his own personal fiefdom. The strongman, who has been heavily criticized for his human rights record, expresses his frequent devotion to Russian

President Vladimir Putin.

Kadyrov also has a penchant for surrounding himself with famous international actors and he has been visited in Grozny by Hollywood stars Hilary Swank and Jean-Claude van Damm, as well as French actor Gerard Depardieu who took up Russian citizenship in 2013.

Beyond Chechnya

Roman Volkov, a Russian screenwriter who worked on the script for "Call of the Heart," told The Moscow Times that he studied Chechen traditions before he began writing, and that the film's high quality and glimpses into Chechen life give it value for audiences outside the mainly Muslim republic as well as within it.

"Call of the Heart" can be watched in Chechen cinemas from Monday, but Terekbayev said it would be shown in 27 cinemas across the country, LifeNews reported.

"[The series] is a way of smoothing out relations between Russia and Chechnya ... art is a lot more important than weapons," Volkov said by telephone.

Aside from continuing work on "Call of the Heart," it was not immediately clear what other projects ChechenFilm was involved in. Terekbayev has said that prominent Russian actor Sergei Bezrukov has agreed to appear in a ChechenFilm production, RIA Novosti reported.

No-one at the film studio answered repeated telephone calls Monday.

It remained unclear whether ChechenFilm was linked to Kadyrov's announcement in May that he would take the leading role in a blockbuster called "Whoever Doesn't Understand Will Get It." A trailer from the movie posted at the time showed a camouflage-clad Kadyrov firing a machine gun into the sky.

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