

IN THIS ISSUE

- What is it to be Russian? 1
- Stability at a price 5
- Russia's Orthodox Church: atop the hierarchy again? 8
- Kiselev's team returns to TV-6 10
- Freedom of speech: not in one paper 13
- Dagestan's Amirov, the survivor 16
- Kyrgyz patriotism rekindled 21

**RUSSIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY
TOWARD THE "NEAR ABROAD"**

By Taras Kuzio

In the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the only republic with no institutions of its own was the Russian SFSR. This was rectified only in 1990 by President Boris Yeltsin, who sought to build a power base independent of the Soviet Union, which was ruled by his arch enemy, Mikhail Gorbachev. These new Russian institutions were later supplemented by Soviet ones.

Each of the fourteen non-Russian republics included a titular nation that "owned" the republic as its homeland. These Soviet republican ethnic identities competed with a more civic Soviet identity at the all-union level. Nationality policies in all fourteen non-Russian republics forged intense loyalties to their territorial boundaries, reflected in the high support given to territorial integrity.

In some cases—Central Asia, for example—Soviet policies facilitated nation building and Russification was not so abrasive. In others, like Ukraine and Belarus, Russification was highly intensive from the 1950s to the 1980s in order to produce an eastern Slavic core majority for the Soviet Union. Even today, the Soviet Belarusian identity—which President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has promoted since 1994—is stronger than the Belarusian ethno-cultural one. In Ukraine a Soviet identity was prevalent only in the Donbass in the early 1990s, but it has since declined. Nevertheless, the Soviet legacy produced a more widespread Russophile orientation in the Russified cities of eastern Ukraine.

The Russian SFSR had no republican institutions because "Russia" and the "Soviet Union" were conflated into one identity. In the Soviet era, Russian nationalist groups had a completely different agenda from nationalist groups in the non-Russian republics. Russian nationalism was similar to British, which sought to maintain an empire or great state and prevent the secession of outlying regions. Non-Russian nationalism sought to establish independent states and was therefore more analogous to Irish nationalism within Great Britain. Russian dissident groups, like that of Mikhail Gorbachev, did not seek to take the Russian SFSR out of the Soviet Union, but merely to "democratize" it. Today no major Russian political group—again unlike nationalist groups in the non-Russian successor states—seeks to withdraw Russia from the Commonwealth of Independent States.

*"Russia" and
the "Soviet
Union" were
conflated into
one identity.*

A second problem Russia faces is that there is no historical precedent to fall back on in building a nation-state. A minority of Russian intellectuals has proposed that Vladimir-Suzdal/Muscovy be the base upon which to draw a historical antecedent. But Russia's elites have largely ignored this. The more popular view is of Russia as a "great

power,” however untrue it is in the non-nuclear sphere. As a great power the new Russian nation-state needs to seek legitimacy from its imperial and Soviet past, not from Muscovy. This is clearly President Vladimir Putin’s preference, as seen in the continued use of the Russian double-headed eagle and the music of the Soviet anthem.

By choosing to build a post-Soviet identity on the basis of Russia’s imperial/Soviet past, rather than Muscovy, the new Russian state will be unable to forge a modern Russian identity. This would require “the deconstruction of the symbiosis between Russian and Soviet imperial identity.” [1] Western policy towards Russia that continues to play up to Russian demands to be treated as a “great power” therefore serves only to harm the creation of a modern Russian nation-state.

What is Russia?

For Russians the Soviet Union, not the Russian SFSR, was their homeland. It is not surprising that it has been difficult in the post-Soviet era to withdraw the Russian national consciousness to the boundaries of the Russian Federation, and especially problematic in relation to Ukraine and Belarus. Opinion polls in Russia since 1992 have consistently shown that a majority of Russians do not see Ukrainians and Belarusians as separate ethnic groups but as somehow “Russian.”

Equating “Russia” with only the Russian Federation will take place over many decades in the process of nation building. This process is not helped by a foreign policy ideology that repeatedly refers to Russia as a “great power” or by Russia providing continued sustenance to an eastern Slavic union with Belarus that Russia defines as the incorporation of Belarus within Russia, a policy that even Lukashenka rejects. [2] Russia continually makes overtures to Ukraine to join this union without understanding that in Ukraine only the extreme left support such a move. Not only national democrats, but all centrist, oligarch parties as well, are opposed to Ukraine’s membership in the Russia-Belarus union.

A movement to support the Union of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia (ZUBR) is active in all three countries and Moldova. It received 0.43 percent of the vote in Ukraine’s parliamentary elections in March. It has 130 deputies in Russia’s State Duma and had the same number in the outgoing Ukrainian parliament, mainly drawn from the communists. But since the Communist party of Ukraine’s faction nearly halved as a result of the March election, to sixty-six deputies, the number of ZUBR cross-faction members in the newly elected Ukrainian parliament are likewise reduced. The founding congress of the Moldovan branch of ZUBR took place in November 2001 in Chisinau and Valeriy Klimenko, leader of the Ravnopraviye (Equal Rights) movement, was elected its head.

In the Crimea, the Russian Bloc, which won only 0.73 percent of the national vote, was composed of regional branches of the Ukrainian Slavic Party and the Party of Slavic Unity. Its Russian nationalist program called for the transformation of the Crimea into a Russian autonomous republic, opposed quotas in the Crimean Supreme Soviet for Tatars, and demanded the recognition of Russians as a second titular (indigenous) ethnic group in Ukraine. Yet these ideas proved to be unpopular even in the Crimea. In the March Ukrainian parliamentary elections, the Russian Bloc came in third in the city of Sevastopol, with 8.86 percent, and fifth in the Crimea, with 4.76 percent, receiving nearly half of the 9.77 percent received by former Prime Minister Viktor Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine, which came in third place. Crimea, the only region of Ukraine with an ethnic Rus-

THE JAMESTOWN FOUNDATION

4516 43rd Street NW
Washington, DC • 20016
Tel: (202) 483-8888 • Fax: (202) 483-8337
E-mail: pubs@jamestown.org
<http://www.jamestown.org>
Copyright ©2002

JONAS BERNSTEIN & HELEN GLENN COURT, EDITORS

Prism is published by The Jamestown Foundation, as are its companion publications, the daily *Monitor*, *Russia's Week* and the biweekly *Fortnight in Review*. For information about subscribing to these publications, please contact the Jamestown Foundation.

The Jamestown Foundation, through its programs, encourages democracy, civil liberty and free enterprise in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union. Jamestown’s publications give its readers a realistic, accurate, and unbiased view of events in the Russian Federation, the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Central Asia and the Caucasus.

sian majority, prefers to vote for the supra-national communists. They came first in the Crimea and Sevastopol, with 33.91 and 32.73 percent, respectively.

The question “what is Russia?” has ramifications in other areas. Post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography and school-books have gradually “nationalized” the history of Kyiv Rus’ as the first Ukrainian state. The city of Kyiv has numerous monuments to Kyiv Rus’ heroes. This past January President Putin instructed historians specializing in Rus’ to “gain insight into how to form a national ideology” and advise him in answering the question “What Russian city can be considered the historical and cultural center of Russian civilization?” [3] Which city will Russian historians come up with in answer to this question? In 1982 the city of Kyiv celebrated its 1,500th anniversary, making it 600 years older than Moscow. Who then is the real “elder brother”?

The weakness of Russian ethnic nationalism

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, it was widely feared that the 24.8 million Russians living outside the Russian SFSR in the non-Russian republics would mobilize along the same lines as the Serbs in the former Yugoslavia. In a Russian Public Opinion Monitor poll taken last year, 73 percent of Russians thought “often or very often” that Russians living abroad are subject to discrimination. Another 18 percent thought about this “sometimes or rarely” and only 1 percent never did.

The mobilization of Russians outside Russia, however, has not occurred. The question is why it has not. In Moldova the secession of the Transdnister republic had less to do

with ethnic Russian nationalism than with a regional regime that had supported the August 1991 putsch and mobilized Russian speakers with a Soviet-eastern Slavic ideology. Lukashenka promotes a similar ideology, except that he has less use for the Russian imperial past than the Transdnister regime did.

One explanation for the weakness of Russian nationalism in the former Soviet Union, and therefore the inabil-

ity of Russians outside Russia to mobilize, is the lack of an ethno-cultural base. Serbian ethnic nationalism developed within the independent nation-state that preceded Yugoslavia. And within Yugoslavia itself the Serbs had their own republican institutions.

This was very different to Russian experience in the Soviet Union. Prior to the formation of the USSR in 1922, Russian identity was shaped within an all-Russian imperial framework, not a nation-state. This supra-national identity continued after the fall of the tsar. Russian identity is therefore more imperial and statist than ethno-cultural. As we see in the case of Ukraine, only regions with strong ethno-cultural identities (those in the west and center) can mobilize the population. Where identity is confused, regional or civic-territorial, as in eastern and southern Ukraine, mobilization has proved difficult. In addition, groups that cut across ethnic lines (Russian-speakers, for example) tend to reduce mobilization and thus ethnic conflict. In contrast to the weak performance of pure ethnic Russian parties, those who champion supra-national ideologies (such as the Communists) are more successful in attracting voters.

Because the Soviet Union promoted Russian identity only within the framework of an all-Soviet supra-national identity, there is a lack of an identity grounded in ethno-cultural terms. The post-Soviet Russian identity is thus an amalgam of Soviet, pan-eastern Slavic and Russian imperial constructs rather than a purely ethnic Russian one. According to a poll taken in the summer of 2001 by the Public Opinion Foundation only 68 percent of Russians consider themselves Slavs. Twenty-eight percent believe “Slav” is equivalent to “Russian,” 16 percent believe “Slav” applies to all three eastern Slavs and 6 percent said “Slav” includes other ethnic groups as well.

Another reason that conflict has not erupted is that it is a misnomer to define the Russians outside the Russian Federation as a diaspora. Western observers of the former Soviet Union tend to apply the Western understanding of ethnicity as being primordially based to the results of the

*The mobilization of
Russians outside Russia,
however, has not
occurred.*

last Soviet census, which was taken in 1989. This census found 24.8 million Russians living outside the Russian SFSR, half of whom were in Ukraine. In reality, those who classified themselves as Russians in the 1989 census were not always ethnic Russians, because of the conflation of Russian and Soviet identity referred to earlier. It is more likely that “Russian” in the 1989 census had the supra-national territorial-civic meaning of “rossiyanin” rather than ethnic meaning of “ruski.” Among these “rossiyanye” there were ethnic Russians, those who said they were Russians for career advancement and others who had mixed marriages where one partner was a Russian. In Ukraine, for example, 30 percent of marriages in the Soviet era were mixed, especially in eastern Ukraine. Some 18.9 million of the 24.8 million Russians outside the Russian Federation live in the non-Russian successor states of the former Soviet Union.

Thus there are indications that the December 2001 Ukrainian census may show a radical decline in the number of Russians living in Ukraine, because some of those who defined themselves as Russians in 1989 will now identify themselves as ethnic Ukrainians. In Eastern Europe “citizenship” and “nationality” are often used interchangeably. Although Ukrainian passports do not indicate ethnicity, as did their Soviet predecessors, birth certificates still do. The decline in Ukraine’s population by 4 million since 1989 will also affect the urban east more than the rural west and center, where birth rates have not gone down to the degree they have elsewhere in the country.

Russia’s confusion over its identity is seen in the debate over who should be protected by Russia outside the Russian Federation—ethnic Russians or compatriots. The Russian Orthodox Church, which is the state church in Belarus and the largest of the three Orthodox denominations in Ukraine, uses Russians and compatriots interchangeably. Patriarch Aleksy II told a group of Russians that “you are flesh and blood of our people” and “we see it as our duty to take part in all actions aimed at consolidating the unity of our compatriots living abroad.”

Russia has also viewed the former USSR as an exclusively Russian sphere of influence.

Putin told the Congress of Russian Compatriots last October that by “compatriots” he meant a spiritual community of different ethnic groups oriented towards Russian culture and language. Nevertheless, the congress was criticized for being more of “ornamental-propagandistic character” than substantive. [4] Indeed, Russia is unlikely to push too aggressively on this issue in order not to alienate such countries as Ukraine. Russia will, however, continue to applaud political parties within Ukraine, Moldova and elsewhere in the CIS that support upgrading the Russian language to an “official” or second state language, as in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

As with the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin’s policies are confused. In March 2001 a presidential decree ordering the Foreign Ministry to protect the rights of “compatriots” in the CIS followed the resuscitation of the government Commission on Compatriots Affairs. This will prove difficult because new legislation in areas such as citizenship does not give special preference to Russophone immigrants from the CIS. Russia withdrew from the Bishkek agreement on visa-free travel within the CIS. There is still no Russian legal term for compatriots (sootechestvenniki), though it is usually understood as referring to Russophones in the former Soviet Union.

Russian identity and CIS policies

Russian identity cannot confine itself only to the boundaries of the Russian Federation because of the legacy of the Soviet Union, in which Russian and Soviet were the same. Russia has consistently attempted to speak on behalf of the CIS in the international arena on questions like NATO enlargement or in protesting actions like NATO’s bombing of Kosovo and Serbia, much to the chagrin of states such as Ukraine.

Russia has also viewed the former USSR as an exclusively Russian sphere of influence. In Moldova and Belarus, Russia is interested only in geopolitics and ignores the lack of human rights and support for political-economic reform. In the recent Ukrainian elections, the Russian ambassador to Ukraine, Viktor Chernomyrdin,

along with other high-ranking officials, openly interfered by calling on Ukrainian voters to vote for “pro-Russian” forces (that is, not Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine). During the campaign, Putin met only one Ukrainian party leader, Petro Symonenko, leader of the Ukrainian communists, during a meeting with Russian communist leader Gennady Zyuganov.

Russia has opposed the enlargement of NATO into the former USSR and reserved for itself the exclusive right to undertake peacekeeping missions in the region. In reality, Russian peacekeeping operations in Moldova and Georgia have served only to freeze conflicts on the ground in Moscow’s geopolitical favor. Thus Russia’s military establishment loudly protested the arrival of American military advisers in Georgia. The likely enlargement of NATO to the three Baltic states at the upcoming Prague summit, something Russia has long opposed, will force Russia to withdraw its no-go “red line” for NATO to the CIS.

Russian identity has also influenced Russia’s unwillingness to accept a “hard” definition of CIS borders. While not opposing the continued demarcation of CIS “external borders,” which these states inherited from the USSR, Russia has opposed the demarcation of “internal borders” in the CIS. It views the CIS as neither fully sovereign nor quite like the former USSR, but something in-between—a “Near Abroad.”

Notes

1. Mark Beissinger, “Elites and Ethnic Identity in Soviet and Post-Soviet Policies” in Alexander J. Motyl ed., *The Post-Soviet Nations. Perspectives on the Demise of the USSR* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p 150.
2. Taras Kuzio, “Virtual Foreign Policy in Belarus and Russia,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, vol. VII, issue 11 (November 2001).
3. *Versiya*, no. 1, 2002.
4. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 10 July 2001.

Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Russian & East European Studies, University of Toronto.

PUTIN MARKS HIS FIRST TWO YEARS IN OFFICE

By Elena Chinyaeva

March 26 of this year marked the midway point of President Vladimir Putin’s first term as president and, as such, was a convenient date for drawing intermediate conclusions about his presidency. In reality, Vladimir Putin has been in power de facto since August 9, 1999, when he was promoted from the post of Federal Security Service (FSB) chief to that of prime minister. In addition, he appears to be well positioned to win the next presidential election and thus a second term in office. What is clear is that during the relatively short time he has been in power, Russia has changed a great deal and attained a certain level of stability. It is not, however, the stability of a society bored by its economic prosperity and political predictability, but that of a society tired of economic chaos and political turmoil and ready to pay whatever it takes to avoid further upheavals.

*...despite their
revolutionary character,
these events not only did
not undermine the
achieved stability...*

Revolutions to seal stability

The presidential mid-term coincided with two events: the outcome of a tender for the TV-6 television channel’s frequency and the ousting of the Communists from their committee chairmanships in the State Duma—events which would have been unthinkable just a couple years ago. But despite their revolutionary character, these events not only did not undermine the achieved stability, but also sealed it. They also turned out to have best illustrated the current situation in Russia.

On March 26, the license to broadcast on the Russian TV channel 6 was given to MediaSotsium, a team of the journalists headed by Yevgeny Kiselev and backed by a group of well-known Russian entrepreneurs, including Anatoly Chubais, the “father” of Russian privatization and now the head of the state electricity monopoly, in alliance with Yevgeny Primakov, the head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce (RTP), and Arkady Volsky, the head of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs (RSPP). A stranger alliance is hard to imagine. In the last two years, Kiselev’s team first left NTV and

then TV-6 as the authorities, eager to put in practice Putin's declaration that "all oligarchs should be equally far from power," drove the owners of the channels—Vladimir Gusinsky and Boris Berezovsky, respectively—from Russia, stripping them of their television ownerships in the process. Kiselev, who has long portrayed himself as a fiery fighter for the freedom and independence of press, then found new sponsors in a group of well-known businessmen, many of whom he had not so long ago sharply criticized—given that they belonged to a rival political clique, along with Volsky and Primakov, both notoriously statist in their views and the latter particularly known for being unable to handle media scrutiny.

Under President Boris Yeltsin, the mass media in Russia, not satisfied with their role as the "fourth estate," asking the authorities inconvenient questions and provoking public debate on various issues, usurped the role of political prophets and powerbrokers. It was the anticommunist propaganda in the mass media that helped Yeltsin defeat Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov in the 1996 presidential election. Afterwards, the media magnates considered themselves the real power in the country and used their outlets as heavy artillery in feuds and power struggles. During Putin's presidential campaign, Boris Berezovsky's media backed the acting president while Vladimir Gusinsky's opposed him, but both oligarchs lost out after Putin's victory. Two years and a number of court decisions later, both men are living outside Russia, and not one media outlet dares play powerbroker.

Unfortunately, neither do any of them dare any longer to ask the authorities inconvenient questions. Interestingly, no one has actually prohibited them from doing so. Many in the profession have simply assumed that it is out of the question. Kiselev was no different: During the first press conference after MediaSotsium won the tender for TV-6's broadcasting license, he and Primakov, even before saying a word about the new TV station's creative concept, began discussing the main principle for their future work together—self-censorship.

As the echo of the media revolution died down, a parliamentary revolution was starting.

As the echo of the media revolution died down, a parliamentary revolution was starting. During a closed meeting on April 1, the leaders of four centrist factions in the Duma—Unity, Fatherland-All Russia (OVR), People's Deputy and Russia's Regions—along with two rightist factions, the Union of Right-Wing Forces (SPS) and Yabloko, decided to reconsider the package agreement on the distribution of committee chairmanships reached at the start of 2000 between the centrist factions and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF). On the April 3, the Duma voted to sack the Communists from the leading positions in seven of the nine committees they chaired. (Altogether there are twenty-eight committees in the Duma.) In protest, KPRF gave up two other committees and appealed to the speaker Gennady Seleznev, who is a party member, to leave his post. Seleznev refused to do so. The Communists also lost their grip on Duma's material resources, including postal, printing, telephone and other services, which they were known to use excessively, when their representative, Nikolai Troshkin, was sacked as the Duma's superintendent.

The ousting of the Communists happened quickly and smoothly, as if it had not been preceded by a decade-long attempt to strip them of political influence. Under Yeltsin, the Communists and their left-wing allies dominated the parliament, effectively blocking the actions of the reformist government. Reforms were implemented by presidential decrees rather than by laws. The KPRF's position was seriously shaken after the 1999 parliamentary elections, when they lost their majority to centrist factions. In March 2001, a rather clumsy attempt was made to weaken their influence further. The centrists threatened to support a vote of no confidence against the government of Mikhail Kasyanov proposed by the Communists, which could have resulted in dismissal of the Duma and new elections, in which the centrists hoped to steal away more votes of the KPRF's electorate. The plot was not implemented, however, and the Duma rejected the no-confidence measure.

And rightly so, given that the same result was achieved a year later with almost no time or effort expended. This

was possible because Russian politics, largely nonideological and prone to factionalism, has been restructured into a clear three-party political system. Following the merger late last year of Unity, OVR and other smaller groups into a new party called United Russia, the centrists have become the dominant political force, and a clearly pro-presidential one. Centrist deputies in the parliament began acting as a group and before long realized that they no longer had to make deals with leftist factions in order to get pro-presidential legislation approved. The parties on the right, the Union of the Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko, which were largely excluded in the divvying up of committees two years ago, seized on the opportunity to improve their own situation, taking over three committees from the Communists.

*What Russia's
democrats were unable
to achieve in ten years
has been done in two
under Putin.*

What Russia's democrats were unable to achieve in ten years has been done in two under Putin. Unfortunately, the process of reaching a societal consensus on key issues through representative democracy appears also to have been handicapped, because all pro-presidential Duma legislation can now be approved without serious debate. This is without doubt stability, but it is also stability at the expense of plurality.

Stability at a price

These two developments illustrate the situation in Russian society under President Putin very well. Having inherited a huge country in a state of economic and political disorder, his administration has acted swiftly and consistently to achieve stability. But it has come with a price.

The separatist tendencies of the Russian regional leaders were quickly suppressed after major changes in the procedures for forming the Federation Council meant the end of the upper chamber of the parliament as an independent political factor. With its new speaker, Sergei Mironov, who began his term by proposing that the presidential term be extended from four to seven years, the Federation Council shall no doubt be a useful presidential instrument. The Constitutional Court recently ruled that the president has the right to sack the elected governors

if they abuse power. Thus the threat of the country becoming a confederation has been eliminated, but the Federation Council has virtually ceased being an important part of the legislative branch of state power.

As part of the war on corruption, the president has initiated judicial reforms aimed at making the courts more independent and preventing human right abuses by the law enforcement agencies. From now on, arrest warrants will be issued, not by prosecutors, as before, but by the courts. The green light to uncover abuses of power and economic misconduct, however, has led to activities on the part of the Tax Police and Prosecutor General's Office that have aroused concerns. The latter has launched investigations into a number of well-known Russian companies, in some instances causing a dramatic fall in their share prices.

Some observers contend this is being done on command "from above" and thus could undermine the efforts to make Russia's judicial system modern and effective.

In the economic sphere, success has been evident in statistics. The economy grew 5.5 percent in 1999, 8.3 percent in 2000 and 5 percent in 2001. Inflation has dropped—36.5 percent in 1999, 20.2 percent in 2000, and 18.6 percent in 2001 (which was still higher than the 12-14 percent envisaged in the 2001 budget and the 11 percent registered in pre-crisis 1997). The government has also launched a number of structural reforms, the most important being the 13-percent flat income tax now in effect. It could not, however, present a coherent economic development program, one that would give the business community a clear orientation. No effective steps have been taken, especially in the tax sphere, to stimulate the development of small and medium-sized businesses.

In the international arena, Russia under Putin appears to have turned from an outsider into a darling of the West. Putin was the first world leader to call President Bush after September 11 terrorist attacks, conveying Russia's sympathies and its readiness to cooperate and thereby making it almost a strategic partner of the West. The

results of this rapid rapprochement have been mixed. On the one hand, Russia was promised help in entering the World Trade Organization and being recognized as a market economy. During Putin's recent visit to Germany, for instance, he was able to set the exchange rate for the Soviet Union's debt of 6.35 billion rubles to the former German Democratic Republic at 500 million Euros. On the other hand, Russia's declared closeness to the West and the United States in particular has impeded its ability to maneuver and thus allowed the U.S. military to gain a presence in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and even in Georgia.

And so while there is a stability, it comes at a price for both Russia and Putin. Some observers have already begun to compare him to Mikhail Gorbachev during the Soviet leader's latter years in power, who became a popular figure in the West but lost all his popularity at home and was eventually forced to leave his office as the country plunged into a decade of turmoil. Another such outcome would be too high a price to pay, even for the current stability.

Elena Chinyaeva, who holds a doctorate in modern history from Oxford University, is a writer with the leading Russian political weekly Kommersant-Vlast.

REVISING RUSSIAN RELIGIOUS LEGISLATION

By Mikhail Zherebyatev

In early 2002 State Duma deputy Aleksandr Chuev, head of the tiny Christian Democratic Party of Russia, published his own version of the Federal law "On traditional religious organizations in the Russian Federation." Chuev belongs to the pro-presidential and simultaneously pro-governmental faction—which is currently Edinstvo (Unity)—in the lower house of the Russian parliament. In 2000 he was elected to the Duma from the lists of the electoral party of the same name, hastily thrown together by Kremlin spin-doctors from among the members of various unknown parties, movements, corporate

organizations and even mass interest groups, at the core of which are high-earning commercial organizations (one example being the television viewers' organization My Family, run by Valery Komissarov, who is now a member of the Duma himself).

Presenting his bill, Chuev stated bluntly that, before sitting down to write the draft, he had consulted Putin on the matter and Putin had approved. There has as yet been no response to this claim from the president, his administration or his informal circle. Chuev stresses that his text is designed first and foremost to encourage broad public debate. Only then does he plan to present it to the lower house of the Russian parliament for discussion. The project calls for a fundamental revision of current religious legislation, creating a hierarchy of faiths.

Since 1990, three laws have been adopted in Russia defining the legal position of religious organizations and regulating relations between the state and religion. The first—a Soviet law—appeared in 1990; the second was passed the same year, as a law of the RSFSR, a union republic within the USSR; the third, which replaced the previous one, appeared in 1997. The Soviet law lost its validity on the break-up of the USSR, because the Russian law was already on the books by that time.

The 1990 Russian law "On freedom of conscience" was extremely democratic (though not without its defects). It declared all religious organizations to be equal before the law. It introduced a procedure whereby religious organizations could apply for status as legal entities. It did not place in the path of newly formed religious organizations any obstacles to prevent them from becoming social institutions. Many organizations emerged from the underground, some renewed their activities after a long break (returning from abroad), and entirely new religions also appeared, some of which had existing structures in other countries, and some of which were purely Russian in origin. As an extension to the declaration of noninterven-

The project calls for a fundamental revision of current religious legislation, creating a hierarchy of faiths.

tion by the state in religious affairs, the law abolished the state body in Russia (the Council for Religious Affairs under the aegis of the cabinet), which in Soviet times had monitored the activities of religious organizations. In addition to this, the law proclaimed the principle of unimpeded dissemination of religious beliefs and practices.

The basis for mutual relations?

Georgy Poltavchenko, the president's envoy in the Central Federal District (who was until recently a member of one of the security structures) has described traditional religious organizations as the "focal point for healthy forces and the bulwark of morality." Poltavchenko has called for agreements on cooperation to be signed with such organizations. Given the current legal framework, however, such agreements are not capable of changing the legal status of religious organizations and therefore of increasing the rights of some and reducing the rights of others.

Thus, at the top of the hierarchy of faiths, according to Chuev's draft, should be what he calls the "traditional religious organization of the Russian Federation." One rung lower would be the "traditional religious organizations of individual peoples of the Russian Federation." Lower still would be "traditional historic religious organizations." Completing the list are what he calls "representations of foreign religious organizations." If we take the parameters laid down in Chuev's bill (number of followers, length of activity and contribution to the historical and cultural heritage of the peoples of Russia), and project them onto the religious organizations present in Russia, then we obtain the following picture.

The "all-Russian traditional organization" can be none other than, irrefutably, the Russian Orthodox Church. The "religious organizations of individual peoples" are Muslim, Buddhist and perhaps Jewish organizations, which are mainly located in the Russian regions. The "traditional historic religious organizations" may apply to Jewish organizations, and also religious groups of the smaller

peoples of the North, Siberia and the Far East who apply to shamans for spiritual guidance, and also ethnically based faiths among the larger ethnic groups of Russia, such as Russian Old Believers, the Molokan and Dukhobor sects, Orthodox Tatars (known as "Kryasheny") and Lutheran Germans. Among Protestants, the only people who may rely on qualifying for this group—and only then hypothetically—are Russia's Baptists and Adventists. The Roman Catholic Church will obviously be classed among the "representations of traditional foreign religious organizations."

The bill contains a provision that makes it attractive to Russia's large religious corporations, as it allows for them to be funded from public budgets at various levels. It even envisages the financing of religious organizations' educational programs and the appointment of chaplains to military units, which is forbidden under the current Russian Constitution.

It even envisages the financing of religious organizations' educational programs and the appointment of chaplains to military units, which is forbidden under the Russian Constitution.

In early March the Moscow Patriarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church published a report of its department for external ecclesiastical relations, giving official approval to the project and the idea contained within it of assigning different rights to different religions. It also spoke out in favor of further restriction of the rights of "representations of traditional foreign religious organizations" (to use the terminology of Chuev's bill). The Moscow Patriarchy believes that in Chuev's draft, such organizations have the same number of rights as those of the third category ("traditional historic religious organizations").

The leaders of Russia's large Protestant organizations gave their reaction to the bill at almost the same time as the Russian Orthodox Church. These included Petr Konovalchik of the Union of Evangelical Baptist Christians, Sergei Ryakhovsky of the Russian Association of the Evangelic Faith Union (Pentecostalists), Pavel Okar of the Christian Evangelic Union (Pentecostalists) and Vasily Stolyar of the Western Russian Union of Seventh-

Day Adventists. They said they were ready to hold talks with the bill's author, but described the document as a "backward step" and expressed concern that passing the law would carry the risk of intervention in the internal affairs of religious organizations, leading to increased high-handedness on the part of local officials. The signatories also noted that the new bill appeared soon after religious organizations had undergone the complex procedure of re-registration. This had created some element of disorganization in the activities of religious communities in Russia, and had used up a great deal of believers' strength, nervous energy and time.

In addition to Russia's Protestant leaders, the board of directors of the Russian branch of the International Association for Religious Freedom also reacted to Chuev's draft bill. The statement of this human rights organization said that the proposed amendments violated the basic principle of a secular state—the separation of religious organizations from the state—and gave the cultural concept of "tradition" legal status. Human rights activists are convinced that this will lead to a division of believers into different categories with unequal rights, and will contribute to destabilization in interfaith relations.

Mikhail Zherebyatev is a specialist with the International Institute for Humanitarian and Political Research in Moscow.

PUTIN'S TACTICS FOR COMPROMISE WITH THE LIBERALS

By Aleksandr Tsipko

One of March's more significant events was the decision of the press ministry's competition commission to return the rights to the sixth TV channel to the team headed by Yevgeny Kiselev. Officially, a competitive tender resulted in a victory for Media-Sotsium, which is made up of three groups: (1) oligarchs close to the Kremlin, led by Anatoly Chubais, who are guaranteeing the funding of the project; (2) the political heavyweights, ex-premier Yevgeny Primakov and chairman of the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Arkady Volsky;

and (3) Yevgeny Kiselev's team of journalists, comprising staff from Vladimir Gusinsky's NTV. It was probably necessary to create this complex amalgam, a sort of political sandwich, in order to reconcile the interests of the Family with those of Putin. Clearly, in Russia today, the fate of a mainstream TV channel could not be resolved without Putin's intervention, either direct or indirect, in the competition. He was undoubtedly the central, decisive member of the jury. Russia has always had a monocentric system, even under Yeltsin. There can be no doubt either that the bankruptcy proceedings against Boris Berezovsky's TV-6 were also conducted at Putin's instigation.

All this gives substance to the claim that the competition commission's decision on the fate of the sixth TV channel was primarily political. More than this, the decision was a model of its kind, as a reflection of Putin's current psychology, objectives, tactics and strategy. It shows who Putin's current allies are and who he's prepared to upset.

Behind the decision

Let us look, first of all, at the psychology behind the decision. It is yet another manifestation of Putin's recent Hamlet syndrome. With few exceptions, he is currently incapable of saying a definite "yes" or "no" on any single question concerning his personnel. Stories of Putin's iron will and his determined pursuit of his objectives were clearly exaggerated. In recent months Putin seems effectively to have given up his earlier policy of decisive, headlong action in favor of preserving the status quo and trying to surround himself with people with whom he is likely to agree. Here are just a few eloquent examples. Putin disbands the Clemency Commission headed by the well-known liberal and rights activist Anatoly Pristavkin. But, at the same time, he appoints this same Pristavkin as one of his advisers. He sacks the chief of staff of the Northern Fleet, Vice Admiral Mikhail Motsak, following the findings of the enquiry into the causes of the loss of the Kursk. Then he unexpectedly appoints him to a senior government post as first deputy to the presidential envoy in the North-Western Federal District.

It shows who Putin's current allies are and who he's prepared to upset.

It's exactly the same with the Kiselev team. First, for some far-fetched legal reason they are forced off the airwaves. But then the same team, with a bit of padding, is hailed as a creative, gifted collective, and declared the victor in the race to win the same channel back again.

Putin, both as an old KGB hand and as a generally guarded man, will not have forgotten the past, or how Kiselev and his team gave him such a pasting on Gusinsky's NTV during the presidential election campaign in early 2000. And to be honest, no one could have forgiven the Gusinsky team—Kiselev, Igor Malashenko and Andrei Cherkizov—for their off-handed arrogance and the personal insults with which they peppered their reports on Putin as a presidential candidate. I don't think that Yevgeny Kiselev will ever be a friend of Putin. The Itogi presenter dropped clear hints, in early 2000, of a connection between the Moscow apartment house bombings and the beginning of the presidential campaign.

But it is now clear that Putin, whatever his feelings and antipathies, is simply not in a position to clear the TV screen of all his detractors—

Yevgeny Kiselev and all those who remained loyal to him. And this is because Kiselev and his team have the backing of the liberal community of the West and, more particularly, the United States. For the West, forcing the old NTV and then Berezovsky's TV-6 off the air still looks like an infringement of freedom of speech. Putin has to bear this in mind. The impression now is that he will refrain from making any serious move that might cause trouble with the USA or give them grounds to accuse him of violating freedom of speech or the democratic rights of the people. Putin declined to comment even when Radio Freedom began broadcasting in the Chechen language, which is surely a direct interference in Russia's internal affairs.

At least until George W. Bush visits Russia in May, Putin is unlikely to do anything that might damage his standing as a Westernizer or interfere with his ambition to establish a special, amicable relationship with the G-7 leaders.

At the same time, Putin needs to bear in mind that Kiselev and his team have the backing of the oligarchs led by Anatoly Chubais. The idea of creating a consortium of big business leaders to provide financial backing for the Kiselev team was quite a surprise for Putin. He was troubled by the consortium's inclusion of key oligarchs from the Family, including Abramovich, Deripaska, Mamut and even an associate of the Petersburgers, Fridman. At first, Putin and his inner circle even tried to apply pressure to the signatories; Putin saw the creation of this consortium of the wealthiest people in Russia as a mutiny and a hostile act. Hence his first attempts to take the wayward oligarchs in hand.

But no one except Potanin would renege on the deal. And, after weighing up all the pros and cons, Putin decided to make his peace with the "mutineers." For the political elite, and especially for the big businessmen involved, this was proof that Putin could be opposed and that, at least at present, he is not in a position to do anything to alter the balance of political forces in the country. Putin seems to have reached the same conclusion himself. The

Putin, whatever his feelings and antipathies, is simply not in a position to clear the TV screen of all his detractors.

Kiselev saga probably showed him that he currently has no administrative, political or financial resources with which to stand up to the Family, especially when it is acting in concert with the liberal elite and big business. The old Kremlin elite, combined with the Liberal party led by Anatoly Chubais, is now simply beyond Putin's grasp. So is there anyone Putin can rely on other than those who have helped out Kiselev?

The family oligarchs

It seems at least that Putin has recently restored good relations with the leading oligarchs of the Family. In Krasnoyarsk, he gave his support to the aluminum king, Oleg Deripaska, who, through his father-in-law, Valentin Yumashev, recently became a relative of Yeltsin. Deripaska, by some accounts, has taken over the key position in the business bloc of Yeltsin's 'family', which was earlier held by Roman Abramovich. In a significant concession to the oligarchs and the Yeltsin elite as a whole,

Putin decided to sack the chairman of the Central Bank, Viktor Gerashchenko, and replace him with a Chubais man, the former first deputy finance minister, Sergei Ignatiev.

But Putin has not put himself completely in the hands of the Family. In the battle for the sixth channel, he managed to solve his tactical problems without any loss of face. Boris Berezovsky has finally lost control of the Kiselev team and the sixth channel. Putin has managed to break the haughty Kiselev, who now publicly maintains that he is no longer in touch with either Vladimir Gusinsky or Berezovsky. And it is quite possible that this former GRU officer might now serve Vladimir Putin just as zealously as he once served Gusinsky and Berezovsky. But will Putin want to have dealings with Kiselev, now that he's finally on his own? It's common knowledge that when our intelligence services, like the Americans, have broken their enemy, they want him out of their sight and will eventually throw him on the scrap heap.

Furthermore, Putin has managed to take out an insurance policy in the formation of the Media-Sotsium organization. Everything possible has been done to prevent Kiselev's team from using the sixth channel to launch a direct attack on the president. This is why the old apparatchiks and representatives of the communist nomenklatura—the head of the Russian Chamber of Commerce, Yevgeny Primakov, and the head of the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, Arkady Volsky—were included amongst the founders of Media-Sotsium. These 'heavyweights', however upstanding, and however liberal their thinking, will still not oppose the will of the president in a crisis. And should Putin need to find legal grounds for the destruction of Media-Sotsium, he can rely on Primakov and Volsky to revoke their signatures so as to invalidate Kiselev's victory in the tender.

Political strategy

But Putin's motives in deciding to award the sixth channel to the Kiselev team were more to do with politics

than tactics. And politics on the grand scale—a whole strategy, in fact.

First, and most important, Putin has always chosen to rely first and foremost on the liberal elite in the construction of his policies. This is probably because it is to the liberal elite in Russia that the overwhelming majority of the expert community, the overwhelming majority of the big businessmen and the overwhelming majority of the Russian press all belong. Russia, unlike the rest of Western Europe, such as England, France and Germany, has no real right-wing conservatives or real right-wing traditionalists. The conditions in which right-wing conservatism might have flourished were wiped out by our Bolshevik revolution. It will be very hard for Putin to win the 2004 presidential elections if he dares to fall out with the liberal elite.

So, what Putin was actually doing in this instance was gritting his teeth and opting not so much for the Kiselev team as for the liberal elite. He had until then been ma-

Kiselev's victory also marks the defeat of all those who don't share his convictions and views.

neuvering back and forth, pursuing a liberal economic policy based on the support of the traditionalist masses, who dreamed of a firm hand and a great Russia and dreamed, too, of giving the oligarchs their comeuppance. It would be fair to say that Putin's liberal policies now hinge instead on a corresponding liberal force—not the masses, of course, but the intelligentsia. All that we've seen in recent days

shows how precious the opinion of that "minority" in Russia is to Putin at the moment. This minority is no more than 10 percent of the population, who continue to subscribe to the ideas and attitudes of the old NTV, who enthusiastically supported the Za Steklom series and who wanted Kiselev's team to win the contest.

Ultimately, this tactic, though risky, is justifiable. Yeltsin held on to power for so many years after October 1993 with the backing of no one but the liberal elite in the later years. Kiselev's victory, approved by the Kremlin and the Family, also marks the defeat of all those who don't share his convictions and views and who were openly

pleased at both the overthrow of the old NTV and the expropriation of Berezovsky's TV-6. As always in Russia, another victory for the Westernizers amounts to another defeat for our pchvenniki (men of the soil), our Russophiles. In this instance, it meant defeat for the Petersburg siloviki (the ex-KGB and military cadres) and for the communists. See how the Duma committees, cleansed of communists, have been falling into the hands of the liberals of the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko.

The whole story of the TV contest has shown that the Petersburg siloviki simply have no standing on information and ideological issues. Despite all their ambitions and influence, they didn't even put up a fight for the sixth channel. They were unable to gather a professional team around the banner of their so-called statist ideology. In Russia now, as it was ten or fifteen years ago, it is much easier to staff a 'pro-western' project than a "great Russian power" (derzhavny) project. Sergei Pugachev, the Orthodox banker behind the new Petersburgers has likewise failed in his plan to establish a statist PR machine. The persistent rumors on this matter remain unconfirmed.

And though great power ambitions and patriotism are proclaimed by Putin as a type of state ideology, there is no corresponding propaganda and material base to underpin it. On TV, all our patriots look like amateurs, taking the responsibility upon themselves.

Finally, in giving his support to the Kiselev team, Putin showed that he couldn't care less what the leaders of the Communist Party or the 30 percent of the population who vote for them in the elections, think of him. It is already apparent that by opting instead for the 10 percent of the population who sympathize with Kiselev's ideas and creative style, Putin has placed himself in direct opposition to the overwhelming majority, who regard liberal television as "enemy propaganda."

So, the Kiselev team's victory in the contest for the sixth channel is symbolic of Putin's definitive return to the do-

mestic and, to an even greater extent, foreign policy agenda of Boris Yeltsin. Like Yeltsin, Putin has embarked on open confrontation with the Communist Party and the Left. Like Yeltsin, Putin is pursuing a liberal economic policy. It might legitimately be said that Putin is handling the liberalization of the Russian economy even more decisively and rigorously than Yeltsin. And most importantly, as for Yeltsin, Putin's main ally in the re-election process turns out to be the liberal elite.

Yet it must be understood that, in choosing to rely on the minority, Putin is taking the old Yeltsin path of confrontation with the "major-

ity." This means that the problem of national harmony and civilian consensus in Russia is being shelved indefinitely. But, in my view, Putin had no alternative in the current circumstances. And, for the time being, there are no serious threats to Putin's liberal agenda.

The Petersburg siloviki simply have no standing on information and ideological issues.

Aleksandr Tsipko is a senior associate at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for International Economic and Political Research and a columnist for Literaturnaya Gazeta.

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF THE REGIONAL PRESS

By Mikhail Kochkin

The scandals of the past year surrounding the nationalization or closure of national privately owned media outlets (NTV, TV-6) have lent the phrase "freedom of speech" a new relevance and currency, perhaps for the first time since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Many analysts cite the threat of a similar clampdown on recalcitrant regional media outlets by local authorities as one of the main negative consequences of the "purge" of the television channels belonging to oligarchs hostile to the Kremlin. There is a clear logic to these concerns. Regional leaders, under critical fire from the local press, may be keen to find a quick solution to their pre-election problems, using the seizure of NTV and the closure of TV-6 as a signal from above indicating approval for the suppression of independent media outlets. Such a development would signal the end of free-

dom of speech in Russia—not only in the interpretation of individual political groups, but also in reality. Dangerous signs of this have been seen in a number of regions: the problems facing the Moskoviya television channel, conflicts between the local media and the governor of Ul'yanovsk Oblast, and several other examples. To understand the situation and assess the current state and prospects for the independent regional media, it is essential to recall how the Russian information market has developed over the fifteen years since perestroika.

In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union was almost the freest country in the world with regard to freedom of speech and dissemination of information. Thousands of newspapers and magazines reflected all shades of political opinion. The faith in the written word inculcated in Soviet times had not yet eroded, and any member of the middle classes, without being particularly well off, could afford to publish a newspaper with a reasonable circulation. In those days, journalism was a branch of literature, and unprecedented levels of public involvement ensured high print-runs and feedback from the readership. During this short period, Russian media outlets were truly independent. They depended on neither pressure from the state nor the oligarchs.

A short life, suddenly ended

All this came to an end in 1992 with the liberalization of prices (including prices for paper and publishing and telecommunications services). The cost of printed publications shot up tens and hundreds of times. Paradoxically, it was the democratic, liberal government of Gaidar that unwittingly contributed to the destruction of the economic basis for a free press. The Russian media will not, for the foreseeable future, be as independent or influential again.

The liberalization of prices for printed publications in particular gave rise to another important phenomenon. Against a background of hyperinflation, subscriptions generated too many problems and difficulties, and the expensive teletype system by which central newspapers

could be published simultaneously in every region of the country no longer worked. Moscow publications began to appear in the regions three or four days late, and volumes of sales outside the capital fell sharply. As a result, Moscow papers and magazines began to focus on issues relating to the capital. A wall arose between the central and the regional media. It is here today.

From 1993 onwards the Russian media existed on money made from advertising so-called financial pyramids, and business was still separate from politics. Economic independence had been forfeited, but editorial policy had yet to feel the effect.

The collapse of the financial pyramids in 1995 left the press in a parlous state. The only possible panacea came in the form of elections—first the parliamentary, then the presidential elections. With Yeltsin's popularity rating languishing in single figures just six months before the election, the authorities became interested in the media and public opinion for the first time in the history of the new Russia. Yeltsin's phenomenally successful presidential campaign demonstrated to the political elite throughout Russia that

Economic independence had been forfeited, but editorial policy had yet to feel the effect.

such a powerful resource in the battle for power as the independent media should not be left uncontrolled and underfunded. Since then, the press and television have become a decidedly political tool rather than a source of information, a means of influencing voters rather than of creating a dialog with them. Journalism has been transformed from a form of literature and public debate into a means of political struggle.

During 1995 and 1996 the regional elites and counter elites (mainly big business) gradually took control of the local media. Genuinely public, independent media outlets either ceased to exist or were taken over by new proprietors, who were far more preoccupied than their predecessors with editorial policy. At a federal level, this process occurred much later. It was Putin's media triumph of 1999-2000 that awoke the authorities to the necessity of keeping the media under control.

The death knell

Thus regional media outlets lost their true independence well before the Media-Most and TV-6 scandals erupted. Does this signify the final end to freedom of speech in Russia, as some analysts believe? The answer to this depends on how the concept is interpreted. If the main criterion for freedom of speech in the press is considered to be the objective and impartial reporting of events (a definition that in our view borders on the utopian and is realized only very rarely, in very specific political and economic conditions—such as the Soviet Union at the end of perestroika), then the answer is definitely yes.

Yet I think a more productive approach to freedom of speech would be to see it as a dynamic clash of different subjective and possibly biased viewpoints, protecting the interests of different elites. Taken separately, each of these amounts to no more than manipulative devices plus notorious dirty tricks; yet when they are smearing each other with bucketloads of compromising material, the political elites very often tell the truth about their opponents. In some sense, freedom of speech is not what is written in one newspaper, but what people can glean from a comparison of several.

The key to maintaining freedom of speech is the ongoing political process in Russia, and the chief elements of this are elections. Despite the fact that since Putin's arrival a period of relative calm has been observed in politics in Moscow (the absence of a structured opposition and the desire of many political forces to demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin), in the regions there is still a consistently high degree of political struggle. For example, not one Moscow publication—even the most opposition-minded—presumed to launch such ferocious attacks on President Putin as did a whole range of Volgograd newspapers against Governor Maksyuta prior to the elections there.

Living as they do off the regional political elites that sponsor them, regional media outlets are only well financed in the run-up to elections, and journalists wait impatiently

for the next scheduled big payday. While journalism and PR—two respected and prestigious but incompatible professions—are clearly separated in Western Europe and the United States, in Russia politically and economically independent journalism has sadly ceased to exist. The more cynically a publication behaves in this respect, the more it parades its independence in the short breaks between elections.

The almighty ruble

The roots of this state of affairs lie, specifically, in legislation. According to the current laws, anything written about a candidate during an election campaign is seen as propaganda. Outside the allocated few minutes of free airtime on local television channels, any propaganda, by law, must be paid for. Therefore, in order to publish anything negative about a candidate, a media outlet is obliged by law to ask his opponent to pay for it.

Thus existing legislation encourages journalists to undertake various forms of PR work, writing for or against a candidate in exchange for money. Independent opinions are not welcomed and are, effectively, illegal. This state of affairs contradicts Article 29 of the Russian constitution, which is the equivalent of the First Amendment to the constitution of the United States.

Sad as it is, the entire history of the 1990s in Russia represents the slow but sure destruction of the economic basis for independent journalism. The sparse (in comparison with Moscow) advertising market in the regions and far more blatant pressure on the part of the regional elites has led to a situation whereby the poorer and less well-known local media outlets are the first to lose their political independence. There is unlikely to be a quick route back to the days of perestroika and a politically neutral press. The role played by the media in Russia's regions has changed too much since then.

Today, editorial policy depends only on the political and economic interests of the proprietor. To take one example

*...a dynamic clash
of different
subjective and
possibly biased
viewpoints...*

from Volgograd: The newspaper “Den za dnev,” which belongs to the young financial oligarch Ishchenko, is known for its scandalmongering, multitudinous exposures left, right and center, and its exploitation of the theme of Russian nationalism. In the world of financial speculation in which Ishchenko is involved, it is advantageous to stir things up, to bring things to a head. Another publication, “Narodnye Izvestia,” is the industrialist Savchenko’s baby, and is noted for its considerably calmer tone and for its presentation of the views of a wide range of local politicians, because economic and political stability is very important for Savchenko’s metallurgical business. It is in his interests to bring the region’s various warring elites together for a dialog on the pages of his newspaper, and to play the honorable role of impartial referee and judge. It is through such openly partisan local media outlets that the elites communicate—an important process in Russia today.

A battle of wills

Whereas in the late 1980s and early 1990s independent regional media outlets often reflected public opinion on topical issues and served as an instrument for feedback from ordinary people to the authorities, from the mid-1990s onwards (and the situation is unlikely to change in the near future) the local media, already controlled by various proprietors with vested interests, have served as a means of communication between conflicting regional elites, dividing spheres of influence. When people in Russia or abroad write about opposition publications, they often forget that the authorities in modern Russia (particularly in the regions) are not heterogeneous, but represent a “layer cake” made up of different clans—people from the security structures, administrative structures, industry or even the mafia. The most acute political crises in Russia in the 1990s were brought about not by pressure on the authorities from public opinion (which has a minimal influence on political processes in present-day Russia), but by a breakdown in communication between various elites. Today, when almost every interest group has its own media outlet, the job of communicating without the danger of escalation is made much easier.

*...are the terms
“independent press”
and “freedom of
speech” synonymous?*

It will never be possible to achieve complete understanding between these groups; their political and economic interests are too different. However, open conflict entails a political crisis at the very least, and often bloodshed and self-destruction. Therefore at the moment there is a functioning system of “checks and balances,” PR and communication via media outlets, which have had to bid farewell to their independent line.

The question is, are the terms “independent press” and “freedom of speech” synonymous? Probably not always. After all, during election cam-

paigns, regional television channels and publications are involved in a tough information war between the clans they represent, and as a result the audience has access to full information about the people they are going to vote for. The scandals early this year about local authorities and media outlets which they find inconvenient suggest not so much that there is a threat to freedom of speech, but rather that it is in fact alive and well. Complete indifference and apathy towards pre-election propaganda would be a far more worrying symptom. Local administrations will never be able to completely subordinate the media to their will: Regional media outlets are much more mobile than federal ones, and require fewer resources; their antagonism is harder to destroy than the powerful but cumbersome Media-Most empire, for example. As long as there are rival clans from the political and business elites doing battle for power, and as long as there are voters participating in elections, freedom of speech will survive in Russia’s regions.

Mikhail Kochkin is a postgraduate in linguistic studies and a volunteer with “Eurocontact” NGO in Volgograd.

DAGESTAN’S SAID AMIROV: “ONLY DEATH WILL STOP ME”

By Zaira Abdullaeva

The mayor of Makhachkala, Said Amirov, occupies a special place amongst the politicians of Dagestan. Belonging neither to the old communist guard nor to the republic’s power-hungry, blatantly

mafia-like new leaders, Amirov serves as a buffer between the two groups. It is probably for this reason that he is a frequent target for terrorist attacks—since the mid-1990s he has survived fourteen attempts on his life.

At the end of February, a mayoral election was held in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan. It went almost unnoticed. The republic's State Council (Gossoviet), which has the constitutional right to select the form that local government elections should take, opted on this occasion not to put the election to a popular vote but to leave it to be settled by the Makhachkala city council.

Amirov was almost unanimously re-elected for a second term. Almost—because two of the forty-two deputies on the city council voted, anonymously, against him. Political experts regarded these two votes as no more than a democratic nicety: No one in Dagestan had any doubt that he would win. Amirov is one of the most powerful and promising politicians in Dagestan, and his headlong career is the product of the specific way that relations between the republic's ethnic elites have been managed in both Soviet and post-Soviet times, allowing the advancement of a man of his kind.

A matter of style

He was born in 1954 in the village of Dzhangamakhi in the Levashi region of Dagestan, which is also where the current leader of the republic, Magomedali Magomedov, comes from. In 1977 Amirov took an ordinary job in the republic's Department of Consumer Cooperation (the name for the Soviet government agency handling the purchasing of agricultural produce and raw materials such as wool and leather from farmers, and the distribution of industrial goods in rural areas).

The effective leader of the republic at that time was the first secretary of the local branch of the Communist Party, Magomed Salam Umakhanov, an ethnic Dargin, like Amirov. In the constant rivalry in Dagestan between the

two major ethnic groups, the Avars (27 percent of the republic's population) and the Dargins (17 percent), the war was conducted mainly by helping one's kinsmen to advance up the career ladder. This was possibly the reason why Amirov had become head of Dagestan's system for consumer co-operation at the end of the 1980s.

This system was deemed to be extremely lucrative—colossal sums of cash and huge quantities of industrial goods were involved, from clothing to automobiles, which were always in extremely short supply in the Soviet era. There were therefore frequent misappropriations and

other violations of the law under investigation by law enforcement agencies and the print media. Such explanations as have been given for Amirov's material wealth are generally the stuff of criminal legend, which no one has been able to confirm or deny. Amirov himself sidesteps the question in interviews.

The situation changed dramatically in the mid-1980s, when the leadership of the Dagestani party (and thus of Dagestan itself) fell to the Avars, and

the Dargins were squeezed out into secondary roles. The Dargins' highest-level representative in the government, Magomedali Magomedov, became chairman of Dagestan's Supreme Soviet, a body which was effectively a front intended to give a national face to Soviet power.

However, in 1991, with the disbanding and outlawing of the Communist Party by the first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, it was the country's Supreme Soviets that assumed complete power in the regions, at least for a while. It was at this time that, under Magomedov's leadership, an ethnically structured model for the government of Dagestan took shape.

Ethnic origin—which had always been an unspoken factor in the make-up of the republic's bureaucratic apparatus—now overtly replaced considerations of party membership.

His headlong career is the product of the specific way that relations between the republic's ethnic elites have been managed in both Soviet and post-Soviet times.

In the early 1990s, almost all of Dagestan's ethnic groups formed themselves into so-called national movements, through which new members of the ethnic elite, who were generally from the lower social classes—such as the Khachilaev brothers of the Lak People's Movement (Kazi-Kumykh) or Gadzhi Makhachaeu of the Avar National Front (named after Imam Shamil)—could be elevated to the higher echelons of power in the republic and even in Russia.

The Dargins, once in power, found it harder to mobilize themselves around a single center—rivalries within the ethnic group led to a fragmentation into several different political factions.

The might of the state machinery and especially of the law enforcement agencies, which found themselves vying with several other political forces, shrank dramatically, and every statesman of note needed to secure the backing of some real power. Said Amirov, who had been promoted to the rank of vice premier of the Dagestani government by Magomedali Magomedov in 1991, sought to protect his own position with the powerful patronage of Magomedov, now chairman of the republic's State Council. Almost immediately afterwards, the first attempt was made on Amirov's life.

The role Amirov plays in the republic is enormous. Over the last decade he has ensured the security and immutability of Dagestan's leadership, and therefore also the stability of the political situation in the republic. Hence the great authority he enjoys both with the people and within Dagestan's state apparatus. And hence—in all probability—the terrorist attacks against him. As a result of one attack in 1992, Amirov is now wheelchair-bound.

“The secret of Amirov's power is his style. While other politicians weigh up all the consequences and then go for a compromise, Amirov adopts a position of principle and pursues it regardless,” says Enver Kisriev, a Dagestani sociologist. “That's why he has so many enemies. Yet since sustain-

ing severe injuries which have forced a major change of lifestyle, Amirov has completely given up worrying about his safety.”

In the republic's government, Amirov has dealt with some of the most intractable problems, those of social services and religious organizations. In 1997 the religious conflict between Dagestan's Islamic fundamentalist Wahhabis and members of Dagestan's traditional (Sunni) faith, brought Amirov out of the shadows and into the political public eye. He was tasked with conciliating the warring parties, and although reconciliation proved unattainable, Amirov's efforts nevertheless enhanced his reputation as a man prepared to take on the most complex of problems.

In the political public eye

In February 1998, in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala, where one-quarter of the republic's population lives, the first popular mayoral election was held. Amirov was the sole Dargin candidate, while the Avars were split between the businessman Shirukhan Gadzhimuradov and the then chairman of the city council, Kurban Makhmudgadzhiev. Amirov won with a substantial majority. Before long he had become head of the republic's Union of Local Authorities, which brings together most of the heads of administration from the republic's cities and regions.

A month later, with the June 1998 election for the head of the republic approaching, Magomedali Magomedov

asked the republic's parliament to amend Dagestan's constitution, which provided for the compulsory rotation of the leadership of the republic among representatives of the various ethnic groups. Avar politicians, who had been expecting Dagestan to come under their control, attempted to mount a protest in parliament and on the streets of Makhachkala, but the city, under Dargin control, gave them

no support. The constitutional amendment therefore went through. Meanwhile, Amirov began his term of office in the city by making improvements in the housing and utilities sector and bringing the whole of the transport ser-

Over the last decade he has ensured the security and immutability of Dagestan's leadership...

vices market and the small-scale wholesale markets under the city's management.

It is worth noting that by the mid-1990s, deprived of all subsidies, the city's public transport system, supposedly serving half a million citizens, had collapsed. The only remaining transport services were provided by private minibus operators. Amirov declared that their routes were now city property, set up several municipal transport companies and, with the help of the city police, began to force the private operators to join them. Initially, the drivers organized strike action, but in the end Amirov won the day. The single genuinely independent trade union in the republic, the NPPVD (Independent Union of Entrepreneurs and Drivers of Dagestan), put up lengthy lawsuits against the mayor's office and bloody clashes with strike-breakers, but was finally compelled to give up the fight.

Things were more difficult with the wholesale markets, where the whole city's produce was traded. The Avar business groups that controlled them rejected Amirov's proposal to relocate their trading points from the city center to the outskirts. On more than one occasion the city police tried to disperse the markets by force, but each time the 1,500 or so traders refused to budge. Amirov succeeded in dispersing them only in May of last year (2001), at the end of a bloody operation by Dagestan's elite OMON troops. This was achieved by blockading the city to prevent supporters of the traders from coming in from the region's agricultural areas. The traders put up such fierce resistance to the authorities that dozens of policemen and civilians were injured in the clashes. Over a dozen of the organizers of the resistance were given criminal convictions in February 2002, albeit with short or suspended sentences.

But in May 1998 the traders, having organized an indefinite protest in the square in front of Dagestan's parliament and government buildings and the mayor's office, began actively support an insurrection by the Khachilae brothers, which Amirov was unable to contain.

On May 21, threatened with arrest for opposing the authorities, the Khachilaevs—the Lak national leaders—together with fighters of the Kazi-Kumykh movement and market traders, seized control, unopposed, of Makhachkala's government buildings. Buoyed by this easy success, the traders tried to attack the mayor's office, but there they encountered armed resistance from Amirov's security guards. The mayor's men held back the attackers until the head of the republic, Magomedali Magomedov, returned from Moscow and was able to reach a peaceful agreement with the Khachilaevs.

The brothers called off their men and then spent the month that remained until the leadership elections in the republic putting together an opposition coalition. They were joined by the Kaspiisk city mayor, Ruslan Gadzhibekov, the former head of Makhachkala City Council Makhmudgadzhiev, the chairman of the republic's Pension Fund, Sharaputdin Musaev, and the chairman of the government's Fishing Industries Committee and one of the Avar ethnic leaders, Esenbolat Magomedov.

On the day of the election, which was to be based on voting by the parliamentary deputies and representatives of the local administrations, Musaev announced his own candidacy as chairman of the State Council, but he lost to Magomedov. Amirov, who had delivered to Magomedov the lion's share of his loyal supporters, was the last to cast his vote.

In the months that followed, there were several more attempts on Amirov's life, for one of which the former city council chairman, Makhmudgadzhiev, was sentenced to thirteen years' imprisonment, with the actual perpetrator receiving eighteen years.

But the most famous attack on Amirov took place on September 4, 1998, when a truck stuffed with explosives was blown up next to Amirov's house, but the explosion was off target, destroying dozens of neighboring properties. The death toll was twenty, with over eighty more injured. Later, two close relatives of

In the months that followed, there were several more attempts on Amirov's life...

Sharaputdin Musaev were found guilty of committing this terrorist act.

Amirov's popularity was boosted substantially by the events of August 1999. In the days immediately following the incursion into Dagestani territory by the rebel forces of Shamil Basaev and Khattab, Amirov formed and armed a so-called international brigade of 300 men from amongst his supporters and, together with hundreds of other volunteers, they rushed to western Dagestan to hold off Basaev's men until the arrival of Russian troops.

Some weeks later, Amirov formed from this brigade an armed city police force of fifteen hundred men, under his personal command. Countering objections from the local Interior Minister, Amirov replied that in times of crisis the republic's own police force was unable to guarantee the city's security. Moreover, he said, he was still under personal threat of terrorist attacks.

Every evening the roads leading to Amirov's home are guarded by armed police and even his children are accompanied to school by bodyguards. On several occasions the windows of the mayor's office and Amirov's motorcade have come under fire from grenade-launchers. Fortunately, no one has yet been hurt.

Meanwhile, Amirov's organizational and managerial talent is making its mark in Makhachkala, where all the communal systems are back in working order. His predecessor as mayor had been nicknamed "Trottoirovich" (The Sidewalk King) by the locals because his term of office left pedestrians with almost nowhere to go: Every space, however tiny, could have a kiosk or shop built on it. So Amirov began his period in office by cleaning up the sidewalks.

Public spaces such as parks and beaches were restored; a system of storm drains was established; and the city's roads were comprehensively resurfaced. In the first three

years of Amirov's term tax collection rose by 40 percent, 20,000 new jobs were created and the city's budget deficit fell from 88 percent to 40 percent. Amirov was able to report these facts to representatives of 'Literary Russia' magazine in August of last year, when they visited Makhachkala to award him the title of "Best Mayor in Russia 2000."

Once a "covert" politician, Said Amirov is today the most public politician in the whole republic. It could not, however, be claimed that democracy has flourished as a result: The republic's media, including the independent media, no longer feel able to criticize the leadership, as they did five or so years ago.

But his popularity amongst the people of Makhachkala is considerable—he appears on local TV almost every evening to report on what's been accomplished, he never forgets gifts for children and senior citizens on public holidays, and sorts out all the housing problems of the city's residents.

"In my view, Amirov genuinely wants to improve the life of the people of Dagestan," maintains Enver Kisriev, "and, unlike many other politicians who rely on criminal circles or the republic's officials for support, Amirov puts his trust in the ordinary people."

In all but name

Today Amirov is the head of the republic in all but name. However, his injury, which is a significant impediment to his dealings with Moscow's political play-

ers, for example, may also prove to be an impediment to the acquisition of further power in the future. Probably because he is little known in Moscow, political observers in Moscow and Dagestan differ in their assessments of his prospects.

"His popularity is considerable, but that's in Makhachkala. And Makhachkala is not even Dagestan," says an expert from Moscow's Panorama think tank, Anvar Amirov. "Of course, he is an impressive and unusual man. If he

"Unlike many other politicians who rely on criminal circles or the republic's officials for support, Amirov puts his trust in the ordinary people."

were an ordinary politician, he would have a better chance of further career advancement—he's young, energetic, has great authority and shows exceptional management talent. But too much hinges on his personality, he has too many enemies and he's suffered an unbelievable number of attacks."

Kisriev disagrees: "Amirov is a strong-willed man, he's no fool and he works hard to better himself. He inspires the people's sympathy and even his injury enhances his charisma. Amirov, unlike other politicians, has a program that is clearly comprehensible to the ordinary people of Dagestan, and with Makhachkala he's proved that he can put any of his ideas into effect."

Kisriev does not believe that Amirov will stand against Magomedov in the June 2002 election for the head of the republic. "He will wait as long as Magomedov wants to retain power," he says.

Apparently the only major obstacle blocking Amirov's path now is the possibility of further terrorist attacks.

In September 1998, answering a question about whether he expects further attempts on his life, Amirov told the *Moskovskie Novosti* newspaper: "I hope not, but there probably will be more. We politicians are strange people, prepared, even in the face of terrifying threats, to pursue our aims. The only thing that will stop me is death."

Zaira Abdullaev a correspondent of the Novoye Delo weekly in Makhachkala, Dagestan.

AN EARLY DEFEAT FOR PRESIDENT AKAEV

By Sadjji

March 17, 2002 will be recorded forever in the new history of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan as Bloody Sunday. On that day, as a result of clashes between police officers and demonstrators, fifteen civilians were hospitalized. Five of them later died

without regaining consciousness. In addition, according to the republic's Interior Ministry, forty-seven police officers received wounds of varying severity. What gave rise to this unexpectedly militant behavior of these provincial citizens?

At first sight, the reasons appear to be obvious. Those participating in prolonged mass hunger strikes, meetings and peaceful demonstrations in the Akxy region of Jalal-Abad Oblast had put forward a six-point demand to the authorities. Foremost of these was the release of the chairman of the Committee on Judicial and Legal Affairs of the Legislative Assembly of the republic's Jogorku Kenesh (parliament), Azimbek Beknazarov.

What gave rise to this unexpectedly militant behavior of these provincial citizens?

On January 5, Beknazarov was arrested in Jalal-Abad Oblast by investigators from the local prosecutor's office and charged with exceeding his official powers seven years ago, while he was an investigator at the Toktogul regional prosecutor's office. The opposition

and the deputy's supporters believe that Beknazarov is in fact being victimized for his criticism of the republic's leadership. In 2001, Beknazarov was sharply critical of Akaev and his government for ceding Kyrgyz territories to China, claiming repeatedly that there might be grounds for impeaching the president. He also spoke unfavorably about the latest agreement on the redefinition of the state borders between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which the countries' two presidents, Akaev and Nazarbaev, signed on December 16 of last year. The agreement was drawn up, he maintained, in haste. Kyrgyzstan would be ceding to Kazakhstan a number of strategically important border territories in exchange for marshlands unfit for cultivation, territories that just might be rich in gold deposits.

From January to March, following his arrest, Beknazarov's supporters mounted demonstrations and hunger strikes both in Bishkek and in several towns in Jalal-Abad Oblast, the area that had sent Beknazarov as their deputy to the Legislative Assembly in 2000. One of the hunger strikers, Sherali Nazarkulov, died of a brain hemorrhage on February 7.

Territorial integrity

The conflict between Beknazarov and Akaev, then, lies essentially in their differing attitudes to the important national issue of the country's territorial integrity. In the eyes of the people, the actions of the Akaev regime look like betrayal. Beknazarov, on the other hand, looks like a patriot. The people's sympathies fall with Beknazarov, because he has proven to be the sole statesman prepared to stand up to the Akaev regime on the matter of territorial integrity. For the majority of the Kyrgyz people, therefore, the gravity of the judicial error that Beknazarov is said to have committed seven years ago while working as an investigator in a regional prosecutor's office pales to insignificance compared with his patriotic opposition to the Akaev regime. This is the main reason for the huge popular turnout in his defense.

The situation in the Aksy region of Jalal-Abad Oblast, according to the official version of the situation, began to escalate on March 12, coinciding with the beginning of Beknazarov's trial in the town of Toktogul. The epicenter of the uprising was the village of Kara-Suu—the deputy's birthplace. According to reports in the republic's press, events unfolded as follows.

On March 13, the third day of the trial, the opposing sides held a conference, at which the defense demanded an acquittal and the prosecutor asked for Beknazarov to be sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. The judge announced a deferral until the following Monday, 18 March, when the final verdict would be announced.

On 15 March there was a demonstration of around 800 people in Kara-Suu. Many of the participants went to picket the Toktogul court building and decided to return on the day of the verdict.

The next day, 16 March, in both Kara-Suu and the neighboring village of Kara-Zhigach, over 1000 people gathered together. According to the Interior Ministry's press service, the villagers assembled because they had heard from Tursunbek Akunov, the chairman of the Human Rights movement of Kyrgyzstan, that a number of officials

were on their way to meet them, including Sultan Urmanaev, governor of Jalal-Abad Oblast, and Shakarbek Osmonov, head of the regional administration. The ministry account then suggests that disturbances began at the instigation of Akunov, who had organized the unauthorized gathering. But this was not the case. The Interior Ministry spokesman deliberately avoided saying anything about the other side of the problem—the psychological dimension—which is usually ignored by most of the leadership.

When the people learned that the officials were coming, they became hopeful of being able to put their case to them. The meeting would in all probability have allowed several problems to be nipped in the bud. But the officials failed to show up, and their disregard for the people only inflamed the crowd's feelings. As a result, on March 17, after another large-scale meeting, the people of Kara-Suu, Kara-Zhigach and Bozpiek set off in a column (some on horseback) toward the center of Aksy region, the town of Kerben. There are two versions of what happened next, leading eventually to bloody clashes: one from the government and the law enforcement agencies and the other from the opposition.

State terror spawns extremism

At a press conference held on the morning of March 19 at Government House, Interior Minister Temirbek Akmataliev told journalists that the crowd was met on the approaches to the regional center by police and representatives of the regional state administration, who tried

to enter a dialog with the protestors. But stones were thrown at the police from within the crowd, and bullets followed. When a police officer was wounded in the thigh, the police responded with warning shots, fired overhead. Under pressure from the

crowd, the police retreated. Taking advantage of this, a large number of people broke through into Kerben. First they attacked the Akimiat (the regional state administration) building. Then the enraged crowd reached the ROVD building (the regional internal affairs department), where, in the words of the minister, 139 police officers were under siege until morning. "The crowd showered

The psychological dimension is usually ignored by most of the leadership.

the building with Molotov cocktails, for which they were getting supplies of flammable liquids through the night,” said the minister. “We ordered the police not to use their weapons, but also not to abandon the ROVD buildings because weapons are kept inside.”

In the course of the night-long riots, the building used by the Aksy ROVD’s juvenile offenders inspectorate was burnt down, there was partial damage to the passport office and the state automobile inspectorate, and the windows of the Akimiat building were broken. According to Akmataliev, the disturbances “showed signs of careful planning.” Part of the crowd—some 500 people and seventy horsemen—headed off in an organized manner in another direction, towards Tash-Kumyr, blocking the Bishkek-Osh highway. Those participating in the disturbances demanded the release of Beknazarov and, according to Akmataliev, “additional land allocations.” They presented a number of other economic demands as well. Speaking to the press, the minister appealed for calm. He said repeatedly that only the court could decide Beknazarov’s fate, which was independent in Kyrgyzstan. From the minister’s account it followed that the police had not fired on the crowd, which leaves the question: Whose were the bullets that killed some members of the crowd and left others with wounds of varying severity?

To answer this question, it is essential to be aware of the information provided by the human rights activist, Tursunbek Akunov, who was an eyewitness to the tragic events, especially since, after the bloody clashes, the authorities (in the person of Interior Minister Akmataliev) made a serious charge against him, accusing him of organizing the disturbances.

On March 25, Akunov gave a press conference in the office of the Republican Party. He said that by the time he got there [on March 16], the situation in Aksy region had reached boiling point. In view of the explosive nature of the situation, Akunov had invited Shakarbek Osmonov,

the region’s Akim (head of the regional administration), and Jalal-Abad Oblast Governor Sultan Urmanaev to meet with the people. They had promised to come to Aksy at 10 am on March 17. People from several villages had gathered outside the Kara-Suu agricultural directorate building, but the officials didn’t appear; they cancelled the meeting because they were awaiting the arrival of a government delegation from Bishkek. Angered by this, the people had left Kara-Suu and headed for Kerben, the center of Aksy region. Along the way, more and more people had joined them. When they reached Bozpiek, the Akim, the regional prosecutor and the ROVD chief had

come out to meet them. The police were carrying machineguns. The regional prosecutor had refused even to listen to the crowd. He had accused Akunov of organizing the disturbances and ordered his men to arrest him. When the people had tried to set him free, the police had opened fire.

“I found out later that four people died in the clashes with the police. I wasn’t present at that point because I was in a cell at the Aksy ROVD building. From

there I could hear the people’s outrage. Police officers, afraid of pressure from the crowd, allowed me to call the Deputy Interior Minister, Sadyrbek Dubanaev. He told me that I was the only one capable of stopping the people. When I went outside, I saw some 10,000 Aksy people throwing stones at the ROVD building. It was only with difficulty that I managed to stop them. They wouldn’t even listen to Kubanichbek Zhumaliev, the transport and communications minister, who is a local man. The authorities are wrong to accuse me of breaking the law. On the contrary, I did all I could to calm the crowd,” said Akunov. He condemned the statement made by Minister Akmataliev, who had accused him of political extremism and incitement to overthrow the authorities. Akunov also announced that he would sue the minister for insulting his honor, dignity and professional reputation.

“Even as I was pacifying the crowd, the Interior Ministry was framing charges against me under Article 94 of the Criminal Code of Kyrgyzstan. I hereby declare that I did

Whose were the bullets that killed some members of the crowd and left others with wounds of varying severity?

not incite the people to overthrow the authorities. On the contrary, it was the authorities that took the anticonstitutional decision to use weapons against their own people. That we have no independent judiciary, and that the 'White House' has a monopoly on power, was clearly demonstrated by the group of officials headed by Minister Zhumaliev. He spent an hour on the telephone to the 'White House' persuading them that 99 percent of the problems in Aksy could be solved by the release of Beknazarov. And in the morning the deputy was duly released," Akunov said at the end of his press conference.

After his release, Beknazarov confirmed that the courts of the Kyrgyz Republic are completely under the control of the president and his government. In a press conference in the Jogorku Kenesh on March 22 he said: "I was a judge myself and never encountered such a practice. This shows once again how both our deputies and our courts bow only to orders from above".

There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this: The case against deputy Beknazarov was brought by the political order of President Akaev.

Prospects for further political developments

At this press conference, Beknazarov made another observation: "Throughout the whole affair, the president, the head of the Law Enforcement Coordination Council and Interior Minister Akmataliev have blamed the tragedy on the opposition, deputies and human rights activists. This has gone down very badly with the people of Aksy and intensified their grievances." Also at the press conference was parliamentary deputy Adahan Madumarov, who backed him up and reported a statement made by Karybek Biibosunov, one of the president's strategists, and deputy director of the International Institute for Strategic Research, which answers to the president of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Biibosunov's view was that the situation could be stabilized by putting all the deputies from the south of the country behind bars. Hearing this, Beknazarov joked: "As I said at one of my hearings, it's as if I'm bin Laden and

my supporters are al-Qaida terrorists. It's a good thing that no one called for air and ground support from the Americans based at Manas Airport. But seriously, this was a defeat for President Akaev at the hands of his people. After these events, he should ask the people's forgiveness and just leave quietly," said Beknazarov.

However ironic the tone of Madumarov's account of Biibosunov's statement, it should be understood that herein lies another major reason for the tragedy that unfolded. The fact is that, while there are over thirty political parties registered in Kyrgyzstan, there are in fact two more unregistered ones—the northerners and the southerners. At present the North holds power. As soon as Akaev announced that he would not be standing in the forthcoming presidential elections, the struggle for power in the republic began. In Beknazarov, the southerners have an unexpectedly strong political card to play: patriotism. In light of this, the Akaev regime is making yet another foolish mistake in claiming that the bloody disturbances were organized by a "gang of demagogues and intriguers." Blinkered political thinking of this kind is evidence of just how isolated the republic's leadership is from present day reality. Even the weakest of oppositions could now effortlessly turn the republic's population—90 percent of which is impoverished—against the regime.

For over ten years, the Akaev regime has represented the northerners. But a schism has now developed in their ranks, and former Vice President Feliks Kulov has formed a breakaway grouping even though, unlike Beknazarov, he has neither a strong political hand to play nor any ideas with popular appeal. On the contrary, Kulov has always said that he supports president Akaev's policies. All he has done is to propose that they be modernized. Yet, for this modest criticism of Akaev's reforms, Kulov has been sent to prison for seven years. This has earned him the people's sympathy, rather than any solid political backing. It is for this reason that the people have not come out so militantly in Kulov's defense.

"After these events, he should ask the people's forgiveness and just leave quietly," Beknazarov said.

The obvious question is: How are political events likely to unfold? Kyrgyzstan's Bloody Sunday has shown that the Akaev regime can only be effectively opposed by a united force. Therefore, in recent days, action has been taken by supporters of Jalgap Kazakbaev, a deputy of the Assembly of People's Representatives, and his brother, who have been unjustly imprisoned for fourteen years. On March 26, the village of Tel'man in Panfilov region and in the town of Kara-Balta in Zhaiyl region saw demonstrations by some 700 of Kazakbaev's supporters. Speakers at the meeting told how, on February 26, parliament had sent a letter to President Akaev asking why so long had passed without the amnesty law being used in the case of the Kazakbaev brothers. Only when the head of the presidential administration, Amanbek Karypkulov, reported that he would give his answer to parliament within two days did the demonstrators dis-

perse and go home. Kulov's supporters recently held another meeting to demand his release from detention. If the supporters of other persecuted political figures also take action to oppose the Akaev regime, then the republic's presidential elections may be brought forward. But whether the elections take place at term or prematurely, the power struggle between Akaev's intended successor and the opposition candidate is likely to be uncompromising and may well see further bloodshed. In view of this, the presence in Kyrgyzstan of the anti-terrorist contingent of U.S. and Western armed forces may prove to be just the stabilizing factor needed to prevent more bloody clashes at the forthcoming elections.

Sadji is an independent journalist from Bishkek.
