

Battle Lines Drawn in Karachai-Cherkess Poll

Author: [Akhmat Ebzeyev](#)

Three Karachai candidates dominate the forthcoming presidential election.

Retired general Vladimir Semyonov is strongly positioned to regain power as president of the North Caucasian republic of Karachai-Cherkessia in the forthcoming elections there.

The contest in one of Russia's most troubled and ethnically mixed regions has already got off to a rocky start after angry disputes over the actual timing of the poll. And a number of factors could still destabilize the situation.

Five candidates have so far registered for the August ballot, though only three of them have substantial support. Initial figures from a census held last autumn show that the Karachais are now the majority group in the republic, with 40-42 per cent of the population, edging the Russians into second place for the first time. Meanwhile, the Cherkess account for just 9-10 per cent of the population.

The three contenders are Semyonov, supreme court chairman Islam Burlakov and national bank chief Mustafa Batdyev.

The two other candidates include Magomet Tekeyev, an ethnic Karachai who is a deputy in the Russian parliament - and is an ally of President Semyonov.

The fifth is former deputy prime minister Fatimat Kunizheva, who comes from the small Abazin ethnic group (related to the Cherkess) which forms only seven per cent of the population in this diverse region. Few are taking her candidacy seriously, particularly as she is nominating her son, Olegei Kunizhev, as her vice-presidential running mate. Aside from her reluctance to look outside her own family, the job of vice-president in Karachai-Cherkessia is in any case set aside for an ethnic Russian.

That leaves Semyonov, Bulakov and Batdyev - already dubbed "the three whales" - gearing up for the race. All are of Karachai origin.

Local Communist Party leader Mikhail Yakush, who has decided not to stand and is supporting Burlakov instead, says, "I am firmly convinced that there is only one way we will avoid social destabilisation - if all the really viable candidates for president are representatives of one nationality, the titular one."

In contrast to the last election, held in 1999, there is no candidate from the Cherkess ethnic group. After Semyonov was declared the victor of that ballot, large numbers of Cherkess challenged his legitimacy after their own candidate was defeated. For several months, the republic was wracked by violence and street protests, and it was placed under temporary direct rule from Moscow.

The precise date of this year's election was in doubt until the very last moment as Semyonov angrily clashed with the local parliament about when it should be held. Parliament had defied him by fixing the poll for June 15, while Semyonov and his supporters argued that his term in office runs out only in October. (See CRS No. 176) Eventually, the republican supreme court named August 17 as election day.

Many were surprised when Semyonov challenged the earlier election date, as polling had promised him a

fairly smooth re-election. Opinion polls show that Semyonov, who is half Karachai and half Russian, has the support of around 40 per cent of the population. With the addition of the 10 to 15 per cent of voters whose support is usually guaranteed because of what is known as "administrative resources" - the pressures and persuasions of the governing regime - he could even win a first-round victory.

One legal problem could throw the whole election into doubt. Three years ago, an agreement was reached whereby the prime ministerial job was given to an ethnic Cherkess, while the job of vice-president was kept open for a Russian. A local law has now been passed under which each candidate names a running-mate who would take the vice-presidency.

However, there is no Russian Federation law providing for a vice-presidency in regional elections, and it is possible that the arrangement will be declared invalid in Moscow. If the elected deputy president has to be removed, this could annul the entire election process.

Semyonov, who was formerly commander of Russian land forces, has had a difficult relationship with Moscow. But a well-placed source in Cherkessk who asked to remain anonymous said that the Kremlin had already concluded that there is no point in trying to support a rival candidate.

The source said that the government monitoring and surveillance agency FAPSI, formerly part of the KGB, had conducted its own survey of public opinion in Karachai-Cherkessia, and concluded that Semyonov had at least 40 per cent support.

"In that situation, Moscow will probably prefer to keep its distance and let people make their own minds up," said the source.

Central banker Mustafa Batdyev is the effective leader of the opposition. For more than a year he has been supporting two newspapers, Vozrozhdenie Respubliki and Jamagyat, and the Ekran television station. He also has the support of seven public organisations, although the backing of one, the Cherkess nationalist group Adyge Khase may be a mixed blessing. In 1999, Adyge Khase leaders angrily denounced the Karachais, and this could now cost Batdyev votes.

Burlakov will benefit from Communist Party support. As head of the supreme court he has gained a reputation for not being corrupt and for having acted impartially towards all ethnic groups - which will win him support from non-Karachais.

Overall, this presidential election already looks radically different from its predecessor, since it is a contest between Karachais.

Akhmat Ebzeyev is a freelance journalist working in Karachai-Cherkessia.

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