

Chechen Peacemaker Assassinated

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Leaders across the North Caucasus pay tribute to murdered Chechen leader Yusup Soslambekov - a man whom many saw as the only real hope for peace in Chechnya

The assassination of Yusup Soslambekov in Moscow has dealt a severe - and, some say, fatal -- blow to the struggle for peace in the North Caucasus.

President of the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples (CCP), Soslambekov, aged 44, was shot in the chest by an unidentified gunman on July 20. He died in hospital 10 days later.

Most observers in the Caucasus today agree that Soslambekov was the most moderate political figure in the trouble-dogged region. But his efforts to bring peace to the republics provoked the anger of Chechen radicals and Russian nationalists alike. It was almost certainly one of these groups which ordered his assassination.

Born in exile in Kazakhstan, Yusup Soslambekov became a leader of Chechnya's Vainakh Democratic Party in 1990. Six years later, he was elected president of the CCP.

The organisation won its laurels during the Abkhazian conflict but, during the first Chechen war, lost much of its following in the region. Critics argued that the idea of building a sovereign state in the North Caucasus was untenable and the ongoing dispute with Russia could only be solved on the battlefield.

But Soslambekov stood his ground to the end, acting largely on the advice of his chief supporter, Munich University professor Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, who fiercely opposed armed confrontation between Chechnya and Russia.

In recent times, many local leaders have referred to the CCP president as "Maskhadov's man in Moscow" but this was never the case. Soslambekov worked hard to develop a constructive dialogue with the Kremlin but he had long ago parted ways with Maskhadov over these issues.

And, while Maskhadov found it easier to engage in bloody conflict than to enter into any form of dialogue, Soslambekov made repeated attempts to draw the Chechen people into the peace process. For that reason, he had many enemies in his own country.

Yuri Shanibov, his predecessor as chairman of the CCP, comments, "When I handed over the reins of power to Soslambekov, I knew that he was a man who wanted nothing but peace and progress in the Caucasus.

"Now the Caucasus has lost its finest son. It was his very stance over the Chechen conflict that put his life on the line. On the one hand, he was against all-out war in Chechnya and the genocide of peaceful citizens in the Caucasus but he also virulently opposed Russian neo-colonialism.

"He was a democrat who always understood that the North Caucasus was desperately in need of democracy with a European slant.

"Soslambekov was fiercely independent - he had a true Caucasian character. It was impossible to bribe him or scare him and he never faltered in his convictions. Killing him was the only way of silencing him."

Soslambekov's death is likely to lead to the radicalisation of national movements across the North Caucasus. Previously, the CCP leader acted as a moderating force both in Chechnya and Dagestan. Now the young people of the region are likely to see violence as the only means of dealing with Moscow.

It is probable that the assassination itself was aimed at deepening the rift between Russia and the Caucasus region in a bid to ensure that there can be no peaceful solution to the Chechen conflict. Others believe that it was a direct consequence of the vendetta between the two heads of the pro-Russian administration, Akhmad Kadyrov and Beslan Gantamirov.

However, Soslambekov's death may have slowed down the peace process in the Caucasus but there is no reason to conclude the blow has been fatal. The process will inevitably continue because hope is always the last thing to die.

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