

## **Disgruntled Deputies to Boycott Cherkessk Assembly**

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Despite dramatic changes in his political fortunes, Boris Berezovsky has pledged to continue the fight for democracy in Karachaevo-Cherkessia

Just a day after resigning from the Russian parliament, billionaire tycoon Boris Berezovsky visited Karachaevo-Cherkessia, his former constituency, to settle some unfinished business.

The former deputy, who quit his post in protest against Vladimir Putin's "Latin-American-style politics", has set himself the unenviable task of solving the republic's ongoing ethnic disputes. It is a goal that proved elusive during his seven-month tenancy of the Duma post.

During a meeting with leaders of the Cherkess and Abazin minorities, Berezovsky openly attacked the policies of President Vladimir Semenov, a member of the majority Karachai clan, who has made concerted efforts to oust his ethnic rivals from all top government posts.

"President Semenov's position is totally unconstructive and detrimental," said the oligarch at the July 20 meeting, adding that his criticisms of Semenov would be far less restrained now that he was "just an ordinary citizen".

During his term of office, Berezovsky was slammed by local elders for neglecting his duties and for failing to deliver election promises. Calling for his resignation in April, the Cherkessk Council of Elders said that the tycoon viewed Karachaevo-Cherkessia as little more than a "pawn in his political intrigues".

Now, Berezovsky appears to be eager to redress the balance, expressing a renewed determination to realise the socio-economic projects he promised in his election manifesto. These include plans to set up two charities aimed at alleviating poverty and a pledge to lend money for the purchase of agricultural equipment.

The former deputy also outlined a range of new initiatives for the North Caucasus republic including the introduction of Internet classes at local schools, the reconstruction of the Dombai sports complex and the building of a mosque and an Orthodox church in Cherkessk.

Berezovsky's sudden decision is likely to trigger significant political fallout in Karachaevo-Cherkessia. From the outset, the Moscow magnate has championed the underdog - the Cherkess, Russian and Abazin leaders who have effectively been ousted by General Semenov's regime.

On several occasions, the Duma deputy intervened in the ongoing dispute between the general and Cherkessk mayor Stanislav Derev, who was Semenov's chief rival in the presidential elections last spring.

Berezovsky repeatedly called on Semenov to appoint Derev, an ethnic Cherkess, to the post of prime-minister and reverse his discriminatory policies. For nearly a year, his demands have been ignored.

The ongoing dispute has prompted Derev's supporters to stage a series of demonstrations in Cherkessk, calling for proportional representation in the government.

The latest meeting was held on July 18, when several hundred Cherkess, Abazins and Russians converged on the capital's Central Square. However, the authorities sealed off the area with heavy lorries, forcing protestors to gather outside the Drama Theatre. Here they were subjected to repeated intimidation by government helicopters which flew low over their heads in a bid to drown out the opposition speeches.

Despite the interference, a decision was taken at the meeting to boycott the People's Assembly. Opposition leader Murat Khatukaev explained, "Semenov has failed to fulfil repeated promises to solve the problems. By way of protest, our deputies to the People's Assembly will cease to take part in this legislative body. If the authorities do not make good on their promises within a month, the deputies will hand in their mandates."

On the same day, a terrorist bomb caused serious damage to railway lines on the outskirts of Cherkessk. No one was injured in the blast but the resulting disruption to rail services prevented a delegation of People's Assembly deputies from making a proposed trip to Moscow.

It later emerged that the delegates were hoping to persuade Boris Berezovsky to abandon his intention to resign from the People's Assembly - and several observers have speculated that the Semenov regime may have been behind the explosion.

Semenov, formerly commander of the Russian ground forces, has always been wary of Berezovsky's influence, particularly after the Moscow oligarch sided with the republic's ethnic minorities. In May this year, he launched a fierce media campaign to discredit the Duma deputy who had suggested a package of compromise measures in a bid to placate the warring factions. Certainly, news of Berezovsky's resignation will have come as a relief to the embattled president.

Now General Victor Kazantsev, head of the Southern Federal District, looks set to take on the role of the peace-maker in the bitter dispute. Last week, both Derev and Semenov were summoned to Kazantsev's "court" in North Ossetia in the run-up to a session of the North Caucasus Inter-regional Association which is aimed at promoting understanding between ethnic groups.

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