

Judge Points Finger at Cherkessk 'Bombers'

Author: [Islam Ibragimov](#)

Political and ethnic rivalries are threatening to play havoc with the trial of two "terrorists" in Cherkessk

The sensational trial of two students charged with attempting to assassinate Karachaevo-Cherkessia's top judge has triggered a bitter war of words between ethnic leaders in the republic.

The trial is particularly sensitive because the defendants are both members of minority ethnic groups whilst their alleged victim comes from the ruling Karachai clan. Tribal tensions have been tearing the republic apart since last autumn when newly elected president Vladimir Semenov began excluding minority representatives from top government posts.

Islam Burlakov, chairman of the republic's High Court, was caught in the blast of an F-1 grenade as he stood in the doorway of his Cherkessk home on April 14, 1999.

Days later, police arrested Arambi Pshmakhov, a European champion in unarmed combat, and Ruslan Midov, 22, a student of the State Technological Institute. Both were subsequently charged with "terrorism against the state", a crime which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years.

Speculation reached fever pitch when it emerged that Pshmakhov was an Abazin and Midov a Cherkess. Leaders of these minority clans immediately claimed that the arrests had been motivated by racial prejudice and that the evidence against the two students was purely circumstantial.

The paper-thin testimony of the victim himself has added fuel to the flames. Burlakov has told the court that, as he was driving home on the evening of the assassination attempt, he stopped at a traffic light and another car pulled level with his.

Through the open window of the car, the judge saw a man he later identified as Midov. "His face was stamped on my memory forever," said Burlakov.

He arrived home shortly afterwards and it was then that the would-be assassins struck, firing a rocket-propelled grenade directly into the doorway. Burlakov, who was badly wounded in the attack, told the court that, as the smoke cleared, he saw a young man standing in an archway 100 metres away. Despite a thick fog and severe injuries to one eye, he was able to discern the features of Arambi Pshmakhov.

Seconds later, Burlakov managed to crawl to his car, call the police on his mobile telephone and drive to hospital.

Following their arrests, both men were moved between investigative cells in Krasnodar, Cherkessk, Nevinnomyssk and Stavropol before charges were brought against them in September, 1999. Attempts by defence lawyers to secure bail on the grounds of chronic ill health were rejected by the prosecutor's office. Seven months later, the case came to court.

Islam Burlakov has been the object of bitter criticism in Karachaevo-Cherkessia ever since he took an active part in Semenov's presidential election campaign. Cherkess and Abazin leaders openly attacked Burlakov's appearances on the 14-24 TV channel during party political broadcasts, arguing that a judge

had no right to get involved in politics.

Burlakov was later appointed chairman of the High Court without being presented to the Judicial Collegiate - a formality which is mandatory in such cases.

During his irregular appearances at the Midov-Pshmakhov trial, Burlakov has repeatedly insulted defence lawyers and threatened to expel them from the republic if they continue to plead the defendants' case. He has also accused Cherkess and Abazin leaders of deliberately attempting to topple him from his post.

Meanwhile, the trial itself has reached deadlock. The minority leaders are playing the ethnic card at a time when the Cherkessk regime is particularly concerned about intercession from Moscow. Karachai domination of the judicial system has been one of the main bones of contention in the wake of President Semenov's election victory.

And the authorities, for their part, are remaining aloof, doggedly reiterating the evidence of a shell-shocked, half-blinded victim peering at his would-be assassin through a thick fog and a veil of cordite smoke.

Islam Ibragimov is a Cherkessk print and TV journalist

Location: Stavropol

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/judge-points-finger-cherkessk-bombers>