

A Mouthpiece for Chechen Liberals

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Chechen newspaper Gums seeks to shape public opinion from its self-imposed exile in Dagestan

Whilst federal and rebel propaganda chiefs are locked in a fierce battle for international sympathy, an exiled Chechen newspaper is fighting a valiant rearguard action in Dagestan.

Gums, a Gudermes weekly which has decamped to Makhachkala, provides a vital mouthpiece for the Chechen intelligentsia, ousted by Aslan Maskhadov's regime. Apparently their long exile in the Dagestani capital has given the dispossessed liberals fresh insights into the problems of their homeland.

The Gudermes paper takes a more constructive approach than its rival, *The Voice of the People*, which is also published in the Dagestani capital. *The Voice* is simply another string to the Chechen propaganda bow, launching bitter attacks on Dagestani newspapers which criticise separatist politics.

Gums, on the other hand, attempts to come to terms with Chechnya's past and shape its increasingly uncertain future. A recent editorial claims the Chechens are haunted by "bitter memories" and suggests that all the Caucasian peoples should join together in a bid to exorcise them.

It is an opinion echoed by the Russian minister for nationalities, Ramazan Abdulatipov, who told the newspaper that Chechnya's first president, Dzhokhar Dudaev, deliberately manipulated these "bitter memories" in order to seize power and create an authoritarian regime.

The Chechens, he concluded, were not reacting to the forces of history but to a crude propaganda campaign.

Abdulatipov went on to explain that ethnic groups across the Caucasus have traditionally lacked the collective will to resist the rabble-rousers. The Chechens in particular had made no effort to combat criminal elements within their own society.

"I believe that the Chechen people simply lacked the organisational skills necessary to free themselves from the bandits and the government itself couldn't get Chechen society to fight against the criminal groupings," Abdulatipov said.

Ismail Munaev is another Chechen intellectual who has discovered the wisdom of hindsight. He told Gums that the republic's leaders had made concerted efforts to convince the people that their case was unique. "The removal of this national snobbery would be the first step towards a moral renewal," said Munaev. "We must live in the present time and space and not in past centuries. The experience of history must be used in order not to repeat tragic mistakes."

Munaev bewails the fact that Aslan Maskhadov's regime forced around 200,000 ethnic Russians to leave the republic, people he describes as the "cornerstones of Chechen society". He accuses Maskhadov, a "mountain-politician", of driving away anyone who did not agree with his "satanic, Pol-Pot ideology". The result was the gradual disintegration of Chechen society.

Another Gums contributor, Aslan Khamidov, attacks the West's passive stance over the Russian invasion of

Chechnya. In an article entitled, "Does the West Care About Us?" Khamidov comments, "It is absolutely clear that the stalemate in the North Caucasus suits the Western powers. The establishment of law and order under a Russian flag would contradict their geo-political and economic interests."

The writer says any talk of peace before the anti-terrorist operation is brought to a victorious conclusion would constitute a betrayal by the Kremlin and herald a return to the "law of the jungle". The Chechen republic could only look forward to a rebirth when rebel resistance was entirely crushed and the separatists were forced to accept the conditions offered to them.

"Of course," adds Khamidov, "that scenario does not fit into the plans of the West, which pretends to be so concerned about us - the West, after all, has its own interests."

Gums has also shouldered the unenviable task of patching up relations with Dagestan. Chechnya's eastern neighbour is still smarting from a series of raids staged last year by Chechen Wahhabis.

In August, the Islamic fighters, under top field commander Shamil Basaev, swooped on Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi in a bid to join forces with local extremists. Weeks later, over 2,000 Chechens seized the village of Khasavyurt following a terrorist bomb attack in nearby Buinaksk which killed around 30 people.

It was in the aftermath of the raids that Moscow launched its "anti-terrorist" campaign against Aslan Maskhadov's regime in late September.

The newspaper openly calls on the Dagestani people to forgive their warlike cousins for these "bandit" attacks and calls for the reestablishment of cultural and economic ties.

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Location: Caucasus
Stavropol
South Ossetia
North Ossetia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/mouthpiece-chechen-liberals>