

North Ossetia: Pre-Election Press Clampdown

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President Dzasokhov, fearful of electoral defeat, attempts to silence his political rivals.

The government of North Ossetia is cracking down hard on opposition media in the run up to presidential elections later this month.

One editor has been imprisoned, whole runs of newspapers confiscated and staff sympathetic to opposition candidates sacked from state radio and television.

The reason for this unbridled attempt at censorship relates to the fact elections will be the most hotly contested in North Ossetia - an autonomous republic in the Russian Federation - since the break up of the Soviet Union.

Although current president Alexander Dzasokhov came to power with around eighty per cent of the vote in 1998, his lead is threatened by former prime minister Sergei Khetagurov's decision to stand.

Khetagurov is a popular figure and his outspoken views on the current regime's economic and political failings have won him widespread support.

Six other presidential candidates due to run in the first round have already said that they will support Khetagurov in the event of a run off between him and Dzasokhov.

Such support has prompted Dzasokhov to try to crack down on his rival's bid for the presidency in any way he can - and he has come down especially hard on opposition print media.

The monthly Pravda Osetii has been singled out for attack. Attempts have been made to muzzle this opposition paper since it was launched back in June last year. Copies have been confiscated or bought up by police, and the authorities have tried to prevent it from being printed either inside or out of the country.

Then, on December 7, the entire 20,000-run of the paper's seventh issue was seized on the Ingush-Ossetian border.

The police said the newspapers were confiscated because the driver was not carrying the "necessary documents". Pravda Osetii's editor-in-chief, Petr Safronov, told IWPR that he was sure the order to seize the papers came from Dzasokhov himself, something the government has dismissed as "lies".

Safronov was then arrested mid-December. The charge, assaulting the publisher of two pro-Dzasokhov newspapers, is believed by many to have been a dreamt up pretext to prevent Safronov continuing to bring his paper out. Around a thousand demonstrators turned out in the capital Vladikavkaz on December 25 demanding his release.

Pravda Osetii's deputy editor, Shaukuz Aguzarov, told IWPR that the paper had consistently had trouble getting distributed since its launch.

"We have no chance to use North Ossetian printing houses and we even have problems printing in neighbouring regions as a result of pressure from Dzasokhov's administration," he said.

Anatoli Dzantiev, a high-ranking official responsible for the media, admitted that the government had leant on neighbouring Stavropol not to help Pravda Osetii and that the authorities of this Russian region had "followed this advice".

As far as other publishing houses were concerned, he said that, "when they (the printing houses) saw what dirt this paper brings up, of course they refused to cooperate with it. No government would tolerate a paper like that". Dzantiev is currently seeking to have Pravda Osetii's printing licence revoked.

Meanwhile, other independent outlets are finding themselves under the scrutiny of the censor. Independent television and radio broadcaster IR said that they have been forced to take a number of programmes dedicated to election coverage off the air.

The station's president, Vladimir Tavasiev, said that the government had coerced them into making the decision. Despite having had no prior trouble with the authorities, "this time even slight and absolutely ethical criticism has become taboo".

The government has denied interfering in the station's programming.

Concern is growing that, as the election campaign progresses, Dzasokhov will attempt to put a stop to any opposition voice.

While Pravda Osetii staff struggle to distribute their paper, other pro-Khetagurov journalists say that they will address public rallies if needs be to get their point across.

There are also indications that more radical elements in the opposition camp will attempt to silence the pro-presidential press in revenge.

On January 7 a blast destroyed the transmitters of a pro-Dzasokhov television station in Vladikavkaz, raising fears that a media war will escalate further in the days running up to the elections.

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