

Opposition Editors Attacked by Raiders

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Karachaevo-Cherkessia's fledgling opposition party fears a government-sponsored terror campaign

The editors of a Cherkessk opposition newspaper who were terrorised and beaten by masked gunmen have accused the authorities of orchestrating the attack.

Vladimir Panov, the editor of *Vozrozhdenie* (Rebirth), and his deputy, Rashid Khatuev, believe the raid was prompted by a series of articles criticising President Vladimir Semenov's regime.

However, the local government has dismissed the allegations, blaming the incident on mysterious "destabilising" forces within the political elite.

Vozrozhdenie was first published in January this year on the initiative of Murat Karaketov, the former Stavropol Communist boss, who was once Semenov's staunchest ally.

Karaketov played a leading role in bringing Semenov - a fellow Karachai -- to power in September 1999 when the former army general beat the favourite -- Cherkessk mayor Stanislav Derev -- in a controversial second round of elections.

During the election campaign, Panov was given charge of the general's press office whilst Khatuev was named minister for nationalities.

However, frustrated by Semenov's refusal to offer them top government positions, the three men have announced plans to launch a rival Karachai movement, *Vozrozhdenie Respubliki* (The Rebirth of the Republic), using *Vozrozhdenie* as their official mouthpiece.

In the first edition, Karaketov wrote that "Semenov had failed to live up to the expectations of his supporters" and the new publication would "present an objective analysis of his activities".

Over the past two months, the newspaper has launched a series of stinging attacks on the Cherkessk regime, accusing the general of dooming the republic to penury whilst a small cabal of monopolists bleeds the economy dry.

Last week, Khatuev and Panov were working late at the *Vozrozhdenie* offices when two men dressed in black balaclavas and grey Spetsnaz uniforms barged into the newsroom.

Armed with TT pistols, the intruders fired gunshots at the ceiling before attacking the editors with rubber truncheons.

Panov said, "They just started laying into us. At first, I turned away and covered my head with my hands but they knocked me off my feet with an expert blow.

"They didn't say a word - we couldn't even tell what nationality they were because we never heard their accents. They grabbed Khatuev and literally trampled on him. They hit him round the head and the torso. At one time I thought they were going to kill him. Finally, when we were all lying on the ground, too terrified to stand up, the thugs smashed the monitors of two computers and left."

An interior ministry spokesman said Khatuev was recovering in hospital from concussion and a broken rib. Panov, however, refused hospital treatment and promptly accused the president of organising the attack.

He said, "Vozrozhdenie never criticised anyone apart from the leadership of Karachaevo-Cherkessia. For example, in the first edition, we accused the government of laundering millions of roubles through a charity foundation."

The Cherkessk authorities have been quick to deny the accusations. Boris Batchaev, secretary to the Karachaevo-Cherkessian Security Council, blamed the attack on "political groups attempting to destabilise the republic".

He said it was no coincidence that the attack had taken place at the same time as a meeting between Semenov, Karaketov and another opposition leader, Keram Semenov. After a two-hour discussion, the men had agreed to meet again on the following day but the appointment was cancelled in the wake of the raid.

"This was provocation," said Batchaev. "I believe that someone is determined to sabotage any attempt at dialogue between the authorities and the opposition."

Three days later, President Semenov announced that he would take personal control of the investigation and promised speedy results.

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