

## **State Targets Balkaria's Islamic Community**

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Moscow continues to regard Kabardino-Balkaria as a potential breeding-ground for Islamic extremists

State-controlled media in Kabardino-Balkaria has launched a wave of anti-Islamic propaganda in a renewed bid to exorcise the spectre of fundamentalism in the North Caucasus.

The campaign boasts few subtleties. Television news programmes broadcast scenes from Muslim ceremonies, featuring plenty of animal sacrifices and bloody knives but little in the way of commentary.

The scenes are followed by footage of Russian soldiers in Chechnya being executed by Islamic extremists - the notorious Wahhabis who have become synonymous with terrorism and organised crime across the former Soviet Union.

Routine reports from Kabardino-Balkaria are littered with apparently harmless observations: "On the central street of the city, shops are busy selling Islamic wares such as rosaries and books with excerpts from the Koran..." The political sub-text is barely concealed.

Islam has never been widely propagandised in the Kabardino-Balkarian republic but, now, in the wake of the military campaign in Chechnya, it is coming firmly under the spotlight.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, changing attitudes to religion went hand in hand with the rebirth of a "national consciousness". Faith helped to fill the spiritual vacuum left by the breakdown of the socialist system.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the local authorities made no attempt to discourage religious worship and even appeared to patronise the Islamic faith. Plans to build mosques and open educational centres in the North Caucasian republic were spearheaded by religious leaders acting with the apparent approval of the authorities.

In reality, however, the local and central governments missed no opportunity to torpedo religious initiatives in Kabardino-Balkaria. The scheme to build a mosque in the capital, Nalchik, is a good example.

In 1992, a radio and television fundraising initiative was launched to collect funds for the ambitious construction project. It became a matter of honour for every family and village to donate money to the mosque - not least because the names of those who had made a contribution were screened daily on television, together with the exact sum they had donated.

The target was reached in a few days, to widespread excitement, and the entire nation waited eagerly for the first stone to be laid. They waited in vain. The money simply disappeared - some said into the pockets of corrupt officials, others claimed it had been deposited in a foreign bank which later went bust.

Whatever the case, the mosque has never been built and no official explanation has been forthcoming.

The Islamic Institute in Nalchik is the latest victim of official pressure. Opened in the early 1990s, the institute was set up to instruct would-be effendis and forge links with Muslim states abroad.

Over the past eight years, 500 graduates have left the institute, with 25 being sent to Egypt and Saudi Arabia for further training. Recently, the institute was renovated and teachers were invited from Turkey, Syria and Jordan.

Earlier this month, however, the authorities announced that the Islamic Institute would be closed down because it was operating without a licence. Again there was no further explanation, again there was no warning. The closure was announced as a fait accompli.

And, in the face of these open attacks, the people of Kabardino-Balkaria have remained silent. Since the demise of the Adyge Khase, the only real opposition party in the republic, there has been no platform for protest and certainly no individuals willing to champion the cause of the underdog.

There is a sense that the population at large is entirely at the mercy of the Moscow government and its representatives in Nalchik, President Valery Kokov's regime.

Kabardino-Balkaria has been dubbed a "potential trouble-maker" and a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalism - and therefore strenuous measures are being taken to discredit the Muslim faith as a whole.

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