

Ali KAMALOV

Born 1948, Dagestan, USSR

Elected head of the Dagestan Union of Journalists in 1999; since 2003, one of the 14 secretaries of the Russian Union of Journalists, based in Moscow

Background

Peace in the first Chechen war (1994-6) was signed in August 1996 in the northern Dagestani town of Khasavyurt. It proved tragically short-lived. One of the first moves in the second Chechen war (1999-2005) was the incursion by a small column of insurgents, led from Chechnya by Shamil Basayev and Saudi national Khattab, into a mountainous area across the border in Dagestan. Yet it was not until the war was officially over in Chechnya that the spiral of violence began in Dagestan.

A much larger and more populous country, Dagestan is made up of over 30 ethnic groups none of which are in a dominant position. A historic and remarkably enduring balance has been reduced over the past 4-5 years to a state of ongoing internal violence, with the population often caught between insurgent "Islamic" fighters and an unpopular, corrupt and inefficient local police force. Over the past four years eight journalists have been targeted and killed, all but two in the capital Makhachkala. In June 2009 Malik Akhmedilov, Mr Kamalov's young deputy editor, was assassinated near his home; on 15 December 2011 Ali's own nephew Hadjimurad Kamalov, the founder and one-time editor of the Russian-language "Chernovik" weekly died in a hail of bullets outside the newspaper's office.

Ali Akhmedovich Kamalov

Mr Kamalov has worked for the same newspaper, "Khakikat" (Truth) since the mid-1960s when he joined the staff as a proof-reader. In 1991 he was appointed the paper's chief editor, a post he has held ever since. Many of the journalists writing in Dagestan today are Mr Kamalov's trainees and protégés. He was among the first in the region to begin transforming the way newspapers were produced, introducing computers and other modern technology. This was achieved, moreover, during the 1990s when the upheavals in the Russian economy and publishing world left "Khakikat" with almost no financial resources.

Elected head of the Dagestan Union of Journalists in 1999, Ali has worked to support the profession in many ways. One of his contributions was the creation of a House of Journalists (a mixture of office and club) where many different types of events take place – round table discussions, seminars, less formal gatherings and social events. This life dedicated to journalism has been increasingly overshadowed by the mounting violence within Dagestan. It has become a place where honest and courageous journalists and editors regularly find themselves caught in the crossfire – whether being charged with criminal offences, denounced by others or the victims of assaults and assassination attempts..

In 2008 the head of broadcasting for the entire country, Gadji Abashilov, was shot dead. A few months later the presenter and author for a moderate Islamic TV channel was assassinated. In 2008 editors at "Chernovik" were taken to court under the most popular "anti-extremist" law for having persistently the corruption and brutality of police, acting under the guise of "counter-terrorism". Then chief editor Nadira Isayeva and members of her staff were accused of "inciting hatred against a social group ... the police". They were only acquitted of this charge by a court in Dagestan last year.

The newspaper “Chernovik”, founded in 2003 by Ali’s nephew Hadjimurad, has been the constant target of pressure and attacks from all sides. In September 2009 an execution list, containing the names of Hadjimurad and other editors, was circulated in Makhachkala. On 15 December he himself was gunned down outside the newspaper’s offices in Makhachkala.

None of these killings has ever been properly investigated and the only case that came to court collapsed before a verdict. “Chernovik”, “Khakikat”, “As-Salam” and other papers, in Russian and the many other languages of Dagestan, do what they can to preserve the peace within the country and maintain good relations between Moscow and the region. The pressures, however, are considerable and they are mounting.

The first task, evidently, is simply to make people aware of the situation. Mr Kamalov and journalists in Dagestan are thankful for this opportunity to describe what has been going on in their country. Freedom of speech survives there but its future looks precarious, and the not unreasonable concern is that if the situation gets worse that troops might be deployed there – a measure for which the precedents are not good..

John Crowfoot

IFJ analyst (Russia)

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Journalists killed in Dagestan since 2005

Magomed Varisov	28/7/2005	Commentator and head of research institute
Gadji Abashilov	21/3/2008	head of republic’s TV and radio company
Abdullah Alishayev	2/9/2008	presenter and broadcaster on Islamic TV channel
Malik Akhmedilov	11/8/2009	deputy editor of “Khakikat” (in Avar language)
Shamil Aliyev	5/5/2010	TV producer and director
Magomedvagif Sultanmagomedov	19/8/2010	head of republic’s broadcasting company
Yahya Magomedov	8/5/2011	chief editor of “As-Salam” newspaper
Garun Kurbanov	28/7/2011	presidential press advisor
Hadjimurad Kamalov	15/12/2011	founder and one-time chief editor of “Chernovik”

For details on most of these killings see the database online at <http://journalists-in-russia.org> (in English and Russian)

The name “Chernovik” (draft, rough draft, in Russian) is accompanied on the weekly’s banner head with the quotation attributed to US news magnate Philip Graham, “A newspaper is the first draft of history”