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*ACPC Exclusive Interview with **Magomed Mutsolgov**, Director of the Human Rights Organization “Mashr” in Ingushetia*

How would you describe the current situation in Ingushetia?

I would say the situation is very difficult. The new administration has been unable to disrupt some of the tendencies in the republic. Grave violations such as abductions and killings have continued to increase.

Has Kremlin’s policy in Ingushetia changed with Yevkurov’s appointment as president?

I believe that the federal centre has not changed its policy but rather has simply replaced the regional leader who is trying to change the situation in the republic.

What is Kremlin’s policy in the region and Ingushetia specifically in your opinion?

I am convinced that the focus has been on using force but in general I believe the Kremlin does not have an actual unified policy in the North Caucasus.

There was much hope that with Zyazikov’s departure, the situation in Ingushetia would improve significantly. However, almost a year into Yevkurov’s tenure, there has been a significant rise in violence including an increased use of suicide attacks. Why has Yevkurov been ineffective in at least preventing the security situation in Ingushetia from deteriorating? What are some of his obstacles?

Indeed there was much hope with Yevkurov’s appointment, but it’s important to point out that there weren’t illusions. Of course we understand that it is impossible to change everything immediately, however a year is a serious marker by which time there should have been tangible results, in at least improving security in the republic, should become apparent. Improvement in security in particular is lacking and the situation has even deteriorated. The responsibility for this lies with the federal centre,

and the federal security services that do not answer to Yevkurov and are not under his control. As a politician he states that he is in control but in reality this isn't so. They [security services] submit reports to Yevkurov but reports can be compiled in different ways. They do one thing but report another. I believe this has become possible and continues because such grave violations as killings and abductions continue to go unpunished. There is simply a carte blanche for security services and they continue to use it. There hasn't been a single case when a person accountable for abductions has been held accountable, or when an abducted person has been found. All the criminal cases have been put on halt and moreover, not a single person responsible for civilian deaths has been held accountable in the past.

In a recent interview, Yevkurov discussed his proposal to the federal center to move terrorism cases to other jurisdictions. What are your reactions to this proposal?

I do not agree with this proposal. I'm aware that the president of Russia has proposed such legal changes involving not just terrorism cases, but other serious criminal violations to be tried in different regions. In fact, I consider the amendment made to the constitution depriving certain defendants to jury trials as unconstitutional. It is a violation of constitutional rights. Moreover, we can't continue creating new laws under different heads of state. If there's a change in leadership or certain situations, we shouldn't be changing laws in such a big country to suit certain individuals or in reaction to situations. We have a law which states explicitly that criminal cases must be tried in the jurisdiction where the crime was committed and we must abide by this law. I do think we need to reform the judicial system in order to improve investigative methods, and gathering of evidence through legal means and not by force. My main point that it's impossible to change laws for the sake of convenience.

How do the Ingush perceive Yevkurov today and how has this perception changed compared to a year ago?

The public's trust and expectation levels were indeed high with Yevkurov's appointment as president. Since then, he has lost a part of that trust among a certain and not insignificant part of the population. Yet, many still expect him to be able to improve the situation. I am convinced, however, that unless Yevkurov is given a full mandate, there will not be significant positive changes in the republic. Yevkurov does not make many decisions himself. The fact is that an appointed leader is not an elected leader. Russia must repeal the constitutional amendment and reinstate elections of leaders of federal regions so that regional heads answer to constituents and not the administration that has appointed him or her.

As a human rights defender, have you observed an improvement in human rights violations during Yevkurov's tenure?

I would say that absolutely, one of the biggest achievements of Yevkurov's presidency is the improvement in transparency and information about violations and media access. Most importantly is his accessibility, including for the population, and his genuine desire to open a dialogue with human right organization, social welfare organization, religious leaders, with opposition members. The desire to listen to these groups of people, at the very least, is a big step in a positive direction. But the main

questions regarding problems in the republic, specifically territorial and security questions remain unresolved.

Yevkurov, in a recent interview, stated that he is only aware of two specific cases when innocent individuals were detained by security services and added that in the majority of cases, security services have proper motives and or reasons for detaining individuals stemming from certain intelligence.

I am aware what “intelligence” entails. It is a report or statement by individuals often obtained through force therefore I am somewhat skeptical about the president’s statement and I would like to add that this year alone, seven individuals have been abducted without a trace and nearly 300 have been killed. This is far more than two instances. Most importantly, one simply cannot assume that without fire there is no smoke. As a person with a legal background, I would like to point out that all allegations must be made in court regardless of the fact that our courts often make inadequate decisions, disregarding evidence, alibis, etc. Quite often, courts make rulings because of political pressures. This is unacceptable, but it’s a fact. Nevertheless, we must assume the presumption of innocence. An individual is not guilty if he is abducted, if a grave violation has been done against him. Those that perform these abductions cannot fight illegal activity with illegal activity and those that carry out these abductions must be held accountable.

Yevkurov, in an interview with Ekho Moskv, stated that he does not rule out that security services were complicit in Aushev’s murder calling his death a direct challenge to his rule. In your opinion, would you say that Yevkurov is in control of government structures, local and federal, operating in Ingushetia today? In whose interest is it to undermine Yevkurov: militants, corrupt officials, or both?

I can say that in my personal opinion, in either case members of security services partook in Aushev’s killing. I do not have a single thread of doubt about it. Moreover, I was personally acquainted with Aushev having provided him with legal counsel after his son and nephew were kidnapped (in 2007) and ever since then we had a good relationship. I can say that Aushev never travelled in his vehicle alone, he always either had a driver or someone with him in the vehicle. Always. In this case, he was travelling alone and this says that he was being watched. And to watch someone who knew how to be on the lookout, given the fact that he himself was almost abducted, without being noticed means that it was done by professionals and he was killed in the neighboring republic of Kabardino-Balkaria on purpose. Therefore, I don’t have any doubt that it was carried out by security services. I am only considering two versions: he was killed for playing an active role in lobbying for previous administration’s removal or to undermine Yevkurov. He was not forgiven for what he was able to achieve; in part with his help the removal of Murat Zyazikov as president was achieved; and it’s possible that the death of Aushev could lead to the removal Yevkurov from his post just like the death of [Magomed] Yevloyev led to Zyazikov’s removal.

If I understand you correctly, you are not ruling out that members of Zyazikov’s administration may have played a role in Aushev’s death?

Yes, people that had power to act freely under that administration because billions of rubles were

embezzled. It was exposed that 1.3 billion rubles from Ingushetia's budget was stolen in 2008 alone, I'm not sure how many criminal cases have been opened, but this was all exposed thanks to orders given by Yevkurov to analyze budget allocation in 2008. Imagine how much was stolen during the six years that Zyazikov was in power. Obviously it is a big sum, and security services acted freely then and still do today, but now there are certain differences, particularly the leakage of information through media sources. The blockade of information that existed under Zyazikov has been lifted. Although there still isn't total freedom of information, nevertheless they don't keep quiet. Facts about killings are exposed, including on local television. That's a first. Second, Yevkurov really tries to have dialogue with all aspects of society, and this was never so. During the last 6 years, [before Yevkurov was appointed as the president of Ingushetia] no government official would meet with people. . Even during the first president [Ruslan Aushev], there wasn't such openness on the part of the president. When Thomas Hammarberg was in Ingushetia recently, he said (and I agree with him) that he hasn't seen such a level of communication and openness with the population from any head of European state. Yevkurov came to the hotel where this seminar was held and anyone could enter the hotel and Yevkurov didn't allow anyone, his bodyguard, advisors, etc to interrupt or prevent a person from asking a question. There were people who had lost their relatives speaking on emotions and said impolite things toward authorities and other people present at the time. Nevertheless, Yevkurov acted very properly and remained patient and stayed until the very end, even though he wasn't supposed to, and Thomas Hammarber was rather astonished that this was even possible. Yevkurov stands out from everyone past but he does not control the security services and, in my opinion, the federal centre did not delegate to him such authority.

Is it possible that in light of Aushev's death, Yevkurov will ask the federal centre for more authority to control the security services?

I don't believe that Yevkurov will demand more authority now. I believe that if he would have asked in the past, he would have received it but given the fact that Yevkurov is a military man, he still behaves like one, he observes subordination and in my understanding the Kremlin found a brave and honest Ingush willing to give his life for Russia and has assigned him to a trouble spot. Moreover, whenever Yevkurov makes certain strides to fix something according to the situation on the ground, he is quickly reminded about the conditions under which he was positioned here, that is with tied hands and feet. I can say that he will need more authority at least in the near future. Why is it that there are political intrigues directed against him? The fact is that there are many people who have stolen large sums of money, including security services who always have had an unlimited mandate to operate in the republic, these people want to get rid of Yevkurov. Yevkurov is not a politician, he is a simple man whose fate made him president, but who had no political background whatsoever. He didn't even have a legal background. He's a military man that they found in the army for certain military achievements and honors for the Russian Federation, he was offered or more likely convinced, to become president of Ingushetia and many believe that especially after the assassination attempt, he is still physically weak and that his health inhibits him from standing strongly on his feet and of course attempts will be made by certain people to replace him with someone who is more favorable, who has a political background and personal interests and connections or someone from the previous administration. After all, the

financial stream that was going to the pockets of these people before Zyazikov's departure is very attractive and a lot of people are interested in benefiting from this again.

To what extent is the armed underground interested in removing Yevkurov given that he believes in working with the population in convincing the youth to not take up arms and join the militants?

I cannot say to what extent they're interested for one simple reason, the militants do not care who's in power. The majority of them have other goals and that is to seek revenge while the minority, who are mainly in leadership positions, have an idea of creating a Caucasus state or "Caucasus Emirate." And this does not depend on the leader of the republic. I would understand if Yevkurov was doing something that was indeed changing the situation significantly in one way or the other. But, even the much publicized joint special operation on the border of Chechnya and Ingushetia has not had the effect that representatives from the security services have claimed. In reality, it is not clear who is chasing who. As far as I know, we can see by simply observing the media outlets and official data during this period that the militants have attacked Chechen and Ingush troops at least four times and at least once attacked and destroyed a convoy of Chechen policemen therefore it's not clear which side has suffered more casualties. If we count casualties from both sides, we can see that they are similar. We can say that the one single achievement of this special operation is that the authorities were able to capture Rustaman Makhauri, an individual who is actually considered one of the ideologues of rebel leaders. As far as operations on Ingushetia's territory go, security services claim success from the death of Rustam Dzortov who was the emir of Ingush Jamaat. I can not name any other real achievements because majority of the youth is being used both by the police and by the militants as cannon meat. It's not important how many people have died. Why? Because they always find a person to replace someone who has been killed, on both sides.

Is the youth still joining the insurgency at the same rate as before or is this dynamic changing in some way?

I can't comment on this because I don't possess this information. But judging by what is happening, I believe that there aren't very many changes because there's a continuation of civilian deaths (including those suspected of militant activity), security servicemen and members of special forces. We continue to have cases of arson of liquor stores and attacks on government officials. Everything goes on as before. I don't think this is related to too many or too few being killed. Abuse only leads to more abuse. The more killings there are the more young men will join the militants. The more that security services violate human rights and the more they exacerbate relations with the population, the bigger the increase in militant numbers.

President Yevkurov has laid the blame for much of the violence in Ingushetia on foreign services and not so much on federal ones. Can you comment on this?

I believe that this was a purely politically motivated statement and it is important to note that Yevkurov's statement was later repeated by the President of Dagestan Mukhu Aliev, by the President of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov, and even the President of Kabardino-Balkaria Arsen Kanokov. I believe it's a

typical political ploy to always look for enemies abroad, and not at home. Of course, each government carries out a political agenda that is beneficial to its own country. It's much easier to say that certain enemies are disrupting from fixing problems that exist in the republic rather than actually fixing the problems. We should be dealing with the problems at hand, and not looking for enemies. That's important.

Although it's difficult to foresee the future, given the situation in Ingushetia today, what scenario do you foresee down the road for security and human rights?

I will not make any predictions but will simply say that I don't expect any significant improvements as long as the Kremlin's policy in the North Caucasus remains the same. There are no normal national politics in the North Caucasus that aim to improve the situation in the republics. Interests of the people are not taken into account. You can't say what needs to be done in Ingushetia while being in Yakutia. It's important to listen to the people and taken their wishes into account, not just try to solve the problems through the use of force. As long as heavy handed tactics are favored, there will not be any improvements. If someone really wants to change the situation, and I don't believe that too many politicians and military personnel have a burning desire to improve the situation in the North Caucasus, if the issue was really addressed, these are all solvable problems. What people care about is security, their children's future, few people actually wish for eternal war or for their sons and daughters to be killed during war. Moreover, the politicians making the decisions never send their sons to take part in these wars. In that sense, national politics are necessary. I don't expect for any steps to be taken in the near future. Regarding human rights, I will simply say we shall wait and see who is next. Today, even if you have an honest desire to protect human rights defenders, no one has the ability to actually do so, not even the presidents of Ingushetia or Dagestan. It's not there because a new mechanism is needed, it's necessary to stabilize the situation in the republic, to be able to take criticism directed at you and other government officials, and it's necessary to take immediate steps to protect human rights activists, but in principal, if we talk about an ideal situation, then there shouldn't even be a situation when human rights defenders need extra measures of protection.

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Translated by the American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus

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