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The Integration of Non-Russian Servicemen in the Imperial, Soviet and Russian Army

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“There is discrimination in the Russian army against religious minorities” - Interview with Abdurashid Saidov, surgeon, writer and Moscow correspondent for *Dagestanskaia Pravda*, Moscow, 7 October 2008

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“There is discrimination in the Russian army against religious minorities” - Interview with Abdurashid Saidov, surgeon, writer and Moscow correspondent for *Dagestanskaia Pravda*, Moscow, 7 October 2008

- 1 **PIPSS.ORG** – What is it like for Dagestani conscripts? How do the officers relate to them? Are they able to fulfill all their religious duties? Do Dagestanis have the ability to rise to the officer ranks?
- 2 **Abdurashid Saidov:** In Moscow, there are more than 10 million residents; in Dagestan, there are 2 million. In each conscription, however, Dagestan offers up many times more young men to the army than Moscow¹.
- 3 Speaking of attitudes towards Muslims, it is possible to say with confidence that in the Russian army there is discrimination against religious minorities. How does it manifest itself? To take just one example, when recruits are in formation for their swearing in, you never see a mullah or a rabbi to bless the soldiers. But a Russian Orthodox priest will definitely be there sprinkling everyone – Muslims, Jews, atheists, Hare Krishnas -- with holy water and blessing them with the cross.
- 4 As far as your last question is concerned, there are quite a few officers from the Muslim peoples of Russia.

Every company is under the control of orthodox priests

- 5 They should be commanded to break formation, since it doesn't apply to them. This would be the right thing to do. But it is not allowed and the holy water is sprinkled on the Muslims. This is discrimination. In addition, every company is under the control of Russian Orthodox priests. Every warship also has its own priest.
- 6 The so-called “counterterrorism operation” in Chechnya is a real holy war. Russian priests are blessing the war and sending soldiers to kill us Muslims! And this is within the country! Between countries Christians are killing Christians in war. In a multi-religious country it is better to discuss and reconcile, but instead they set young men on each other.
- 7 Obviously it turns out that the Russian Orthodox priests are blessing murder. Why are they killing Chechens?
- 8 It is clear that the Russian army is imperialistic, just as it always was. Jews and Muslims are also serving in the military in addition to Christians. The phrases “other believer” and “religious minority” are not just insulting, but also dangerous. In a secular government, as we have according to the Russian constitution, religion should not be a part of the army, nor the schools. Otherwise there should be equal conditions for the performance of religious rites in the army and in all public spheres for people of all religions.

Gruz 200 as a result of non-statutory treatment

- 9 Another important aspect is that those coming out of Dagestan -- the boys who were sent to serve in the Russian army -- are often sent back in the first year like “Gruz 200”². These tragic stories are the grounds for ethnic hostility, but officially they are classified as “non-statutory treatment”³.
- 10 There was a case where a Dagestani serviceman was beaten to death by a group of Russians. In order to cover up the incident, the body was burned in a furnace. The body wasn't found until one of the Russian participants blabbed. Then it came out that he was burned.

11 In November another one [*Dagestani*] was called up and was assigned to the Tamansk Division, an elite division outside Moscow. This isn't Ryazan, or Ural, or the Far East. This is the Tamansk Division. His parents were prepared to pay to get him out of it. They tried to persuade him: "You don't need to go to the army." He said, "What am I a coward? Am I not a patriot? I'm going to serve." He left in November. In December his body was sent home as a result of "non-statutory treatment". There are lots of these cases.

12 I can say personally that if you took all the cases of victims of non-statutory treatment in the Russian army, the percent of suffering Muslim and Jewish soldiers would be larger than the percent of suffering Russians. I can't prove this of course. It would be necessary to carry out an objective sociological study.

Cutting service short leads to a difficult period

13 **PIPSS.ORG** - And how is the situation with the ending of the draft and the professionalization of the army?

14 **Abdurashid Saidov:** The end of the draft is leading to a transition period in which the situation in the army will be doubly difficult and dangerous.

15 It is possible that conflict will arise between those who were called up for two years and are fulfilling their period of service and the new arrivals who, according to the new law, got just one year. "Senior" servicemen will be dissatisfied. "Why should I serve two years when he's serving just one?" The response will be to be "indignant" at the new recruits. This is very dangerous period in sociological and psychological terms. Are the Russian generals, who it seems are busy with other issues besides the army, considering this? I doubt it.

16 In conflict studies, knowledge of the history and cultures of other people is very significant. In Russian conflict studies, knowledge of the history and cultures of other people, however paradoxically, is a hindrance. It is not necessary to know or to get into history. They say, "Let's live in the present." How can I live in the present when my people are carrying the weight of 150-200 years? When my people are being worn down? And to this day there is not an apology, or compensation, or anything at all. This is a heavy burden. Very many tragedies are going on because the government - bureaucrats, the president, power structures - are never seriously interested in history and do not make any conclusions. In fact, they are all silent, they deny, and what is worse, they are starting to lie. In as much as you are engaged with the post-Soviet areas, you probably are familiar with Marie Bennigsen. She knows the culture, history, and traditions of the Caucasian peoples, as though she was from there herself. We do not have such Caucasian specialists. I wrote in the newspaper that not one of our ministers knows even a tenth of what Bennigsen knows about any of the peoples. And they don't want to know. And this is where all the problems stem from.

They pay bribes to get their son in the army

17 **PIPSS.ORG** - And how do Dagestanis relate to military service? Is the army still prestigious in Dagestan?

18 **Abdurashid Saidov:** Recently I heard that people in Dagestan have even begun to pay bribes so that their sons would be taken into the army, whereas before people were paying to keep them out of the army! This is a new trend. I can't explain it. They say that it is possible to serve... The troops that served in the Georgian war are being stationed in Balkaria and in Dagestan. They say that for money it is possible to set your son up in the forces in Dagestan, so they don't have to leave. The idea is, "He has gone just 100 km to the army, an hour from home, he's serving nearby." This way it is easy for the parents to control them. But to go to the army, in my mind, is still very costly because you can pay for it with your life or your health. At least this is the case in the Russian army today. Paying bribes to get into the army is also probably related to the difficult economic situation and unemployment rates. There is the hope that you can at least get some skills out of your service.

19 **PIPSS.ORG** - Who in Dagestan speaks for the conscripts?

20 **Abdurashid Saidov:** There is the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. And journalists are also quite important. There is the *Chernovik* newspaper⁴. It frequently publishes articles on the

defense of conscripts and soldiers and gives a lot of attention to this issue. There is also the Moscow Cultural Center of Dagestan. It is without political or religious affiliation. It doesn't have a specialized program for soldiers, but if someone comes, we help them if we can. I personally have twice gone to the Tamansk Division in relation to a problem. We do what we can to help, but we are not involved in any special monitoring.

21 **PIPSS.ORG** – What was the problem at the Tamansk Division?

22 **Abdurashid Saidov:** There was a fight. The Russians beat some of our boys. It was necessary to regulate the conflict. It was necessary to make sure our people didn't get together to get revenge and do something worse. It was a peace mission. I met with officers and commanders and with the youths involved. It was a typical conflict resolution. As a result, the conflict was snuffed out. It was agreed to reassign to soldiers to different groups, so that everything would turn out peacefully. Nothing was done officially. Everything was resolved internally, quietly and peacefully.

23 **PIPSS.ORG** – Do these things happen frequently?

24 **Abdurashid Saidov:** Incidents of violence? They are very frequent, especially beyond the Urals. I have documents from lawyers and from rights defenders with names and concrete conditions. I am working closely with the Mothers' Council and have even gone to the military division. Such cases are frequent, but I cannot say how many times a year.

Absence of reaction of spiritual leaders

25 **PIPSS.ORG** – How do spiritual leaders react?

26 **Abdurashid Saidov:** They don't react in any way. The religious leaders don't notice practically anything that the government doesn't want noticed: the illegal arrests, murder and humiliation of people. They just don't notice. This is why the spiritual plan is empty. There is no support.

In Dagestan it is fashionable to go to a military educational institution

27 **PIPSS.ORG** – How attractive is the army and the power structures to Dagestanis?

28 **Abdurashid Saidov:** It is very popular today to go to a military educational institution (FSB, army-air force, border school). It has become prestigious. Very many Dagestanis have begun applying to the FSB school in Moscow. I can say that it attracts them. They hope that having become FSB workers they will a free pass and will become all powerful and able to do anything -- protect businesses, regulate conflicts between the government and people. That is what is going on now. For instance, I do not pay taxes. The legal tax inspector says: "Why do you not pay taxes?". "I have an uncle in the FSB", I call him and he tells the inspector "Leave my nephew in peace!".

29 They young see that these people can defend themselves illegally and that they are above the law and that bureaucrats – especially those in the power structures – control everything. This is what attracts the young -- not patriotism. In name it might be patriotism, but it is just personal profit that is attractive: the possibility for control outside the government and outside the law. If the legal system were to develop, if there were objective courts, if people lived according to the law, it is possible that young people would not look for such an exit from their extremely difficult situation (through work in the military, FSB, and army).

Notes

1 The Moscow region alone has a larger Muslim population than Bashkortostan [E.S.K.'s note].

2 A reference to the coffins in which soldiers in the war in Afghanistan were returned home [Translator's note].

3 Acts of harassment or violence against servicemen [Translator's note].

4 <http://www.chernovik.net/> [E.S.K.'s note].

Footnotes

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