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Groznyy makes you want to stay there forever

The “Novaya Gazeta” newspaper, January 27, 2003

If you continue to pretend that Chechnya does not exist, it will come to you sooner or later.

I don't want to leave Chechnya. Chechnya makes you want to live there. To rise with the dawn, to get busy around the house, and to have one for your own. Whether to rejoice or to weep, to love or to hate, or to bring up a child, but I want it here, in this place, where everything balances on the line between life and death. And nowhere else in the world is this line as shifting and uncertain.. ...

News brought to you by the “Ichkeria TV ”

A convoy of the federal troops is plodding along a dilapidated, bumpy road: several armored personnel carriers, “Ural” trucks. Sappers with mine detectors in hands are walking on the sides of the road. There are soldiers on foot, who crouch from time to time into firing position. Roofs of houses with smoking chimneys are seen in the background.

Suddenly, there are cries of “Allah Akbar!” The camera trembles slightly. At the same moment, one of the armored carriers blows up and several soldiers cinematographically somersault high in the air. But it is not, as it appears at first, one of the numerous Russian action movies on Chechnya. The scene is accompanied by a popular Chechen song, “Paradise under the canopy of swords”, and is followed by other documentary clips: dead and wounded children, dead Khattab with his chin tied up, ruins of Groznyy, diving attack planes.

While tuning my small battery powered TV set I stumble from time to time on broadcasts of the official Chechen TV. In contrast, during the first Chechen war, the “Ichkeria TV ” would even occasionally blot out the powerful signals of the federal TV channels, and an interview with

Dudaev¹ would suddenly replace a Moscow talk show. Now, to watch news on the “Ichkeria TV” one has to learn how to tune in.

Or take the newspaper “Ichkeria”. You get down to the hall in the morning, and here it is: a pile of the freshly printed copies, as if it has materialized out of the thin air. The last issue, for example, is about Mikhail Babich and the criminal chapters of his biography².

The Afterlife or Ingushetia?

The controversy around Chechen refugees in Ingushetia would not subside. The refugees are reluctant to return to the ruins of their old life, while the Chechen officials hint that their remaining in Ingushetia plays into the hands of the militants, who allegedly pay the refugees for staying there.

I think it is rubbish. Graffiti on the walls in Grozny, for example, testify to the contrary. “The Afterlife is better than Ingushetia”, says one, and another concurs: “End of absurd is better than absurd without end”. Or another one: “Revenge is sweeter than humanitarian aid”.

In the beginning of December, an acquaintance of mine, one of the best computer experts in city, returned to Grozny from Ingushetia. He opened a business: computer classes, video rental, copying, and lamination. Two weeks later he was “cleansed”. Though not completely: he was not even shot. Simply, one day armed people in military uniforms came in an UAZ van, took the copying machine and two computers, and left with a polite goodbye. The computer expert took his family and fled, though not to Ingushetia, but much further: to Barnaul³.

The market of contention

Recently, a momentous event of local importance shook Grozny. The notorious central city market has been bulldozed flat in one night by the city authorities.

This was done under the pretext that the market detracts from the appearance of the historic city center and does not satisfy public hygiene norms. For those who have not seen it: the so-called

¹ The first president of Chechnya, killed, presumably by a Russian rocket, in April of 1996.

² At the time, the Moscow appointed prime-minister of Chechnya. As the vice-president of the state company that distributed Western food aid, was a subject of a criminal investigation for allegedly selling the food to commercial firms. Currently, a member of the Duma from the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

³ A city in the South-Western Siberia.

historic city center is a heap of stinking ruins⁴. As to the sanitary norms, what does satisfy them in Chechnya?

As usual, the real reason for demolition of the pitiful shacks is different from the declared one. And what is the real reason is an open secret in Groznyy. A shopping mall has been built in the Theater Square, a tidy building, corresponding apparently to the norms, even attractive in some ways, if one ignores the absurd blue it is painted in. The mall is a property, as the persistent rumor has it, of the Mayor of Groznyy, Beslan Gantamirov.

In today's Groznyy, where rats enjoy in some ways more rights than people do (unlike people, they can walk the streets freely 24 hours a day), it would be preposterous to assume that demolition of the market was motivated by concern for cleanness of the streets. More likely, somebody (and we can guess who) was after the money that circulated there in huge amounts, due to complete absence of the state run retailing, and decided to put a roof over it, in both senses of the word⁵.

The outdoor facilities

Speaking of the sanitary norms. Most of the few apartment buildings in Groznyy that have been restored don't have toilets. More precisely, the broken toilet balls have been replaced, but they cannot be used: the sewer system does not function. But the construction workers came out with a solution: now, in the courtyard of each apartment building, they dig a hole in the ground and put a shed atop of it. Now the President's dream to "waste in the outhouse" would be easier to realize.⁶

The heating situation is no less absurd. Hot water radiators are being installed in the apartments. There is a lot of work involved: measuring, cutting, welding. But the radiators are nothing but theater props: there is no central heating in Groznyy. The empty, freshly painted radiators are just standing there, whether to beatify the apartments, or as a joke.

⁴ Most of Groznyy, partially destroyed during the first Chechen war, was bombed to the ground at the beginning of the second war in Chechnya, in the late 1999 – early 2000.

⁵ A reference to the new meaning "roof" has acquired in contemporary Russian: a body - a band of racketeers, police, FSB, local administration, etc. – providing for pay protection, from competitors as well, and other services to a business. For example, the questions "who is their roof?" or "who roofs them?" are routinely asked, though not necessarily answered.

⁶ A reference to Putin's famous promise to "waste the terrorists in the outhouse", which he made in September 1999, shortly before elected President of the Russian Federation.

Radiators aside, life in Chechnya is full of excitement, and Groznyy in particular is a paradise for connoisseurs of extreme lifestyle.

Going to bed, put it in the place where you are less likely to be dusted by shell fragments should they fly into the window. Waking in the night, you listen to the sounds of armor in the streets and wonder at which house it would stop. You get more adrenaline rush than you can buy on any roller-coaster.

So, friends, come to live in Chechnya! Or continue to pretend silently that there is no such place. Then, maybe, one day it will come to where you are.

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