

Nationalism is raising its head in Bashkortostan

ARVAK center's comment, 23.01.2024

The sentencing of the Bashkir activist Fail Alchinov by the Baymak city court (RF) on January 17, 2024, led to unrest in Bashkortostan. Back on April 28, 2023, Alchinov spoke at a citizen meeting near the Ishmurzino house of culture with a speech of negative content towards “Armenians, Caucasian nationalities and nationalities of Central Asia” whom he also called “*kara khalik*” (in Bashkirian - “*black people*”). The investigative authorities, and later the court, noted signs of incitement to ethnic hatred in Alchinov’s speeches, and he was accused of extremism and has been handed a 4-year prison sentence for inciting hatred on ethnic grounds.

On the day of the verdict, several thousand people from all over the region gathered in the town of Baymak. The Security Forces, in turn, blocked the entrances to the court. After the verdict was announced, riots began in the crowd, the Police resorted to force, and Special Forces were involved. The number of people injured because of the unrest reaches several dozen, including the security forces. Several rally participants were arrested, and criminal cases were initiated against them.

Mass-media and analytical circles in the Russian Federation prefer to carefully comment on the events in Baymak or not to talk about it at all, apparently avoiding a broad discussion of the obvious interethnic background of the issue. Despite the assurances of Alchinov’s defenders that his speeches were only of a socio-ecological nature and related to the issues of the dominance of “*migrant labor force*” at the gold-bearing mines of Bashkortostan, politicians and journalists do not exclude, that this could only be a reason for the start of deeper processes in the subject of the federation.

Therefore, discussions mainly take place around social problems of the region and administrative shortcomings of the republican authorities.

The head of the republic, Radiy Khabirov, himself is more sincere in his assessments of the problem and openly states that we are talking about attempts to blow up Bashkortostan from within and withdraw it from Russia. Khabirov does not deny certain guilt of the republican authorities and does not hide the fact that socio-economic life here is not at the best level, but at the same time claims that the root of the problem should be sought elsewhere. According to his leaks, “*you can put on the mask of a kind environmental activist, a patriot (meaning Alchinov), but, in reality, the situation is not at all like that*”. “*From the first day of my work, I said that I would not tolerate extremism and attempts to undermine the situation. As the head of Bashkortostan, I must protect the republic and people from any attempt to shake interethnic harmony based on nationality, language, faith...*”.

He directly stated that the nationalist organization Bashkort, which was recognized as extremist in the Russian Federation in 2020, was involved in the riots. “*Some of these people are abroad and, in fact, act as traitors, calling for the separation of Bashkortostan from Russia and guerrilla warfare*”.

A similar opinion is shared by former State Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev, who, however, argues that Moscow's *protégé* Khabirov will not be able to calm the situation. Moreover, according to Ponomarev, the unrest could spread to Yakutia and Tyva, where nationalist sentiment is on the rise and where people feel less dependent on Moscow.

From the words of Khabirov and Ponomarev, we can conclude that we are most likely talking about Turkic nationalism, and the phrase “*are abroad*” almost directly points to Turkey – the sponsor and ideological inspirer of the nationalist organization “Bashkort”.

It is symptomatic that Fail Alchinov, convicted by the Baymak court, specifically mentioned Armenians in his speeches as the culprits of the difficult environmental and social situation created in Bashkortostan, and defined the rest of *the “black people” in such vague formulations as “persons of Caucasian nationalities and nationalities of Central Asia”*.

In this case, the rhetoric and the emphasis placed directly point to the main customer of the “*social and environmental actions*” in Bashkortostan and the unrest that followed.