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June 22, 2010

Russian Envoys Back European Criticism of Kremlin's Caucasus Policy

By ELLEN BARRY

MOSCOW — To the surprise of human rights activists, Russian delegates to the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly on Tuesday approved a sharply critical [draft resolution](#) on [Russia's](#) policy in the North Caucasus, which says "human rights violations and the climate of complete impunity were bound to foster the rise of extremist movements."

This is hardly the first time that the Strasbourg, France-based assembly has issued a damning assessment of human rights in the North Caucasus, the mountainous region on Russia's southern border where separatist wars in the 1990s have given way to a persistent insurgency. But never in 14 years of membership has Russia's delegation voted unanimously to approve one, much less praised it as objective and balanced.

Delegates hailed the vote — 132 in favor, with six abstentions — as a historic moment, and the author of the resolution called it a "major signal" of a shift in Russia's approach to the region under President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#).

"I think it shows that they understand the situation must change, and that they actually want to change something," said the author, Dick Marty, a former prosecutor from Switzerland who visited [Chechnya](#), Ingushetia and Dagestan in March. "We are far from having found a solution, but I believe we are entering a new era, a period where dialog might be possible."

Oleg P. Orlov, an official at the venerable Russian human rights group Memorial, called Mr. Marty's research "excellent, objective and harrowing," and said he, too, was surprised by the support from the Russian delegation. But he was more cautious in assessing its significance, saying it could turn out to be "a smoke screen, what we

call in Russia a ‘Potemkin village,’ ” designed to deflect complaints routinely raised by Russia’s would-be partners in the West.

The resolution cites findings by the [European Court of Human Rights](#) that the authorities in the region employed torture and extrajudicial killing, and says that Russia’s failure to punish these crimes feeds “the nefarious cycle of violence.”

It praises reconstruction efforts in Chechnya but levels particular criticism at its leader, [Ramzan A. Kadyrov](#), saying he has nurtured “a climate of pervading fear.” Mr. Kadyrov’s degree of personal power, the resolution says, “appears disgraceful in a democracy.”

An accompanying report zeroes in on the [murder of Umar S. Israilov](#), who was shot in Vienna in January of 2009 as he prepared to testify against Mr. Kadyrov, and it says the police have credible evidence that associates of Mr. Kadyrov were involved. Mr. Marty offers some evidence that one key witness in the murder, refused protection by Austrian authorities, was killed after his return to Russia, and that a second witness was killed in Azerbaijan.

A spokesman for Mr. Kadyrov, reached earlier this month after the text was made public, said he had not read it, so could not comment. Mr. Kadyrov has [denied accusations](#) that he was involved in Mr. Israilov’s death.

As Tuesday’s vote approached, Russian delegates said they had negotiated to remove the resolution’s harshest language, such as a section that characterized Mr. Kadyrov’s rule as “a cult of personality.” After these changes, “practically all the resulting part is satisfactory to us,” Leonid E. Slutsky, first deputy chairman of the State Duma’s foreign affairs committee, told Kommersant, a daily newspaper. “It is not complimentary, but it is not biased.”

Indeed, the tone of Tuesday’s debate had none of the rancor of previous discussions of the North Caucasus, though five of Moscow’s eight delegates defended Russia’s record. Konstantin I. Kosachev, chairman of the Duma’s international affairs committee, called Mr. Marty’s work “high quality, very balanced and professional.” But he bridled at criticism of Mr. Kadyrov, saying refugees have flocked back to a stable Chechnya, and lashed out a colleague who called Mr. Kadyrov “a self-styled ruler.”

“He is insulting all those residents of the Chechen Republic who voted for President Kadyrov,” said Mr. Kosachev, one of two Russians who abstained. “I don’t idealize

him, I don't say he's an ideal politician, but don't insult those who voted for him.”

Mr. Marty was effusive in his thanks to Russian delegates who assisted him during his research, and clearly pleased at their response to his report, which he said “could have turned into a clash between two camps.” Some of his toughest comments were directed at European governments which he said were hesitant to challenge Russia.

“I quoted a former judge of the court who said very recently to me, ‘You know, unfortunately today, gas carries more weight than human rights,’ ” Mr. Marty said at a news conference. Austria's response to Mr. Israilov's murder in Vienna, he said, “shows the degree to which authorities in European countries are willing to act in a way that is not consistent with the elegant pronouncements on human rights which they emit so often.”