

# Circassian World

## Responses to the New Challenges

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 54

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*December 2008*

Every tourist who comes to Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, visits a famous gift shop called “Adyga Una” (“The Circassian House”). The owner of this gift shop is a well-known Circassian businessman who was born in Turkey and moved back to the Caucasus, the homeland of his ancestors. He is a living example of the Circassian dream. Three quarters of the Circassian population do not live in their historic homeland and very few of them believe they will return. Some of them try, but cannot get through the process, and very few are able to obtain citizenship and adjust to their new life. This man, however, used the first opportunity he had after the end of the Cold War to attain his dream and managed to overcome many obstacles – even divorcing his wife in Turkey, who did not believe in coming back. He then obtained Russian citizenship, built a new family, and made his own successful business in Nalchik.

Small nations do not always have to be the victims of conflict between larger nations; they can sometimes solve their problems during hard times if they are able to clearly understand their own interests and have defined goals. The Circassians have as many grievances about their past, as much of a sense of cultural commonality, and as many resources as other more mobilized groups in the region, such as Chechens or Tatars. This has always raised the question - why has the Circassian issue not been politically more important up to this point? This paper focuses on the problem of how the great geopolitical changes of the 1990s have affected the Circassians – a small nation of the Caucasus, most of whose population is dispersed all over the world, and how Circassians, in turn, have responded to the main events of our times that concern them.

## Formation of the Circassian World and Its Ideology

The contemporary Circassian world was formed amidst great geopolitical events, such as the constant conflict between the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Bolshevik Revolution, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, World War Two, the Palestinian conflict, and others.

Only ten percent of the Circassian population remained on its native soil in the Caucasus by the end of the nineteenth century. Circassian lands were divided in the Stalinist period into several small administrative units of different statuses (autonomous republics, oblasts, and regions). These areas did not border each other, and the Circassian populations were grouped together with non-related nations. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the lands traditionally inhabited by Circassians formed three republics: Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygeya, and Karachaevo-Cherkesia.

Figure 1

Circassian population in Russia

	Population	Percentage of the population
Kabardians	519,958	Kabardino-Balkaria - 52.5
Adygeyans	128, 528	Adygeya - 25.2
Cherkesses	60,517	Karachaevo-Cherkesia - 11.2
Total	709,003	

According to the 2002 census, there are over 700,000 Circassians currently in Russia (Figure 1). Most of the Circassian population emigrated from its homeland in a mass exodus after the Russo-Caucasian war from 1763 to 1864. The flow from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire continued from the 1860s to the beginning of the twentieth century. The number of Circassian settlers in Turkey reached an estimated total of 1.5 million, and their numbers doubled before the turn of the twenty-first century. Today Circassians live in 897 villages and towns in Turkey.

After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, Circassians found themselves scattered throughout several newly formed states, including Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Serbia, and Palestine. As an ethnoreligious minority in Kosovo (Serbia), they started to migrate to Turkey after the Balkan wars (1912-1913) and continued migrating for almost a century. In 1998, there were reportedly 174 Circassians in Kosovo - quite a drop from the 6,500 in 1900.

The Russian Civil War (1918-1922) forced many anti-Bolshevik families to leave the Caucasus and settle in different Western cities such as Paris, Lyon, Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, and New York. Another wave of Circassian emigration to Western countries,

mainly a work migration, started in the 1950s, with migrants heading mostly to Germany from Turkey and to the United States from the Middle East. After the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, more than 18,000 Circassians were deported from the Golan Heights and settled in Syria and Jordan. Two big Circassian villages, Kfar-Kame and Rehania, remained in Israel. Representatives of Circassians live outside the Caucasus in 50 countries.

Figure 2  
Circassian Diaspora

	Quantity
Turkey	3,000,000
Syria	80,000
Jordan	65,000
Israel	3,595
United States	9,000
Kosovo (in 1998)	174
Germany	40,000
Netherlands	500

In the early 1990s, the Circassians had two main geopolitical problems to solve: the unification of the Circassian world and the repatriation of the expelled population to the homeland. A clear understanding of these two problems has emerged over the last two decades as the result of a broad international movement, which has been marked by seven International Circassian Congresses (Nalchik 1991, Maykop 1993, Cherkessk 1996, Krasnodar 1998, Nalchik 2000 and 2003, and Istanbul 2006).

The realization of their ideology and an understanding of their problems brought two main tendencies into the Circassian movement. First, the Circassian world started to respond to world events from its own national position, trying to achieve its own interests. Second, the movement realized that the resolution of both the Circassians' geopolitical problems depends on their relationship to Russia – a situation understood perfectly well by the Circassian regions of Russia and by the diaspora.

## **The Circassian Unification Movement**

The unification movement started after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War. In 1991, the International Circassian Association (ICA) was established in Munich. Its first president was a prominent Circassian, Yuri Kalmykov, who was appointed Russia's Minister of Justice two years later. The ICA not only united the activities of Circassians all around the world but also raised the Circassian movement to

an international level. It became a member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) in 1994. The fifth General Assembly of UNPO (July 15-19, 1997) issued a Resolution on the Situation of the Circassian Nation, in which it called upon the Russian Federation and the international community “to acknowledge the genocide of the Circassian nation that took place in the nineteenth century and to grant the Circassian people status of an exile nation; to grant the Circassian people dual citizenship, both that of Russia and of their respective countries; [and] to ensure the Circassian people of the possibility to return to their historical land.” The Circassian International Academy of Sciences was founded in 1993 in Nalchik with branches in Krasnodar, Maykop, Abkhazia, Israel, and Jordan.

The break up of the Soviet Union and the formation of three republics within the Russian Federation – Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygeya, and Karachaevo-Cherkesia – greatly accelerated the process of Circassian state building. Each republic was given its own president, government, parliament, and constitution; the Circassian language became an official language in the three republics. The first constitutions of these republics even came into conflict with federal law because they were based on the ethnopolitical interests of the republics. In the republic of Adygeya, the Circassian national identity was so prominent that the parliament was renamed the *Khasa* (in the old Circassian style), and the old Circassian flag with 12 stars and three crossed arrows on a green background became the republic’s official flag.

Another modern tendency among the Circassians of Russia was a form of irredentism – a movement for the reunification of Circassians according to ethnic and linguistic principles. Steps were taken to bring Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygeya, and Karachevo-Cherkesia closer. In 1992, the republics signed a Treaty of Friendship and Partnership. The most significant achievement was the establishment of an Interparliamentary Counsel of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygeya and Karachaevo-Cherkesia in 1997. Recently, the question of uniting Circassian territories was brought up in public at the Circassian Congress in Cherkessk, on November 25, 2008. The recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by Russia inspired the delegates of the Congress, and they considered sending an appeal to the Russian government to unite the Circassian republics into one unit within the Russian Federation.

## **Response to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict**

Abkhazia is considered to be part of the Circassian world (the Abkhaz language belongs to another branch of Abkhaz-Circassian languages alongside Abazin, spoken in the North Caucasus). For that reason, the Circassians of Russia responded dramatically to the Georgian-Abkhazian war (1992-1993). Groups gathered in Nalchik, Maykop, and Cherkessk to protest the war, and some blocked federal roads. All Circassian NGOs in Russia raised their voices against the war, including committees of women, journalists, and writers. In August 1992, Russian President Boris Yeltsin stated that Russia supports the principle of Georgia’s territorial integrity and pointed to the dangerous actions of those who summoned volunteers to fight for Abkhazia. This was negatively received by

Circassians in Russia and led to further meetings.

Due to the fear of disorder in the republic, military troops were deployed to Kabardino-Balkaria. The leader of the Confederation of Caucasian Nations, Musa Shanib, was arrested in Nalchik for declaring war on Georgia. In response, people blocked the roads to the airport in Nalchik and started a permanent protest from September 24 to October 4, 1992 in front of the Republican Government building. This led to a clash with the army and police, leaving many people wounded. Another demonstration took place in Nalchik from September 20–27, 1993. The Cabinet of Ministers and the Supreme Soviet of Kabardino-Balkaria made decisions to send humanitarian aid to Abkhazia.

The first group of volunteers arrived in Abkhazia on the third day of the war under the leadership of a Nalchik-born retired Soviet colonel, Sultan Sosnaliev, who later became the commander of all Abkhaz forces and was appointed Minister of Defense of Abkhazia. Over 1,500 volunteers from Nalchik participated in the war. Indeed, a regiment from Nalchik captured the pro-Georgian government in Sukhum(i) on September 27, 1993, and raised the Circassian flag on top of the government building.

The Circassian diaspora was very active since the first days of the war. Circassians in Turkey organized several meetings and sent appeals to the governments of Turkey and other countries. A delegation from Circassian NGOs met in September 1992 with the prime minister of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel, who agreed to cooperate to stop the conflict, although his government later supported Georgia. More than 350 volunteers went to Abkhazia from Turkey. The Circassian Benevolent Association (CBA) of Syria established a fund to help Abkhazia. The CBA of Jordan visited and appealed to the government of Jordan and embassies of the United States, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. On January 5, 1993, a freight carrier from the Jordanian Air Force landed at the Nalchik airport with 17 tons of humanitarian aid from the CBA and Jordanian Prince Hassan.

The Circassian world continued to support Abkhazia after the war as well. The International Circassian Congress in 1993 was mainly devoted to the war, and all following congresses raised the question of Abkhazia's independence. Circassian NGOs spoke many times against the economic blockade of Abkhazia after the war. The Union of Abkhazian Volunteers was established in Nalchik and remains very active, recently celebrating the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abkhaz victory. Abkhazia has its own ambassador in Nalchik (who was the brother of the president of Abkhazia until the last election). Recognizing the important role of the Circassian diaspora in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, held a discussion with the Circassian leaders of the Caucasian Association (Kaf-Der) in Turkey on June 31, 2008. Circassian NGOs responded to the five-day war in August 2008 with statements in support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; leaders of the Union of Abkhazian volunteers and the Union of Afghanistan Veterans from Nalchik were in Sukhum(i) and Tskhinvali. A meeting took place on Abkhaz Square in Nalchik on the

day of recognition of Abkhaz independence. Delegations from all parts of the Circassian world met up in Sukhum(i) to celebrate the Russian recognition of Abkhaz independence in August 2008.

## **Circassian Repatriation**

Expelled Circassians did not have a chance to immigrate to the Caucasus until the early 1990s. In 1990, Soviet authorities officially rejected an appeal by the Circassian Benevolent Association of Syria to let 234 Circassian families return to the Caucasus and obtain Soviet citizenship.

The end of the Cold War started a wave of Circassian immigration to the Caucasus. In 1993, about 3,000 Circassians returned to Nalchik and 1,000 to Maykop. Indeed, some scholars compare the beginning of this process to the lesser numbers of the first *Aliyah* of Jewish emigration to Israel. However, this initial wave of migration did not herald the beginning of a larger movement. The post-Soviet realities of Russia, the instability of the Caucasus after the beginning of the war in Chechnya in 1994, and other factors slowed down the process. Another problem was the complicated process of obtaining temporary residency and Russian citizenship. Up through 2000, authorities in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygeya only issued 1,711 temporary residency permits and granted only 610 requests for citizenship, mainly for returnees from Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and Yugoslavia, but also from the United States and other European states.

The best time to return was when it was possible to obtain Russian citizenship without giving up one's previous citizenship. However, most returning emigrants obtained citizenship according to a November 1991 law that had three conditions making it harder to obtain Russian citizenship: an applicant had to reject the citizenship of his or her country of origin, live five years in Russia, and know the Russian language. After a new law was passed in November 2003 on the legal status of foreign citizens in the Russian Federation, it became almost impossible to obtain citizenship. Only five passports were issued after that in Nalchik. A survey of 400 Circassian immigrants in Adygeya and Kabardino-Balkaria in 2006 by the Institute of Humanitarian Studies of Kabardino-Balkaria showed that their main problem, overwhelmingly, was the process of obtaining citizenship (unemployment was the next biggest problem for respondents in Kabardino-Balkaria, while in Adygeya it was adapting to local traditions).

"Return movements" are unique events in world history. Only a few of them have succeeded. It seems that almost every social force in existence acts against diasporic returns and that they succeed perhaps only when there are utterly extraordinary conditions (like the genocides of Jews, Armenians, and Circassians).

The political aspect of Circassian repatriation culminated in the case of Kosovo. The International Circassian Association brought up the question at three sessions of the United Nations. Ultimately, the president of the Adygeya Republic, Aslan Dzharimov, appealed to the government of the Russian Federation to grant Kosovar Circassians the

right to resettle in Adygeya. Between 1998 and 1999, a total of 174 did so. A new village, Mafakhabl, was built for repatriates. The president of the International Circassian Association, Boris Akbashev, stated in a speech at the International Circassian Congress in Nalchik in 2000 the significance of the Kosovar Circassian repatriation, noting that “this was the first time Russia not only admitted their right to return, but made practical, political, diplomatic, and economic steps for their moving home and settling here.”

## **Conclusion**

The end of the Cold War opened up a significant new era for the Circassian world. Most importantly, Circassians united their activities on the international level and started to respond to world events from the position of their ethnic interests. The ideology of this new era brought up two strategic interests of the Circassian world – unification of the Circassian world and repatriation of the expelled population back to its homeland.

Circassians had to wander for a long time, so why have the Circassians remained relatively quiescent? For various reasons, one could suggest that this period of quiet is coming to an end. Significant achievements have been made in the building of an international Circassian network: the development of state structures on Circassian territories, the beginning of the repatriation of Circassians, and most of all, the recognition of independence of Abkhazia by Russia. All these events will have important implications for the Circassian world. One of the main conditions for the development of the Circassian world is its relationship with Russia, and it is obvious that Russia’s attitude toward the Circassian world has been generally positive and helpful. It is apparent, though, that these strategic problems are far from being solved. From the responses of the Circassian world to the challenges of our time, one can see what the future might hold in terms of Circassian mobilization and identity.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

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