

# The Circassian Question in Russian-Georgian Relations

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Russian-Georgian relations have gone through many changes, but before August 2008 one constant in this relationship was the attitude toward Georgia's territorial integrity. In 1990-91, when Georgia made its first official steps toward independence, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev tried to stop the republic by approving of the various "separatist" declarations issued by the parliaments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both formally autonomous units within Soviet Georgia. In contrast to Gorbachev's policy, however, the first presidents of Russia and Georgia, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze, tried to develop good relations between their states. When the Georgian-Abkhaz war began in August 1992, Russia expressed its support of Georgia's territorial integrity and even deployed military troops to the Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (with its titular Circassian/Kabardian population) to prevent thousands of Circassian volunteers from joining Abkhaz in their fight against Georgia.

After some fifteen years, however, the situation has changed completely. The deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations culminated in the "five-day war" between Russia and Georgia and, subsequently, Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

In response to Russian interference in its affairs, Georgia has recently turned its attention to the North Caucasus. In particular, it has taken an interest in the international Circassian movement, which seeks recognition of the genocide committed against Circassians by tsarist Russia in 1864. This issue is especially timely, as the 150th anniversary of the Circassian genocide coincides with the next Winter Olympics in 2014, which will be held in Sochi, the last capital of an independent Circassian state.

## **The Circassian Question in Georgian Foreign Policy**

Georgia has always played an important role among the nations of the Caucasus. However, Georgia lost influence in the North Caucasus when, in 1992, it invaded Abkhazia in the midst of a dispute over the nature of their political ties and effectively forced Circassians to choose sides. Circassian nongovernmental organizations in Russia raised their voices against the war, including committees of women, journalists, and writers. Over 2,000 Circassian volunteers participated in the war under the command of a Nalchik-born retired Soviet colonel, Sultan Sosnaliev, who became the commander of

all Abkhaz forces during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-93 (Nalchik is the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria). Sosnaliev was later appointed minister of defense of Abkhazia after the war. Circassians in Russia and in the diaspora, scattered across 50 different countries, organized meetings internationally and sent humanitarian aid to the Abkhaz. The Circassian world continued to support Abkhazia after the war as well, raising the question of Abkhazia's independence and speaking often against Russia's postwar economic blockade of the republic. A celebratory demonstration took place on Abkhaz Square in Nalchik on the day Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence.

Despite this, Georgia never issued protests against Circassians. Partly, this was because Georgia wished to conduct state-to-state relations with Russia alone and not to "lower" its policy to the level of the "dependent" Circassians. Also, it appeared useless to try and stop the Circassian anti-Georgian movement if even the Russian government could not do so. Finally, there was no clear way for Georgia to approach the Circassian community as a whole.

Nonetheless, Georgia regarded Circassian support for the Abkhaz as a real political and even military threat. The new National Security Concept, adopted by Mikheil Saakashvili's government before the August 2008 war, considered threats by "non-state actors" more likely than "military aggression by another state." In point of fact, the only non-state actors to ever really threaten Georgia militarily were the Circassian volunteers during the Georgian-Abkhaz war. The August 2008 war represented more than a military defeat and loss of territory for Georgia. Having found itself in a situation where not even its closest allies supported it, Georgia's main loss was its dream for integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. Georgia was not able to form any kind of coalition against Russia. Georgia thus sought to shift the political tides by, among other strategies, rethinking relations with sub-state actors in the wider Caucasus region.

### **Georgia's New Interest in the North Caucasus**

Accordingly, Georgia developed a policy toward Russia called by some analysts a "policy of symmetry" – aiming to intensify its efforts to engage with the North Caucasus more productively while trying to encourage an anti-Russian separatist movement in the North Caucasus. "Considering the lessons of history, we expect an explosion of a separatist movement in the North Caucasus in the near future," said vice speaker of the Georgian parliament, Levan Vepkhvadze. The broader notion behind this seemingly negative idea was to revive the leading role of Georgia in the region and make Tbilisi a political and intellectual center among the Iberian-Caucasian nations.

On January 2010, a new Georgian satellite channel called "First Caucasus" was established to reach out to audiences in the North Caucasus. It was announced that the main purpose of the channel was, as the Russian daily *Kommersant* reported it, "to supply the Russians, and especially the North Caucasians, with true information about what is going on in Georgia and in the North Caucasus." On February 2010, the Georgian parliament established a Group of Friendship and Cooperation with the parliaments of North Caucasian republics. The Georgian parliament called on the North Caucasian parliaments to work jointly "to develop the Caucasian civilization" and "to

save historical and friendly ties between the nations of the Caucasus in spite of the worsening of political relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation.” These initial steps did not have much impact in the North Caucasus because of the response from the Russian side: the television channel, while available on the internet, was ultimately not broadcast by the French company Eutelsat allegedly under Russian pressure, and the parliaments of the North Caucasian republics never responded to the appeal.

It was the next step in Georgia’s policy toward engagement with the Circassian world that proved to be most successful, setting off what one observer dubbed the “war of conferences.”<sup>1</sup>

### **The “War of Conferences”**

On March 2010, the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation and Ilia State University’s International School for Caucasus Studies in Tbilisi organized a conference in Georgia titled “Hidden Nations, Enduring Crimes: The Circassians and the Peoples of the North Caucasus Between Past and Future.” The event brought together specialists on the Caucasus and Circassian activists from the diaspora (mainly from the U.S.), as well as members of the Georgian parliament. At the end, the Circassian participants signed an appeal to Georgia’s parliament to recognize as genocide the massacres and deportations of Circassians committed by Russia in the 19th century.

The Russian government reacted warily to the revival of the Circassian question by a foreign state. Traditionally, the Kremlin has pursued a so-called “policy of silence,” not officially recognizing or denying the Circassian problem. In response to an appeal for recognition of the genocide in 2006, for example, the Russian parliament dithered and eventually only concluded that Circassians were not among the people deported in Joseph Stalin’s time, thereby simply ignoring the key historical issue. This time, the Russian parliament quickly responded to the Georgian initiative, branding it as “support for separatism” in the North Caucasus.

With the Jamestown Foundation’s conference, Western media became more familiar with the Circassian issue, with the event even being referred to as the first genocide in modern history (followed by the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust).

The Russian government did not officially respond, allowing local NGOs to speak for it. In May 2010, a branch of the Russian NGO “In Georgia’s Name” was established in the Circassian town of Maykop to represent the Georgian diaspora. This obtuse approach suggested that that the Kremlin was in fact concerned by Georgia’s “Circassian initiative.” On May 27, 2010, the Russian news agency RIA Novosti hosted a roundtable and press conference devoted to the theme of the Circassian question. On the Georgian side, the Georgian parliament held a session the next month, where a paper on genocide in the North Caucasus was presented by Georgian scholars.

Afterwards, the Jamestown Foundation held a second conference in Washington, D.C., titled “Sochi in 2014: Can an Olympics Take Place at the Site of the Expulsion of the Circassians 150 Years Earlier?” Some members of the Georgian parliament attended the event and discussed the Circassian issue from the Georgian perspective. Circassian

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.7kanal.com/news.php3?id=274824>

participants called for the consolidation of the three Circassian territories in the North Caucasus into a single republic.

Conference participants and observers from all sides developed and shared a range of opinions and arguments on the subject. Georgian deputies, from the outset, expressed their readiness to discuss “the 19th-century massacres of Circassians.” A member of parliament, Gia Tortladze, said that “the Circassian people’s request is rather legitimate.” Another member, Nugzar Tsiklauri, presented a paper entitled “The Sochi Olympics and the Circassians: The View from Georgia” and expressed his opinion that the Georgian parliament would make a just decision concerning the Circassian genocide.

Some Georgian analysts predicted a deterioration in Abkhaz-Circassian relations, as Abkhazia could be expected to follow Russia’s own “policy of silence.” Circassian representatives would thus accuse Abkhazia of being a Russian Trojan horse and of treason against all-Circassian interests. However, Abkhazian activists have already expressed their support for the Circassians: in an open letter to a Circassian internet site, one such activist, Irakly Bzhanava, wished his “kin nation” success in achieving recognition of the genocide and noted that “we want to be part of this struggle, since Abkhaz have suffered as a result of the Russian-Caucasian war no less than our brother Circassians.”

For their part, Circassian organizations and activists were pleased that the Circassian question was making it to the international scene and that the Russian government would not be able to disregard the issue any longer. But they were divided in their attitude toward the fact that the issue was raised in Tbilisi, with some saying they would support genocide recognition by any country, while others were sceptical of Georgian intentions and approached the Tbilisi conference as simply Georgian propaganda. Some even said that the Circassian issue was not Georgia’s business and should be solved only by Russia.

Russian analysts responded with a wide spectrum of arguments. The most positive was that of well-known Russian journalist Alexander Podrabinek, who argued in his article “Olympics in Memories of Genocide?” that Russians must come to terms with their past and express their condolences to the Circassian people. But other responses were rather negative, denying that there was a genocide. Another argument was that the Georgians themselves were to blame because they participated as members of the imperial army while driving the Circassian population from its land. The most negative responses even predicted an element of possible terrorism in Sochi at the hands of the Circassians and Georgians. Moscow analyst Alexey Malashenko declared the need to protect the Sochi games “from a terrorist attack,” noting that “extremist groups in the North Caucasus, and in particular the ethnic Circassians, are opposed to holding the Olympics there.” In addition, political scientist Mikhail Alexandrov pointed out that “the most important thing now is that the Georgians not decide to make diversions and terrorist acts” and expressed his opinion that “the Georgian leaders have such thoughts in their heads.”

## Conclusion

The unresolved issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will continue to spoil Georgian-Russian relations for the foreseeable future. If Georgia does in fact recognize that genocide against the Circassians took place in Sochi in 1864, it would put Russia in a difficult position. Legitimized by a UN member state, the Circassian question would become an international issue in the run-up to the 2014 Olympics. Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide would also put Abkhazia in a difficult position—forcing it to choose between the Circassian nation, which supported Abkhazia in the war against Georgia and in its dreams of independence, and Russia, which made that dream come true.

Within the tangled web of Georgian-Abkhaz-Russian relations, the Circassian question has something to offer Georgia. Not only does it buttress Georgia's support from the international community, which has already promised not to recognize the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it also gives Georgia an ally against Russia, even if it is a weak and stateless one within Russia itself. Russia remains a superpower in the Caucasus region and no state dares join the Georgian challenge against it. Even U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, while demonstrating clear support for Georgia's territorial integrity while in Tbilisi in July 2010, did not say a single word that could be construed as directly anti-Russian or that would compromise the policy "reset" between the U.S. and Russia. The International Olympic Committee rejected Georgia's request to reconsider its decision to hold the 2014 Olympics in Russia. Now, with the Circassian question, Georgia can ally with the Circassians in the anti-Sochi movement. The "symmetry" of this policy lies in the fact that Circassian support is as important to Georgia as the small number of states that recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia were to Russia.

While the anti-Sochi protests have been gathering momentum, there are already two positive outcomes for the Circassians from this so-called "war of conferences" between Russia and Georgia. First, the Circassian genocide has become more of an accepted subject for discussion in Russia. Historians and analysts have come to consider the events of 1864 as a tragedy for the Circassian nation. This, in and of itself, is a massive improvement over the notion that dominated earlier discussions: that the Circassians were "predators" (*khishniki*) who attacked peaceful Russian troops at the border, were deceived by treacherous British and Turkish agents, voluntarily left their country, and, finally, suffered in the Ottoman Empire as a result of their own stupidity. Of course, the second positive outcome to note is, as they say in movie credits, no Circassian was hurt during these events.

*Sources available from the author upon request.*

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