

The Circassian Dimension of the 2014 Sochi Olympics

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In 2014, the popular Russian Black Sea resort city of Sochi will host the Winter Olympics, signifying Russia's increasingly high international profile. The honor of hosting the Olympics is a challenge and opportunity for the host country, which must be ready for a number of unexpected, if inevitable, domestic and foreign challenges. Criticisms and controversy accompany the run-up to every Olympic Games. China, for example, withstood intense pressure from international nongovernmental organizations before the start of the 2008 Beijing Olympics due to the situation in Tibet. In 2002, a member of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) suggested that the Winter Games be relocated from Salt Lake City, since the United States was a country at war (with the Taliban in Afghanistan). Earlier, in 1980, U.S. President Jimmy Carter asked the IOC to move the Olympic Games from Moscow after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The 2014 Olympics in Sochi are still five years away, but they have already become one of the most discussed issues on the Russian political agenda.

Circassian Memory and the Sochi Olympics

The Circassian question is one of the less appreciated issues highlighted by the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Historical Circassia today is divided between six regions of the Russian Federation. In Soviet times, the Circassians were split and subdivided into several Soviet *narodnosti* (nationalities) with different ethnonyms in Russian - Kabardin, Adyghei, Cherkess, and Shapsug - and spread over several administrative units. Today, most of Russia's 700,000 Circassians form "titular nationalities" in the Republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adyghea, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, while a lesser number live in the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions and in North Ossetia.

However, nearly 90 percent of the global Circassian population lives outside Russia. Most live in the states of the former Ottoman Empire – mainly Turkey, Syria, and Jordan – to which they were deported in the nineteenth century. As a share of total population, the Circassian diaspora is the largest in the world. It is also the second largest diaspora from Russia, after the 25-million strong ethnic Russian diaspora itself. Since the end of the Cold War, the Circassian world has developed an ideological unity based upon a shared memory of deportation and the fragmentation of its remaining territory. Repatriation and unification of the native land have become the primary goals of the Circassian nation.

The Circassian question is closely related to the Sochi Olympics in several symbolic ways. By an irony of history, the 2014 Olympic Games will mark the 150th anniversary of the Circassian defeat in 1864, when, after over a century of fighting, Tsar Alexander II declared victory for Russia. Every year on May 21, Circassians around the world light 101 candles and observe a minute of silence in memory of the 101-year war. Sochi itself was the site of the war's last battles, and its port was the place from which the Circassians were deported to the Ottoman Empire. Krasnaya Polyana (*Kbaada* in Circassian), the area that will be the center of the 2014 Olympic Games, was where, on May 21, 1864, a parade of Russian troops celebrated the end of the war with Circassians.

In addition to its association with the war, Sochi is emblematic of the Circassian homeland. The city is named after the Circassian ethnic group *Shache*, who lived there until 1864. It was also the last capital of independent Circassia (1861-1864). At present, there are about 15,000 Circassian Shapsugs living around Sochi who demand the restoration of the Shapsug National District (1924-1945) and the historical Circassian name of their capital Psyshu, renamed Lazarevskoye after Admiral Mikhail Lazarev, notorious for destroying coastal Circassian villages.

The Revival of the Circassian Question

The Circassian question, practically dormant before Russia won the Olympic bid in 2007, has actively reemerged in recent years. One of its first mentions followed discussion of government plans to “amalgamate” some of Russia’s federal regions. This discussion sparked Circassian discontent, as the possible merger of Circassian Adygeia with the largely Russian Krasnodar region was raised. Moscow analysts have noted that the Winter Olympics will prevent this merger until after 2014; if Adygeia were to join Krasnodar, Circassians would most likely oppose the Olympics. At the same time, intellectuals from various Circassian communities have suggested that the idea of a single Circassian republic could also be raised within the framework of the amalgamation of existing regions, eliminating the ethno-territorial divisions imposed under Joseph Stalin. This idea to unify the Circassians into a single federal subject was publicly declared in November 2008 at an Extraordinary Session of the Circassian People’s Congress.

Also generating a Circassian response was the failure of the Russian media to mention the Circassians’ historical presence in the region and its presentation of Sochi as historically a part of ancient Colchis, inhabited by ancient Greeks. Circassian organizations argued that symbols of Circassian history and culture cannot be ignored

and should be included in the format of the Sochi Olympics, just as Australia highlighted its indigenous population in the 2000 Summer Olympics. The media's discussion of the celebration of Sochi's 170th anniversary also provoked protest from Circassian NGOs. In March 2008, leaders of the Shapsug Khase (Shapsug Council) recalled Sochi's official 150th anniversary, when the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of History announced that 1838 was not the founding year of Sochi but the date of its conquest by Russian troops (the Circassians recaptured it after the Crimean War but lost it again in 1864).

Most Circassians see the Sochi Olympics as an opportunity to plead their case, rather than as an offense to be resisted. Still, many Circassians have opposed the Winter Games on the grounds that they will take place on "ethnically-cleansed" land. Some Circassian NGOs have branded the Olympics the "Games on Bones" and opposed construction work at Krasnaya Polyana, as it could endanger important burial sites. In October 2007, about 200 Circassian activists organized meetings in front of Russian consulates in New York and Istanbul to protest against holding the Winter Games in Sochi. Finally, the Circassian anti-Olympic movement began to seek official Russian recognition of the Circassian genocide and called on the IOC to move the Games.

Softening Discontent

Participating in the Circassian Olympic debate are several groups with motivations that shift, expand, and sometimes (but not always) coincide. These groups consist of local elites and the *intelligentsia*, members of the international diaspora, and politicians and businessmen who have something to gain through the power plays surrounding the Sochi Olympics. These groups are converging on the importance of raising the Circassian question, but fissures could reappear in the future.

For example, Circassians and Abkhaz may be unified in terms of the Abkhaz conflict with Georgia, but they are not necessarily unified in their attitude toward the Olympics. Abkhazia, located just thirty kilometers from Sochi, has supported the 2014 Olympics from the start, perceiving it as an excellent economic opportunity. The Winter Games can bring much-needed investment to Abkhazia through increased demand for construction materials, workers, and territory for Olympic use. The governor of the Krasnodar region, Aleksander Tkachev, and Abkhazian president Sergei Bagapsh signed a cooperation agreement in May 2008, according to which Abkhazia will provide assistance for the construction of Olympic facilities in Sochi. Thanks to Abkhazia's enthusiasm, some analysts have even suggested that it risks losing support from Circassians who oppose the Sochi Olympics.

Russia's recognition of Abkhazia has considerably softened the position of the Circassian world toward the Sochi Olympics. Though having adopted a more supportive view, Circassians continue to use the run-up to 2014 as a means to spread information about and draw attention to their cause. In April 2009, the author of this memo and Aleksei Bekshokov, the leader of the Union of Abkhaz Volunteers, proposed that a Circassian Olympic Games be held in 2012, including competition in twelve sports, to correspond to the number of stars on the Circassian flag, and that Circassian elements (twelve stars and three arrows) be included in the emblem of the Sochi

Olympics to remind the world about the area's native inhabitants. A series of presentations on the project took place in cities throughout Russia, including Sochi, Moscow, and St. Petersburg.

Some also view the economic aspect of the Sochi Olympics as a potential benefit for the wider Circassian world. According to Adygeia's president Aslan Tkhakushinov, "The Olympic Games bring countries a colossal income. It's probably worth taking a look at this side of the coin as well. The Olympics should not hurt anyone's national interests. It should be a festival."

The Olympics may well provide economic opportunities for the Circassian regions of Agygheia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. One idea has been to develop mountain tourism in these republics in association with the Winter Games. A major question, however, is how to connect these areas to Sochi. On a map, the Circassian capitals of Maykop, Nalchik, and Cherkessk are relatively close to Sochi, but, separated by the Caucasus mountain range, they are distant in terms of road connections and available transportation. A direct road connection would transform the region into one large mountain and sea resort where tourists could swim in the Black Sea and then drive half a day to ski on the slopes of Mount Elbrus. Experts are studying three different projects for connecting the Circassian regions to the Black Sea. Cherkessk-Adler and Maykop-Adler were the principal routes that were discussed prior to the onset of the financial crisis. The third possible project is the reconstruction of the old military highway linking Cherkessk to Abkhazia, a popular tourist route during Soviet times that fell into disrepair after the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-93.

For now, however, such prospects remain mere possibilities. Due to the financial crisis and a subsequent 30 percent reduction of the budget for road construction in Russia, most specialists say that none of the road projects are realistic. In general, deputy chairman of the International Circassian Association Nalbiy Guchetl has been less optimistic about the economic opportunities for Russia's Circassian-inhabited regions, remarking that "investing billions in Sochi will create an even greater economic gap between Krasnodar and Adygeia, providing new arguments in favor of abolishing Adygeia on the grounds that it is an economic failure."

Sochi and the Future of the Circassian Question

Despite these considerations, the Circassian question has been bypassed in most discussions of the Sochi Olympics. While Circassian NGOs have been concerned about construction work that may endanger burial sites, the agenda of the environmentally-driven anti-Olympic movement in Russia does not include the Circassian question. Not a single Circassian signed the petition that forty-seven Russian organizations sent to the IOC against the Sochi Games out of concern for its potential ecological impact. Thanks to the small Circassian electorate in Sochi, it was also easy for all candidates in the city's April 2009 mayoral election to avoid the Circassian question. Even opposition candidates who tended to exploit any problematic aspect of the Sochi Olympics in their campaigns ignored the Circassian question.

However, the election still indirectly had a Circassian component, which revealed that the Kremlin was not entirely neglectful of the issue. Six months before the election,

Jambulat Khatuov, an ethnic Circassian, was appointed acting mayor of Sochi for three months; he later became a deputy governor of the Krasnodar region that includes Sochi. In mostly Russian Krasnodar, the population of which is less than one percent Circassian, there are now two Circassian deputy governors. The other, Murat Akhejak, directed the campaign of the Kremlin candidate during the mayoral election.

At the moment, the Circassian dimension is a relatively minor issue relative to the others that surround the Sochi Olympics. Only a few intellectuals and social groups are mobilizing around the cause, while other constituencies, like the more powerful local governments, evince far more enthusiasm.

Why, then, is the Circassian issue important in policy terms? First, the intellectuals and diaspora activists that are “globalizing” the Circassian discourse in connection with the Olympics may ultimately pose a challenge to the Russian state. They could potentially cast Circassians as the “indigenous people” of the Northwest Caucasus, for example, or use the term “genocide” as a rhetorical tool. This could lead to an internationalization of the questions of Circassian unification and diaspora return.

Second, a disjuncture between official and NGO/diaspora discourse regarding Circassian history and identity appears to be growing. If the Sochi Olympics become an issue for intellectuals and community activists, local officials will have to find ways to respond. They might end up “capturing” the discourse for their own political purposes or, unintentionally, in a way that puts them in a difficult position vis-à-vis Moscow.

The state has sought indirectly to both co-opt and suppress discussions of Circassian issues, demonstrating the level of relative importance it assigns to this matter in the lead-up to the Sochi Olympics. However, this discourse can be seen less as a threat to the Sochi Olympics and more as an opportunity to develop a new strategy regarding the Circassian question, as well as to launch a much-needed modernization of the region. Two policy changes can help make this happen. First, the Russian government should take steps to address the main issues of the Circassian world – repatriation and unification. Second, the economic opportunities of the Winter Games should provide social and economic benefits to the North Caucasus regions, particularly to its ethnic republics.

If addressed strategically, the Sochi Olympics can open a new era in the history of the Caucasus by resolving the 250 year-old Circassian question. If ignored, the Circassian challenge will become even greater after the Sochi Olympics, and that much harder to solve.

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