

CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER  
BLACK SEA PEACEBUILDING NETWORK  
RUSSIAN EXPERT GROUP  
REPORT NO. 2010/1

# THE ‘CHERKESSIAN FACTOR’ IN THE CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE CAUCASUS

RAPPORTEURS:

**ALEXANDER SKAKOV** INSTITUTE OF EASTERN STUDIES, RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

**NIKOLAY SILAEV** CENTER FOR CAUCASIAN STUDIES, MOSCOW STATE INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**T**he “Cherkessian Factor” is usually understood as the influence exerted by the ethnic solidarity of Cherkessian (Abkhaz-Adyg) peoples—those who are part of the State system of the Russian Federation, and those who live in the major centers of the Cherkessian diaspora (Turkey, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon and Egypt)—on political, social and cultural processes in both the Caucasus region and in those countries with dense Cherkessian settlement. In the early 1990s organizations that had already existed for a substantial amount of time in Turkey tried to take on the role of centers of Cherkessian consolidation, as did new associations created within Russia.

After the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-3, in which volunteers from the Cherkessian republics also played an active role by virtue of their ethnic kinship with the Abkhazians, the impression developed that the consolidation of the Cherkessian peoples had reached a new level, sufficient to transform the Cherkessian national movement into a new political player in the Caucasus. This has not occurred. Despite repeated attempts to create a single center of leadership for the Cherkessian national movement, there has been no success. At present, various associations and centers are active, each aspiring to represent the interests of the Cherkessian ethnic group. Several of them undertake work of a cultural and educational nature. Others attempt to be active in politics, intervening frequently in the interests of various governments. Thus, several Cherkessian organizations based in Turkey supported Russia during the August war with Georgia in 2008; others, supported by Georgia, have announced their intention to raise, at the international level, the question of Russian responsibility for the Cherkessian genocide carried out by the Russian Empire in the middle and second half of the nineteenth century.

The influence of the Cherkessian factor is nevertheless systematically undervalued by the Russian government, as well as by the international community of independent political analysts, insofar as it affects, first, policy towards Abkhazia, and, second, the situation in the Northern Caucasus. It is an undeservedly little known fact that thanks to the presence of an extensive and influential Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, that country was and will remain a most important external partner for

Abkhazia, on an equal footing with Russia. Indeed this was so even before Russia recognized Abkhazia, and will, to all appearances, continue to be so in the future. In the current context, Abkhazia's "horizontal ties" with the diaspora may be more important than Ankara's official position with respect to the political fate of Sukhumi. The Cherkessian factor is also reflected in the attempts made by the Abkhazian government to find ways of surmounting the demographic problem posed by the shrinking Abkhazian population of the republic, immediately addressed by the repatriation of Abazins from countries in the Near East and Russia.

The reasons behind the failure of the Cherkessian national movement to coalesce are various. Where the foreign diaspora is concerned, the process of assimilation has a containing effect that increases with urbanization. In those republics of the Russian Federation that contain a Cherkessian ethnic element, more complex and multilevel processes are unfolding. Moreover, during the past two decades those negative phenomena that are also apparent in the rest of Russia have become widespread in the Northern Caucasus: the privatization of budgetary incomes by local elites; the absolute freedom from supervision and total corruption of bureaucrats, and the transformation of the judiciary into an instrument serving the upper classes. Under conditions of widening social divisions within local ethnic groups, radical Islamist groups have begun to take upon themselves the role of spokesperson for the interests of undefended social strata, acting on a supranational level. Ethnic unification has thus found itself shifted to the background of local politics. At the same time, the factor of ethnic consolidation has been actively manipulated by local elites as they deemed necessary, both to garner additional subsidies from the federal center, as well as to block those political initiatives that they do not welcome. Thus in 2006, when the federal government put forward the project of uniting Adygeia with the Krasnodar *krai*, within the framework of a campaign to amalgamate administrative subdivisions of the Federation, the local elite in Maikop effectively played the card that Adyg rights were being violated, despite the fact that there were no major resources standing behind the protest actions. Such tactics proved successful, however, and the federal authorities backed away, wary of setting off another conflict in the Caucasus. The political role of the ethnic factor is not uniform in the various republics that contain a Cherkessian element, which may be explained by diversity of local conditions. Thus in Kabardino-Balkaria, where the Kabardin elite holds almost complete sway, the Cherkessian factor is directed towards preserving the unity of this republic. In Karachaevo-Cherkessia, where the Cherkessians are in the minority, their ethnic consolidation is directed, on the contrary, towards the delimitation and creation of their own republic.

The fate of those "dual-status" subdivisions of the Russian Federation which contain a Cherkessian element (Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) are, in our view, dependent to an even greater degree on the Cherkessian factor. In the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Kabardins (Cherkessians) form a majority and are politically dominant, whereas in the Karachaevo-Cherkessian Republic the Cherkessians and Abazins are together in a minority. In both cases, the Cherkessians' opponents are Karachai (KChR) and the Balkars (KBR), two closely related peoples, known prior to 1917 by the name of "Mountain Tatars" or "Mountain Turks," and who were repressed and subjected to mass deportation under Stalin. Since they are in the majority in the KChR, and the minority in the KBR, the Karachai-Balkars advocate the division of "dual-status" subdivisions and the creation of a single Karachai-Balkar region. The competition between these two hypothetical, ethno-national projects (Greater Cherkessia and Greater Balkaria, depending on the circumstances) is intensified by the complex of real (and thorny) mutual, territorial and political claims of these two ethnic groups.

The ethnic consolidation of the Cherkessian peoples within the boundaries of distinct administrative and territorial formations, alongside the broad development of the radical Islamist movement, could become a powerfully destabilizing factor (a "war of all against all") in the event that the current political order in the Northern Caucasus breaks down further.

The issue of the “Cherkessian genocide” under the Russian Empire in the mid- to late-nineteenth century is also an important circumstance in the politicization of the Cherkessian peoples’ national movement. This issue has various dimensions. On the one hand, it is a factor in the collective historical memory of the Cherkessian peoples, in their allegiance to a common historical narrative. On the other hand, the narratives of the numerous sacrifices attributed to the Cherkessians in the course of the war with the Russian Empire from 1820s to the 1860s, and in the course of their subsequent resettlement in the Ottoman Empire, are often used by the local elites of the Cherkessian republics to exert pressure on the federal authorities for further subsidies and subventions. At the same time, some specialists cast doubt upon the validity of applying the term “genocide” to the policy of the Russian Empire. This critique stems not only with the fact that the term came into use in international law only after the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals, but also with the fact that the tsarist government did not set itself the goal of physically destroying the Cherkessians. Rather, it is more appropriate to describe the policy of enforced resettlement in the Ottoman Empire as ethnic cleansings and deportation. At the same time, the simple denial of the Cherkessian genocide does nothing to facilitate interethnic dialogue in the region, but rather strengthens the Cherkessian peoples’ feeling of having suffered an injustice. At present, there are no government programs aimed at facilitating dialogue on the acute questions of common history. Among possible measures proposed has been the delimitation of a professional discussion by historians on the problem of the Russian Empire’s policy with respect to the Cherkessians in the nineteenth century, in order to come before public opinion in both Russia at large and the Cherkessian republics in particular with some general proposals. Another idea is to review current regional textbooks on the history of the Cherkessian republics with an eye to providing a more balanced and tolerant exposition.

One factor behind the intensification of interest in the historical problematics of the Cherkessian peoples is the approaching Winter Olympics, to be held in Sochi in 2014. Already, some of the Cherkessian organizations outside Russia have spoken out against holding the Games in Krasnaya Polyana, a settlement that was created on the site of the last center of Cherkessian resistance during the Caucasian war, the mountain village of Kbaade. Historical arguments on the subject of Krasnaya Polyana have fostered growing conflict between the authorities and the national organizations of the Cherkessian republics, on the one hand, and Abkhazia, on the other. Each side stakes its own “historical” claims to the Krasnaya Polyana region. Several Cherkessian experts, moreover, speak of a joint Russian-Abkhazian position in favor of holding the games in Krasnaya Polyana. The reason for these differences can be seen, however, not only in the traditional arguments between the Cherkessian national movements and the Abkhazians, who do not feel themselves to be fully a part of the Cherkessian ethnic group, but also in considerations of an economic nature. Holding the Olympic Games in Sochi holds out the promise of significant profits for Abkhazia from tourism, supplying construction materials, and so forth, while the elite of the Cherkessian republics remains out of the picture. The most important and immediate source of tension in the run-up to the 2014 Olympics is, however, not the conflict between the Abkhazians and the Adyg over the provenance of the Sochi region, but the problem of relations between the Russian authorities and Cherkessian/Abkhazian society as a whole. The very idea of an international sporting festival in the Sochi region is in conflict with the Cherkessians’ tragic national memory of events during the period at the end of the Great Caucasian war in the nineteenth century, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which will fall during the Games. Immediately adjoining Sochi lies a region known as Shapsugin-on-the-Black Sea, where the historically established population (the Cherkessian tribe of the Shapsugin) has been trying for several decades to establish an ethnic administrative region. An additional factor behind the tension between the Russian authorities and the Cherkessians in the run-up to Sochi is the creation in 2010 of the Northern Caucasus Federal *Okrug*, which officially divided Adyg (and Shapsugia) from the other administrative subdivisions containing a Cherkessian ethnic element, (the KBR and the KChR), and created a symbolic obstacle to the inclusion of Cherkessians of the NCFO in activities connected with the Olympics. It is more than likely that the elites of the Federation’s Cherkessian administrative subdivisions (Adyg and the KBR) and the social activists

of the Cherkessian movements (Adygea and the KChR) will try to garner additional resources for the maintenance of stability in the region by playing on the idea of promoting security at the Games, a sore point for the federal center.

Possible avenues for the resolution of problems connected with the Cherkessian factor in the Northern Caucasus may be found in the realm of rapid reforms: full-scale privatization of land-ownership; implementation of the provisions of federal law for municipalities; and effective action against corruption at the level of the administrative subdivisions of the Russian Federation. These transformations would permit a significant portion of the population to return to normal economic activity, which is currently impossible, and would thus automatically reduce the unhealthy interest in politically charged questions of ethnic identity (questions of genocide, questions surrounding the Sochi region, questions of relations between neighbors of different ethnicities) and in radical Islamism. The Russian government shows no signs of readiness for such transformations in the Northern Caucasus, however, or even of an understanding of their necessity. As a result, the Cherkessian factor looks set to evolve into one of the major elements of further destabilization of the Northern Caucasus.

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**EXPERT GROUP MEMBERS****PARTICIPATING IN THE DISCUSSION OF THIS REPORT****INCLUDED:****ANDREY ARESHIN** (FOUNDATION OF STRATEGIC CULTURE)**SAMUEL GREENE** (CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER)**ALEKSANDR KRYLOV** (INSTITUTE OF WORLD ECONOMY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS)**RUSLAN KUTAEV** (NGO 'CAUCASUS')**ANDREY RYABOV** (CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER)**DENIS SOKOLOV** (GAIDAR INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMIC POLICY)**IVAN SUKHOV** (*VREMYA NOVOSTEI* NEWSPAPER)**ALEKSANDR VASIL'EV** (INSTITUTE OF EASTERN STUDIES, RAS)**OLGA VORKUNOVA** (CENTER FOR PROBLEMS OF PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT)**ALLA YAZKOVA** (INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES, RAS)