



Short-Term Travel Grant (STG)

Research Report

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STG 2006-2007
Russia

Social Violence and Political Transformation in the North Caucasus

Topic of Research

The aim of this research project was to interact with leading scholars, journalists, and social activists in the north Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, in the wake of the escalation of social violence in the region nearly a year ago. The central purpose was to uncover the origins of social violence in a north Caucasus republic which, until recently, has been largely immune from the serious interethnic discord and irregular warfare of Chechnya and Dagestan. Despite the republic's multiethnic nature—with Adyga-speaking Circassians (also known as Kabardians) living alongside Turkic-speaking Balkars, in addition to Russians and other groups—the northwest Caucasus has so far remained more peaceful than the northeast. But with the attack on regional administrative buildings in Nalchik, the republican capital in October 2005, the possibility of large-scale violence spreading from the northeast to the northwest Caucasus began to look like a real possibility.

More broadly, the purpose of the trip was to familiarize myself with the northwest Caucasus and to learn as much as possible about Circassian culture and history in the limited time I was on the ground. The northwest is a region that is very infrequently visited by Westerners (or, indeed, by Russians who do not have family there). This trip represented a unique opportunity to learn about a part of the Caucasus which is becoming increasingly important.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

This research trip was an essential part of my book project on the contemporary politics and history of the Caucasus, with the working title The Ghost of Freedom: A Modern History of the Caucasus. The full manuscript is now under review with Oxford University Press. My previous book, The Black Sea: A History (Oxford University Press, 2004), has contributed to debates

about the past and future of the wider southeastern Europe and the place of the Black Sea zone in U.S. and European Union strategy in the Balkans and Caucasus regions. I hope that my current work, a more focused book on the Caucasus itself, will make a similar contribution. At the very least, it should become a useful introduction for policymakers and policy analysts engaged with the Caucasus.

Upon my return, I published an opinion piece in the International Herald Tribune (“Bring the Phantom States in from the Cold,” September 15, 2006). Although the piece focuses on the general issue of unrecognized states in Eurasia, it was influenced by my findings in the northwest Caucasus. I have also recently submitted a revised version of an article on Circassian nationalism in the nineteenth-century; the revisions were strongly influenced by my conversations with scholars in the region. If the revised version is accepted, the piece will appear in a major area-studies journal. In addition, I have sketched out two pieces to be submitted to other scholarly journals. One is a policy-relevant piece on the contemporary politics of the north Caucasus, to be submitted to a major political science journal. There is a general dearth of new information on the north Caucasus in English, apart from very contemporary policy analysis and current-events reports, and I believe that a longer analytical piece would be widely read. A second piece examines the politics of cultural rebirth in Kabardino-Balkaria itself, particularly the rise of a particular dance form, the adyga jagw, as an expression of cultural identity.

In 2007 I plan to teach a new graduate-level course at Georgetown University on “The History and Politics of the Caucasus.” This research trip was a crucial opportunity to prepare for teaching that course. Georgetown’s Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies, through which the course will be offered, is a Title VI-supported national resource center in East European and Eurasian studies. Master’s-level students at other universities that participate in the Washington-area universities consortium will be able to take the course as well, so the potential student population is significant.

Approach and Research Methodology

On-the-ground elite interviews, participant observation, and document collection were my primary methods. I spoke with a range of journalists, scholars, and local administrative personnel, some of whom are part of the new leadership brought in by the new president, Arsen Kanokov. I had followed events closely in Kabardino-Balkaria from Washington, but there was no substitute for piecing together recent political developments by talking systematically with major participants and local observers. I also used the opportunity to collect Russian-language materials, such as newspapers and recently published scholarship, which are impossible to find in the United States.

During the two weeks in the north Caucasus, I was based mainly in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, and was affiliated most directly with the editorial staff of the republic’s major newspaper, Kabardino-Balkarskaia Pravda. In addition, one of the goals of my trip was to familiarize myself with the geography and landscape of the northwest Caucasus in general. I therefore traveled to the following areas, at times conducting interviews with local elites, at other times interacting with local villagers and average citizens:

- Nartkala, Kabardino-Balkaria, a small town near Nalchik and the site of my home stay
- Psnybo village, Kabardino-Balkaria
- “Little Kabarda” (Malaia Kabarda), the arid region beyond the Terek river
- Kakhun village, Kabardino-Balkaria, a large modern village near Nartkala)
- Chegem river gorge, Kabardino-Balkaria, one of the major gorges of Balkaria, populated by ethnic Balkars
- Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, the republican capital
- Beslan, North Ossetia, including a visit to the site of the infamous 2004 schoolhouse siege

- Piatigorsk, Stavropol region, the important regional town connected with Pushkin, Lermontov, and other nineteenth-century visitors to the Caucasus
- Inozemtsevo village, Stavropol region, the site of a nineteenth-century Scottish and German settlement

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

The region of historic Circassia is today divided into the Russian republics of Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkesia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. (Portions of Stavropol and Krasnodar regions might also fall within the bounds of a “Greater Circassia,” according to some historians.) The titular ethnic populations in the three republics are, in the main, self-described as Muslim, although religious practice exists on a continuum from orthodox and observant to culturally relevant but unobservant. Among Circassians themselves, there is a strong cultural code of honor and right behavior, known as adyga khabza, which intersects in complex ways with Islam. Even though the republics are named for ethnic groups, indigenous Circassians are in fact in the minority in Adygeia and form a slight plurality in Karachaevo-Cherkesia. It is only in Kabardino-Balkaria that Circassians (Kabardians) form a majority of the population (55 percent), next to Russians (25 percent) and Turkic-speaking Balkars (12 percent).

The term “Circassian” (Russian cherkes) is of very old vintage for the indigenous population in the northwest Caucasus; its first appearance in English dates to 1550. But the local ethnonym for Circassians is adyga, and today most Adyga-speakers—whether in the northwest Caucasus or in the considerable diaspora in the Middle East and North America—think of themselves as part of a single people and culture. The Circassian national flag, which today serves as the republican flag of Adygeia, is widely seen at public rallies, cultural festivals, and other events focused on Circassian identity, whether in the northwest Caucasus or abroad. Today, being Circassian is, by and large, a more powerful source of group identity than Islam, and people seem more likely to identify with culturally similar groups in other parts of Eurasia—such as the Abkhaz south of the mountains—than with culturally distinct co-Muslims in other parts of the Caucasus, such as Chechens or Dagestanis.

The Circassians were both the first and the last of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus to be absorbed into the Russian empire. The lowland Kabardians were in contact with Muscovy from the sixteenth century, and those relations were sealed when Ivan IV (the Terrible) took a Kabardian princess, Maria, as his wife. (A statue of Maria now stands in downtown Nalchik; it has been defaced on more than one occasion, presumably by Circassian nationalists, bored youth or both.) Yet Circassian populations farther to the west, beyond the Kuban River, staged consistent raids on Russian settlements and fortifications north of the river. They were the target of major military operations from the 1820s forward. The major success of Russian strategy in the region was to prevent the western Circassians from ever linking up with the resistance movement in the northeast Caucasus: the rising among the peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya which was led by the famous highland leader Shamil. Still, with Shamil’s capitulation in 1859, the Russians were able to turn their full military firepower on Circassia.

In a series of military sweeps in the early 1860s, the Russian army and Cossack forces razed Circassian villages, emptying the Black Sea coast and the highlands of much of its indigenous population. A systematic Russian campaign of what would now be called ethnic cleansing produced the emigration of somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 highlanders, mainly Muslims, between the late 1850s and the late 1860s. At the time of the 1897 census, there were about 60,000 people living on the coasts of Circassia, but of those, only 15,000 had been born there. Among them were the last remnants of the populations that had been exiled across the sea—to the Ottoman empire—as well as the offspring of the first generation of Russian settlers who had moved in to take their place.

Within this context, Circassian nationalism in the nineteenth century developed in two directions: one as a cultural revivalist movement within the general context of the Russian empire, broadly pro-Russian in its orientation and seeing incorporation into the empire as a way of bringing the backward Circassians into modernity; and a second as classically nationalist, seeking both modernity and liberation from the Russian yoke. The former was the view of

Circassian intellectuals such as Shora Nogma and Khan-Girei, thinkers who are unfamiliar to most Russianists but who are seen by present-day Circassians as the earliest “enlighteners” of the Circassian nation. The second form of nationalism took root mainly in the diaspora, among groups which had suffered as a result of the Russian advance into the mountains and now found themselves in exile in what would become modern Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and eventually New Jersey (There is a sizeable Circassian population in and around Paterson, New Jersey, as well as in other large American cities.). To a degree, these forms of nationalism are also regional: the former is to be found today among people with ties to lowland Kabarda, the latter among people with roots to trans-Kuban Circassia and the Black Sea coast.

Historic Circassia was at the center of the movement to create the North Caucasus Mountain Republic at the end of the First World War. Circassian exiles in the former Ottoman lands contributed to that project and fought alongside indigenous leaders against both tsarist troops and Bolsheviks. But the collapse of White Russian forces in the southern theater and the growing power of the Red Army—in addition to infighting among the highlanders themselves—doomed the republic. The territories of the north Caucasus were quickly gathered into the new Bolshevik state, which also reached south of the mountains to absorb independent Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The northern territories went through several administrative changes during the course of the Soviet period, and the local population changed considerably—not least because of the forced out-migration of Turkic populations (Karachai and Balkars) in the 1940s. But the current territorial delineations were bequeathed to Russia by the Soviet Union: three republics with ethnic monikers, two of which are “bi-national” republics of Circassians and Turkic populations.

After the Second World War, these republics became demographically far more homogeneous than they had been throughout a good part of their modern history. Ethnic homogenization worked in favor of the titular nationalities, a trend which was general across the north Caucasus during the last forty years of Soviet power. Of all the territories included in the old imperial delineation of the Caucasus, only the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions and the Dagestan autonomous republic had non-ethnic monikers. But despite the labels, almost all of these units were becoming more “indigenous” as time passed. In all the northern territories with national designations, with the exception of Adygeia, the relative size of the titular and “native” populations increased steadily. By 1989 titular nationalities formed an absolute majority in their homelands, while the proportion of ethnic Russians had fallen precipitously. Out-migration by Russians and other minorities, higher birth rates among some Muslim groups, and the return of formerly deported peoples from central Asia all contributed to the “ethnicization” of the region—even if the demographic balance was only slightly favorable to indigenous groups in some regions.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, historical Circassia has been more quiescent than other parts of the north Caucasus. There have been brief episodes of social violence, and in the early 1990s there was an abortive attempt to gain greater autonomy, perhaps even independence, from the Russian center. But the large-scale mobilization of Chechnya, the interethnic violence among Ingush and Ossetians, or the regular assassinations and bombings that have afflicted Dagestan did not, by and large, make an appearance in the western Caucasus. The reason was relatively straightforward: With a demographic situation only marginally favorable to the indigenous population and local authoritarian leaders who were given virtual free rein by Moscow, the scope for mobilization and violence was severely limited.

This is why the events of October 2005 came as such a shock, not only to observers of the Caucasus but to many elites and average citizens in the northwest as well. The details of last October’s events are still vague, and people on the ground are reluctant to speak in detail about what took place. On October 13, a group of gunmen stormed police and security headquarters in various parts of Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria, spraying gunfire from passing cars and briefly holding a building under siege. In the wake of the outburst of violence, scores of people were arrested, although the details of their detention and plans for their trial remain shrouded in either secrecy or misinformation. A preliminary hearing for eight of the defendants

was held on September 12, 2006. The sessions have so far been closed, and even the names of the defendants have not been released.

Some have compared the violence to similar attacks by Chechen guerrillas in Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Dagestan—raids and terrorist attacks designed primarily to convince Russian authorities of the ability of Chechen field commanders to project military power beyond Chechnya itself. Others have compared the Nalchik events to the rising in Andijan, Uzbekistan: a poorly organized and abortive rebellion by locals who, although perhaps inspired to some degree by Islam, were reacting to the oppressive policies of regional administrators.

How are we to interpret the Nalchik events? My interlocutors were nearly unanimous in their assessment that the violence was wholly unconnected with the Chechen conflict. They attributed it to local sources and to motives far more pedestrian than Islamic radicalism or other forms of organized anti-government activity. In fact, a prominent journalist attributed the violence simply to warfare among Kabardian police and criminal gangs, perhaps for control of the drug trade in the republic. Others saw the violence as an expression of public discontent with police brutality, particularly that associated with the regime of outgoing President Valerii Kokov—ranging from the surveillance and arrest of Muslim clerics to the systematic persecution of bearded young men, who were assumed to be “Wahhabi” radicals. Kokov’s successor, Arsen Kanokov, is at least aware of these interpretations, since he has assiduously promoted dialogue with Kabardian youth. (Some of the attackers last October were reportedly in their teens.) Kanokov announced a general amnesty aimed at “terrorists,” who could turn in their weapons with no questions asked, and he has launched a public campaign to underscore interethnic tolerance in the republic and to highlight the multireligious heritage of Circassians themselves—most of whom are Muslim but some of whom are Orthodox Christian (the so-called Mozdok Circassians).

The general picture of social and political life in the northwest Caucasus is decidedly mixed. On the one hand, my interlocutors repeatedly dismissed any talk of powderkegs and tinderboxes. To them, Kabardino-Balkaria is a republic generally known for its tolerance, where Kabardians and Balkars have little to fight over. The government has not sought to mobilize this ethnic difference for political gain; if anything, both Kokov and Kanokov have used Soviet-era language of the “friendship of peoples” to describe interethnic relations. People do worry about infiltration of fighters from Chechnya, especially after the killing of the notable warlord Shamil Basaev, and there are frequent rumors of boeviki (guerrillas) in a network of hideouts in upland Balkaria. (While I was in Nalchik, police arrested a group of men in Balkaria who were allegedly planning to set off bombs at a public rally which I attended.)

On the other hand, the sources of stability in Kabardino-Balkaria could be easily upset, in at least four ways.

1. Crime. There is a widespread perception in the republic that criminal groups and the state are essential part of the same organization—a criminal-governmental complex with its own rules, interests, and occasionally, gangland wars. Those who see the October 2005 events through this prism point toward the possibility that one or more subsets of this group could, at some stage, see large-scale violence as in their interest. In this regard, Kanokov has certain advantages over his predecessor as president. He is extremely wealthy, and he has used his money and government funds to launch public projects of which many Kabardians are proud: a large mosque and new Orthodox cathedral in the center of Nalchik, a general beautification project in the capital, and so on. But this model of local governance is essentially one of the president as capo di tutti capi. At some point, rivals to power within the security services, the police, the highway patrol or the customs service—all lucrative businesses in their own right—might well use organized violence to leverage their positions.

2. Violence and authoritarianism. Unlike Kokov, who was seen by many as an oppressive leader obsessed with the specter of radical Islam, Kanokov has not made “Wahhabism” a major target of his new regime. The message coming from the “White House,” the presidential seat in

downtown Nalchik, is one of tolerance, modernity, faith, and stability, not a war on terrorism or radicalism. That message can be seen in Nalchik itself. The city is small, with around 275,000 inhabitants. Twenty-something urbanites dress in ways that would not be out of place in St. Petersburg or Moscow—or, indeed, New York—and can view the latest Hollywood releases at an impressive cinema or sip lattes at a string of outdoor cafes. But it would not take a great many people to upset this picture. The republic is relatively poor even by Russian standards, and life in the villages and small towns is based on subsistence agriculture and small-scale trade. In such an environment, the message of radical Islam, nationalism or violence could eventually take root. The problem, however, is not so much the growth of radicalism as the government's fear of it. Just as Kokov's crack-down on pious and peaceful Muslims inevitably fueled discontent, a new obsession with the "Islamist threat" could produce the very thing it aims to target.

3. Ethnic politics. Relations between Kabardians and Balkars have been far more peaceful than among other ethnic populations in the north Caucasus. There is a relatively strict ethnic quota (Kabardians, Balkars, and Russians) in state institutions and the media, and leaders among all groups generally affirm the principles of interethnic understanding and "friendship among peoples." There has been no large-scale violence, such as that between Ingush and Ossetians in the early 1990s. But that does not mean that such violence is impossible. As in other parts of the Caucasus, people wear their ethnicity on their sleeve. Everyone is acutely aware of everyone else's ethnicity, and much more as well: such as what clan or village one comes from, whether one comes from a "good" family, and so forth.

In this context, the spark for mobilization and even violence would not be a sense of ancient hatreds or pent-up grievances. Violence would rather take the form of a reactive spiral involving the state, ethnicity, and Islam: If the current government perceives Islamist radicalism to be a threat, it will most likely see the threat as lying in the least accessible regions of the country—the upland river gorges leading to the high Caucasus. Police and security services regularly conduct sweeps in these areas, since it is believed that *boeviki* having some vague association with Chechnya are active there. Such operations inevitably target ethnic Balkars. If Kabardino-Balkaria were to have its own Beslan—a sudden and vicious attack by a shadowy group, larger in scale than the October 13 events—many Kabardians might well blame the violence on Balkars. That, in turn, could fuel Balkar discontent and open up the ethnic divide between the republic's two largest indigenous populations.

4. Abkhazia. While I was in Nalchik, I attended a medium-size public rally organized to support Abkhazia, the secessionist republic in northwestern Georgia. During the Abkhaz war of the early 1990s, Circassian fighters participated on the Abkhaz side; along with regular Russian forces, they helped account for the Abkhaz victory over the rag-tag Georgian army. Over the last decade and a half, Circassians have maintained strong support, in at least a sentimental way, for the Abkhaz quest for independence and recognition. The rally was attended by perhaps 400 people (although some newspapers reported the wildly inflated figure of 10,000) and featured speeches by civic leaders from Kabardino-Balkaria, Cossack commanders, veterans of the Afghanistan and Abkhaz wars, and representatives from North and South Ossetia (the latter of which also claims independence from Georgia).

A new war in Abkhazia would undoubtedly help to mobilize Circassians to defend their "brothers" across the mountains. But would thousands of Circassians flock to the Abkhaz side? Probably not, if the size of the pro-Abkhaz rally is any indication. (It was a sunny summer's day, when many Kabardian young people probably had better things to do.) But the rally was important as an indication that events on the northern and southern slopes of the Caucasus are fundamentally connected. If violence were to return to Abkhazia, the leadership of Kabardino-Balkaria might well see the new war as a way of shoring up its own position inside the republic. The rise of Circassian nationalism, on the back of Abkhaz secessionism, could then have serious ramifications for interethnic relations within the republic—as well as for the broader question of historical Circassia's relationship to the Russian center.

Suggestions for Future Research

Much of the discussion of the Caucasus in the West involves clichés: of tinderboxes, powderkegs, Wahhabi zealots, and ancient hatreds. The language about the Caucasus today is not unlike that which inhibited our understanding of the real drivers of mobilization and violence in the Balkans during the 1990s: not age-old animosities between ethnic groups but rather the complex interplay of political opportunism, narratives of the nation, and communal fear.

An agenda for social scientific and historical research on the north Caucasus should press through the clichés to examine the real engines of social life and identity in the region. Major questions might include the following:

1. What is the relationship between Islam and traditional codes of behavior, such as adyga khabza among the Circassians and apsuara among the Abkhaz?
2. Are local elites maintaining spheres of control that are becoming more dependent on Moscow, or has President Vladimir Putin really left local groups to their own devices?
3. What is the relationship among the various poles of group identity in the region: religion, family networks, ethnic groups? In what circumstances do some forms of group identity matter more than in others?
4. Is nationalism on the rise in the northwest Caucasus, and what might this mean for the future of the region as a whole? Is a concern with Circassian identity and heritage—now encouraged in subtle ways by the new republican government in Kabardino-Balkaria—a source of social stability or a potential threat to ethnic minorities?
5. What is the demographic future of the north Caucasus, as ethnic Russians continue to leave and indigenous populations grow?
6. How do individuals survive in the relatively poor environment of the north Caucasus? What are the sources of household income, and how does the struggle to earn money and provide for one's family cement and transform social relationships?

Recommendations for the U.S. Policy Community

The United States can have no particular policy toward the north Caucasus, apart from occasionally chiding Russia about human rights violations in Chechnya. Even that, however, has been difficult since September 11, 2001, as the United States government has itself publicly condoned forms of interrogation and detention which, a few years earlier, would have come in for severe criticism if practiced by Russians.

However, the key analytical point about the north Caucasus is that the threat to the Russian state does not come from global jihadists or boeviki hiding in the mountains. Rather, the long-term threat will come from the Russian state itself. Local criminal networks and authoritarian politicians, some of whom have already found subtle ways of manipulating both ethnicity and religion for their own purposes, will be the architects of instability. The future of the north Caucasus, in other words, does not depend on its past. The history of indigenous resistance to the tsar, the legacy of highland warriors such as Shamil, the long-running Circassian struggle for independence in the nineteenth century, the legacies forced deportations of Turkic groups under Stalin—all are critical parts of the complex ethnic history of the region. But these are imperfect guides to the future. It is the more pedestrian aspects of north Caucasus politics that will determine the region's fate and, ultimately, its relations with Moscow: whether people feel that their own government guards their security or undermines it, and whether a rossiiskij form of identity—an all-Russian linguistic and cultural ideal, uniting all the groups of the north Caucasus under a single banner—makes sense in the twenty-first century. As Russia goes through its own new revolution, becoming more powerful, confident, and

“national” as time goes on, Circassians, Balkars, and others may begin to question whether the rossiiskii umbrella is big enough for them.