



STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

Adequatio intellectus et rei

Is the Circassian Ethno political Game Over? Assessment of the Circassian Ethnopolitical Agenda post-Sochi Winter Olympics and May 21 campaigns

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With the Sochi Winter Olympic Games concluded and almost two and half months after the May 21 celebration that marked the 150 years of the deportation of Circassians from its homeland in the North Caucasus to Turkey (and from there to other places across the globe) it is time to ask what is the next step for Circassian activists; or if there is a next step for Circassian activists.

A new dawn to Circassian activism

Circassians were one of the least active ethnic groups across the North Caucasus in the 1990's. While the Chechens were raging separatist wars against Russians, the Balkars were planning a restoration of Balkaria, the Ossetians were exercising their territorial rights against the Ingush and the Avars, Lezgins, Kumyks, Dargins, Nogays and Laks were threatening with the implosion of Dagestan, Circassians remained mostly peaceful and (almost) quiet.

Although the First International Circassian Congress happened in Nalchik, capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, in 1991, the political impact of the gathering was minimal. Delegates attending the Congress were focused, on one side, in “the heart of the most serious Circassian global national problem, the problem of assimilation” (Natho, 2009: 559) and on the other side were trying to find an answer to the irredentist movements of their close neighbors since the Balkars had “declared the national sovereignty of the Balkar people and approved the establishment of the Republic of Balkaria” (Meskhidze, 2008: 69).

It is not inaccurate to mention that “the challenge of Balkar separatism finally overrode the barriers to a truly mass mobilization” (Derlugian, 2003: 210) amongst the Circassians, although a little too late. In the end of the 1990's, Circassians were too late to enter in the ethnopolitical game with the Chechens about to be defeated in the II Russo-Chechen War and with Vladimir Putin coming to power and ending the *Catastroika* cycle.

Interestingly, what seemed a “Game Over” to the ethnopolitical agenda of the Circassians scattered across the Diaspora was in fact just a strategic pause to regroup, rethink and reorganize. “Circassians (or Çerkez, Sharkass, Tcherkess), are an example of identity in motion” (Shami, 2000: 179) with the core ethnic ancient distinctive characteristics being rediscovered with the help of Internet and merged with local identity features, from the communities in which Circassians are integrated.

“The mid-2000s was marked by the appearance of new Circassian organizations and by new attempts at cooperation and coordination between the organizations” (Hansen, 2012: 109) that although geographically distant were virtually closer than ever. Using chat rooms and social networks like facebook, YouTube and twitter “Circassians were connecting with each other, and young Circassians realized what happened to their nation” (Bullough, 2010: 140) fifteen decades ago.

The first strike happened in June 2005 when “the Circassian Congress submitted a petition to the Russian Duma, along with over 500 documents, to recognize the Russo-Circassian

War as an act of genocide by the Tsarist regime” (Richmond, 2008: 172). In January 2006 the petition was rejected. In July 2007, in Vancouver, Sochi (capital of the Adygea republic) was announced as the host of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. The decision of the International Olympic Committee filled the Kremlin with joy, Russians with pride and emboldened Circassian activists to harden their campaigns.

Immediately several Circassians pointed out the coincidence that the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games would happen in the same year that marked 150 years of defeat in the Russo-Circassian War and subsequent deportation. In this regard, “Circassian nationalists regard the Sochi area, especially the location called *Krasnaya polyana*, where the core of the Olympic infrastructure was built, as a mass grave containing bodies of thousands of indigenous Adyghes, mostly women and children, massacred during what they call the Circassian Genocide of the 19th century” (Souleimanov, 2011: 67).

The new Circassian ethnopolitical agenda had now a symbolic finish line: February/May 2014. Almost at the same time, the Circassian ethnonational movement also defined and reprioritized “three shared strategic goals: recognition of the genocide, repatriation of the diaspora, and unification of the territories” (Zhemukhov, 2012: 506) that were previously part of Circassia.

Is the glass half empty or half full?

Although I could describe year by year what happened between 2007 and 2014, it serves better this article to summarize the accomplishments and the defeats of the Circassian activists advancing the three goals of the proposed ethnonational agenda. In advance, however, it is important to clarify that there is nothing weird, awkward or less valuable in the fact that the majority of the actions were conducted by Circassians living outside of the North Caucasus.

We cannot disregard that the majority of the Circassians with some social visibility or political power living in the North Caucasus are either collaborationists that stand for Kremlin’s narrative that “only in the Russian Federation (...) can the Circassians enjoy the privilege of developing their culture and even a certain degree of statehood” (Dzutsev, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2011); or are too afraid for their life and the security of their close relatives to be able to act with any sort of impact.

In addition to this, we should also recall that “the state of exile and Diaspora play an important role in the collective identity of Circassians” (Bram, 1999: 209), so it is only normal that the Circassian diaspora activists were more active than the Circassians living in the homeland. After this explanation on the primacy of role of Circassian diaspora activists we can advance to see which victories were accomplished in the last few years.

Media! The several campaigns promoted by Circassian diaspora activists made journalists and media publications interested in the Circassian Affair. The word “Circassian” was rediscovered and appeared in several newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post*,

New York Times, *Washington Post* and *i*. Important magazines like *Time* or *National Geographic* also devoted attention to the Circassian Question as well as broadcasting channels like *NBC*, *CNN*, *Al Jazeera*.

Media activist platforms and think tanks like *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, *Eurasianet.org*, *Observatory for Human Security*, *WikiStrat*, *Strategic Outlook* and *Jamestown Foundation* also devoted bigger attention to the Circassian ethnopolitical agenda. The reemergence of the Circassians across the media specter greatly surpassed the first global media exposure of the Circassians when in the second half of the XIX century the German *Allgemeine Zeitung*, the French *La France*, and the British *The Times*, *Dundee Advertiser*, *Sheffield Independent*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Levant Herald* and *Daily Herald* devoted many pages to recount passionately the last years of the Russo-Circassian War.

Academy! Circassian Affairs were able to break with the monopoly of Chechen Affairs in what regards North Caucasus studies, scientific papers, books and research projects. If between July 2000 and August 2009 the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* published forty articles of which 35 were about Chechnya and the *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Journal of Social and Political Studies*, in between 2000/2011, released forty articles about Chechnya from a total of 81 papers published now the numbers are different.

The action of several academicians, experts and analysts like Olliver Bullough, Lars Funch, Avraham Shmulevich, Georgi Derlugian, Walter Richmond, Yo'av Karny, Sufian Zhemukhov, Emil Souleimanov, Moshe Gammer, Kadir Natho, Charles King, Frederick Coene, Nicholas Griffin, Chen Bram, Seteney Shami, Amjad Jaimoukha, Paul Henze and others is gradually and steadily reshaping the subarea of Post-Soviet Caucasus Studies.

Politics! The biggest political victory of the Circassians was achieved in 2011 when the "Georgian Parliament passed on May 20 with 90 votes to 0 a resolution saying that 'pre-planned' mass killings of the Circassians by the Tsarist Russia in second half of 19th century, accompanied by 'deliberate famine and epidemics', should be recognized as 'genocide'" (Anon., *Civil Georgia*, 2011).

The decision of the Georgian parliament was possible due to the effort of the Circassian activists that played Tbilisi's resentments towards the Kremlin, after the defeat in the short Russo-Georgian Five Day War of August 2008. Nonetheless, so far Georgia remains the sole worldwide country acknowledging the Circassian genocide as such although there is already a similar bill to be voted in the Ukrainian parliament.

On a more symbolic level it is important to highlight that the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympic Games was boycotted by several political leaders (like the Presidents of Germany, France, Lithuania and USA and the Prime-Ministers of Canada, Poland and United Kingdom) that pointed the finger to the Kremlin's disrespect concerning ethnic minorities' civil, cultural and political rights.

Despite all these accomplishments, the Circassian ethnopolitical agenda also suffered some defeats that must be noted.

Olympics! In the end of the day the *NoSochi* campaign and all similar movements failed in their main goal, since they were unable to prevent the organization of the Olympics and Paralympics Winter Games in Sochi. In addition, even if the political leaders of some countries somehow boycotted the protocol events, no delegation cancelled its participation at the games, even if some athletes from Ukraine refused to compete due to the Ukrainian crisis.

Circassians focused too much of their energy to pressure the traditional powers like the USA, France, Germany or the United Kingdom whose capacity to be diplomatically hostile to Russia is diminished, when they should have developed more intense campaigns in countries like Sweden, Norway, Finland or Canada that are the “natural stars” of any Winter Olympic event. Resentment in Georgia and Ukraine would never be useful in this situation since both countries depend heavily on energy and commerce with Russia.

Institutions! In the last couple of years a growing number of voices as been saying that the *International Circassian Association* has lost its legitimacy to speak for the Circassians worldwide and needs to be replaced by another organization or institution. The major complaint is that for an organization representing stateless people (in a macro-usage of the concept, and not regarding UN’s vision of statelessness) the *International Circassian Association* tends to be over bureaucratic and ritualistic and not as proactive as expected.

The *International Circassian Association* needs perhaps to learn with the Circassian youth that used internet in a non-ritualized and non-institutionalized manner, in order to communicate with more flexibility and by doing so with greater success. There is a need to de-institutionalize, without destroying, the *International Circassian Association* because Circassians will always need to have an institutional united front able to defend, at the political and diplomatic levels, the goals composing the current ethnopolitical agenda.

Resettlement! So far, despite all the political promises from Moscow the resettlement of Circassians living abroad in the North Caucasus is still an almost illusive reality. The numbers of resettled families is disappointingly low because of two factors: 1.) “the activities of external powers have been severely constrained by the desire to preserve good relations with Moscow” (Matveeva, 1999: 9); 2.) Circassians across the diaspora have been more focused with campaigns to aid the Circassian communities living in Libya, Syria and Iraq instead of directing “energies” towards the resettlement plans envisaged in the end of the 1990’s.

Towards a post-2014 ethnopolitical agenda

In May 1864 “a victory parade was held on the Black Sea coast just north of Abkhazia, [on a place] called *Krasnaya Polyana* (“Red Glade”)” (Waal, 2010: 149) to commemorate the end of the Russian-Circassian War. 150 years later the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games 2014 were organized in the exact same place to the discontent of thousands of Circassians scattered around the globe.

Two months and a half after the symbolic celebration of the deportation May 21 and almost six months after the Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games organized in Sochi, administrative capital of the republic of Adygea, Circassians need to define the next steps to be given in order to reach the three main goals defined by the new ethnopolitical agenda defined in the beginning of the new millennium.

Several Circassian diaspora activists were disenchanted with the meager results of the campaigns against the sport events hosted in Sochi. In fact, Circassians were able to gather bigger attention from the media and from several players of the transnational civil society than the activists of Tibet during the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008. Circassians were even able to topple Abkhazians and South Ossetians that claim for recognition of the unilateral declaration of independence since August 2008.

Circassians were responsible for a greater awareness that the North Caucasus is not just composed by Chechens and the *unknown others*. How to measure the current stance of Circassian ethnonational activism? If 2014 was the final chance for the accomplishment of the Circassian ethnopolitical agenda than the movement has failed and will soon be dead and forgotten.

However, if 2014 was just one checkpoint in a series of other checkpoints still to come than the movement is still alive, providing it has a medium-to-long-term plan. In 2018, Russia will organize the Football World Cup and the entire world will be looking to Moscow. Circassians will have, in less than four years, a new chance to advance their cause at an international level.

Currently, the Ukrainian crisis can also be instrumentalized in favor of the Circassian ethnopolitical agenda providing that activists are creative and bold enough to find ways to explore the tension and sanctions game between Western powers and the Kremlin. At the same time, dialogue with Moscow must be intensified with realistic proposals instead of utopian revanchist plans.

Circassians must also learn with the failure of the ethnopolitical agendas on Chechnya, Transdnier, Karakalpakstan, Baluchistan, East Turkestan and South Ossetia. In other words, surviving 150 years “of Russian and Soviet rule may have required docility, but for the Circassians to enjoy a post-Soviet renaissance, they had better regain some good old Circassian virtues” (Karny, 2000: 15) like creativity, cunningness and bravery.

In the XXI century, Circassian diaspora “demands for cultural autonomy have coincided with political demands for [the right to] self government” (Lynn, 1997: 68) either inside the Russian Federation scheme (on a single, autonomous, mono-ethnic Republic) or on a fully sovereign manner, reestablishing the state of Circassia. In this regard, Circassians should try to develop, until the end of 2014, a new set of intermediary goals in order to fulfill the three main objectives of the current ethnopolitical agenda.

The failure to fully accomplish the ethnopolitical agenda post-Sochi Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and post-May 21 does not have to mean the end game for Circassian

activists across the diaspora and/or living in the homeland. Nevertheless, in order for the game to continue, Circassians need to continue to play...

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