

Adygeans Set for a Cultural Renaissance

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North Caucasus leaders pledge to fight for the rights of an ethnic group faced with extinction

Following an emotionally charged congress in Kabardino-Balkaria, the struggle to secure official recognition for the Adygean people has firmly entered the public arena.

The Fifth Congress of the International Cherkess Association (ICA), held in Nalchik earlier this month, focused on the problems being faced by descendants of this ancient Caucasian people.

Many of the tribes currently living in the northwest stretch of the Caucasus - including the Cherkess - trace their ethnic roots back to the Adygeans who now occupy a small autonomous republic within the Krasnodarsky Region. The ICA is one of the few official bodies committed to preserving this legacy.

Under conditions of high security, 83 delegates from the USA, Holland, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Abkhazia and Russia attended the event. A new president, Zaurbi Nakhushev, was elected and the organisation's headquarters was officially moved from Karachaevo-Cherkessia to the neighbouring republic.

The former president of the ICA, Boris Akbashev, told the delegates that strenuous efforts were being made to engineer a renaissance of Adygean language and culture. Plans for a standardised alphabet had been drawn up; a textbook on Cherkess etiquette had been published and work on an Adygean encyclopaedia was nearing completion.

However two crucial issues - the lack of a formal history of the Adygean people and the lack of official status for Adygean ,migr,s living abroad - remained unresolved.

Akbashev told the congress, "We have appealed to the state structures of the Russian Federation with a request for the Adygeans to be recognised as a disinherited people but they said that this could lead to a dangerous precedent for other ethnic groups in Russia and the situation could spin out of control. Russia apparently is not prepared to resolve this issue, but we must fight on."

The new president, Zaurbi Nakhushev, commented, "I've lived through a great deal, but when you're given the task of resolving all the problems of the Adygean people, that's an enormous responsibility.

"I won't promise to be better than the other leaders, but I'll work as much as and as hard as I have to."

However, the ICA congress was overshadowed by the ongoing dispute between the Kabardino-Balkarian authorities and the Adyge Khase organisation - which has also made a determined stance against ethnic assimilation.

For the past decade, Adyge Khase has represented the only form of political opposition in the North Caucasian republic - a fact which has provoked increasing pressure from President Valery Kokov's regime in Nalchik.

In order to split the organisation, Kokov last month inaugurated a second Adyge Khase party, based in Nalchik, which makes no secret of its pro-government stance. The leaders of the new organisation are predominantly highly placed politicians from within the existing government.

Valery Khatazhukov, chairman of the original Adyge Khase, attempted to raise the issue at the ICA congress but was shouted down by other delegates. President Kokov was scathing in his rebukes: "These people need to keep their tempers," he said. "The easy way or the hard way, we're running out of patience. Behave in a civilised fashion or get out..."

Most delegates insisted that the Adyge Khase question was an internal dispute with the Kabardino-Balkarian authorities and should not be discussed at the congress. However, Ibragim Yaganov, deputy chairman of the first organisation, demanded the matter be put to the vote.

Yaganov's request was granted but the results of the voting were potentially disastrous for the Adyge Khase "old guard". Fifty-five of the delegates voted for the new organisation, led by Mukhamed Khafitse, to be officially recognised.

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