

Circassian Outrage At Anniversary Plans

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Officials in Adygeia accused of cashing in on a fraudulent version of history. An official initiative to celebrate the 450th anniversary of Adygeia's "unification" with Russia has angered Adygs, also known as Circassians, who accuse the Russian federal and local authorities of distorting history for political gain.

Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a decree on September 8 naming 2007 as a year of festivities in Adygeia to mark the North Caucasian republic "voluntarily joining of the Russian state". Similar events are also planned in Kabardino-Balkaria, where the majority Kabardinians are also part of the wider Circassian ethnic group.

The events will commemorate the sending of a Kabardinian prince as an envoy to Moscow in 1557, which resulted in a military alliance being agreed with Tsar Ivan the Terrible.

The initiative came from the local government in Adygeia, supported by the republic's parliament.

"We are very serious about the planned festivities," said Yuri Udychak, chairman of the local parliamentary committee dealing with interethnic relations. "As a result of joining Russia, we Adygs came into close contact with the culture of the great Russian people and became able to develop our own culture."

"There are two universities and other educational institutions in Adygeia nowadays," said Udychak. "The fact the Adygs speak Russian so well proves that we are very close to the Russian people. Asked whether Adygeia had actually joined Russian "voluntarily", Udychak replied, "No one forced anyone. Why revise history?"

However, many Circassian politicians and activists are outraged, saying the commemoration is a "falsification of history" which overlooks the decades-long resistance by Circassians to incorporation into the Russian empire in the 19th history.

Zaur Dzeukozhev, deputy chairman of the Circassian Congress, told IWPR, "Adygea was colonised by the Russian Empire in the course of an almost century-long bloody Russian-Caucasian war. All honest historians acknowledge this, and we want the Russian authorities to tell the truth."

Murat Berzegov, chairman of the Congress, said, "It's wrong to celebrate an event that never happened historically. Had we joined Russia voluntarily, the Russian-Caucasian war of the 19th century would not have been a popular liberation war but an insurrection by the people against their own tsar.... This is how a single date - a holiday which should not be celebrated - can change the history of a people, converting them from heroes and champions of liberty into bandits."

Another Circassian nationalist organisation, Adyge Khase, appears to be divided on the planned festivities.

"[Moscow] just wants to tick a box to say that they've carried out work to improve interethnic relations,

and local officials just want to make some money,” said Aly Tliap, head of Adyge Khase in the town of Adygeisk.

Amin Zekhov, another of the leaders of Adyge Khase, said that Circassians had indeed served the Russian state in the past and had been outstanding military commanders.

“However, the truth should also be spoken about the Russian-Caucasian war, during which Adygeia was turned into a colony. How can we talk about voluntarily accession after so much blood was spilt?” he asked.

Despite these reservations, Adyge Khase is officially supporting the idea of next year’s celebrations, on the grounds that Circassians and Russians had friendly relations long before the Caucasian war.

Dzeukozhev believes the group’s official support for the plans is financially motivated. He said Adyge Khase representatives admitted in private that the celebrations were historically inaccurate, but wanted to earn money from them.

“Members of Adyge Khase are ‘great writers’ and ‘great composers,’ who want to earn some money,” he said. “They don’t want to spoil their relations with the republic’s bureaucrats.”

The end of the Caucasian war in the 1860s resulted in the expulsion of tens of thousands of Circassians from the Russian empire to the Middle East and Turkey. As a result, there are now far more Circassians outside the North Caucasus than in it. Those in the region are mainly divided between three small autonomous republics, Adygeia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia.

Rushdi Tuguz, a Syrian-born Circassian who has recently moved to the North Caucasus, remarked that if Adygeia’s integration into Russia had been voluntary, his ancestors would not have fled to the Middle East in the 19th century. “If you add sweet water to bitter water, it won’t be good water,” said Tuguz.

In Adygeia, Russians form the majority while the ethnic Adygei account for only around 25 per cent of the population. However, the Adygei form the bulk of the republic’s political elite, a state of affairs that is a constant cause of discontent among local organisations of ethnic Russians. However, as far as the celebrations are concerned, the latter are also critical.

“National elites have betrayed the history of their people,” said Vladimir Karatayev, one of the leaders of the Slavs’ Union of Adygeia, a Russian associations that is often at loggerheads with Circassian groups.

Others in Maikop see the presidential decree as a public relations exercise by Moscow to make up for the dearth of serious policies on ethnic minority issues in Russia’s North Caucasus.

They also say that the festivities are designed to smooth over a quarrel between Moscow and the local elite.

Khazret Sovmen, president of Adygeia, and Dmitry Kozak, Russian presidential envoy in the Southern

Federal Circuit, were engaged in a public row earlier this year. Sovmen threatened to resign over reports that Kozak was backing a plan to abolish Adygeia's autonomous status and incorporate it into Krasnodar region. (See "Adygeia's President Confronts Kremlin", CRS 335, April 13, 2006)

President Putin refused to accept Sovmen's resignation, but relations between Maikop and Moscow were seriously strained.

Meanwhile, opposition deputies in parliament are planning a no-confidence vote against Sovmen, and the republican prime minister, Yevgeny Kovalyov, was dismissed on September 13.

Sovmen's term in office expires in January 2007 and his successor will be appointed rather than elected. Kozak will propose candidates for the post for approval by the Russian president. One way to get on the list might be to support the anniversary idea.

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