Communist and Post-Communist Studies 48 (2015) 71–81

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

How far is too far? Circassian ethnic mobilization and the redrawing of internal borders in the North Caucasus

Marat Grebennikov

Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Canada

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 2 February 2015

Keywords:
Caucasus
Internal borders
Ethnic mobilization
Circassian activism

ABSTRACT

The idea of redrawing the borders between the republics of the region remains a topic of discussion beyond its borders. While the Kremlin de facto makes the subject of territorial changes in the North Caucasus taboo, the processes related to the rise of ethnic self-consciousness in ethnic republics hardly stopped. The Syrian crisis, which gave Russia a much-celebrated diplomatic victory, threatens its territorial integrity because Moscow's mishandling of the Circassian issue is radicalizing the Circassian communities of the North Caucasus. Drawing on the dynamics of ethnic mobilization among Circassians, the paper argues that this process may result in the most dangerous consequences of the Kremlin's policies based on the ancient imperial principle of "divide and rule" – redrawing the administrative map of the entire region. The paper concludes that even though Moscow pretends that the situation is under control, a shift which consequences are hard to predict is already happening. One of them is that the demand for an increased congruency between Russia's ethnic and administrative borders becomes politically salient; and a protrusion in the battle line becomes more prominent with each passing day.

1. Introduction

The situation in the North Caucasus has deteriorated significantly over the last two decades. Beyond Chechnya and Dagestan, the problems of the North-Western Caucasus region, populated by the Circassian people, have resurfaced to become a key factor. The history of the "Circassian question" in Russia goes back to the conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century. The Circassian people remain scattered across a number of different republics and "territorial-administrative units"; there is still no procedure in place for the return of Circassian refugees from the time of the Caucasian War of 1817–1864 to their homeland. In the early 19th century, Russia's policy in the Caucasus was defined by the explicit aim of empire building. The goal was to control the Caucasus Mountains at the expense of the rival Ottoman and Persian empires. In the early years of colonization, Russia's relationship with the indigenous elites was similar to the experience of the British Empire. The elites were to be coopted and transformed into the loyal servants of the imperial government. However, by the mid-19th century, the Russian expansion in the North Caucasus turned to an aggressive expropriation of lands and deportation of local villagers. Numerous petitions from the indigenous elites for a resolution of the above issues remained ignored, and they chose the path of resistance against the Russian presence. In response to the resistance, the Russian administration began to drive a wedge between low-income groups and their land-owing elites. This policy of divide and rule along the social lines continued, until a series of large peasant uprising against their elites shook the entire region and compelled the Russian government to side with the local elites, initiating a long-term process of their acculturation.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.01.003
0967-067X/

From the time of the anti-colonial resistance in the North Caucasus, Islam has served as an element of collective identity that has united the region's many ethnically and linguistically splintered groups in opposition to Russian colonial expansion. In this region, however, Islam has not been historically united. In the northeast, Sufi tariqas have dominated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while this conception of Islam is alien to the northwestern Caucasus (Malashenko, 2001:56–82). Those of North Ossetia, as well as the Turkic and Circassian ethnicities of the northwest, mostly adhere to Hanafite school of law. In all cases, however, the traditional North Caucasian faith can be specified as an amalgam of the relics of local pagan cults and customary law with Islam — or with Orthodox Christianity in the case of majority of North Ossetians (Malashenko, 2001:104–125). Between 1801 and 1830, Russia gradually replaced local monarchs and notables with a system of protectorates and provinces in the South Caucasus. This phase of imperial conquest was relatively straightforward: with well-established political elites already in place (an ancient royal house in Georgia, for example, and a network of Muslim khans in Azerbaijan), Russia's strategy did not require the wholesale remaking of political structures but rather involved simply buying the allegiances of individual powerbrokers (King and Menon, 2011). In the North Caucasus, however, the story was different as Russia faced two core problems. First, rugged terrain and extreme cultural diversity made it impossible to create overarching political institutions. Native princes or chieftains could make exaggerated claims about their hereditary lands, but in practice their rule extended over little more than whatever village they could credibly secure. Second, the absence of broadly legitimate political leaders meant that there was always space for local upstarts to seek their own advantage. As a result, slave-taking, livestock raids, clan feuds, and assassinations were all common (King and Menon, 2011).

Even though the North Caucasus was nominally pacified in the late 1860s, when the last resistance among the Circassians was suppressed, the prospect remained of trouble rising from the mountains and spreading throughout Russia. In the 1920s, Soviet security forces launched campaigns of arrests and ethnic cleansing in Chechnya and other parts of the upland Caucasus that were believed to resist Soviet authority. In 1943 and 1944, Stalin deported nearly half a million people from the North Caucasus for allegedly assisting the Nazis during World War II. The forced expulsions also produced what would become one of the region's epic stories of oppression under Russian rule, with generations of Chechens and Circassians eulogizing their exile as a national tragedy (King and Menon, 2011). Today, the region is part of Russia by dint of history, but the peoples of the highlands are seen as inherently unreliable, congenitally fanatical in their religious beliefs, and culturally predisposed to unrest (King and Menon, 2011).

Circassian activists have long been concerned about the fate of their brethren world-wide and especially about the failure of the Russian government to extend the rights of return and resettlement to the Circassians that are specified in Russia's compatriots program. The Russian government has been reluctant to do so in part because it does not want to see an influx of Circassians into the North Caucasus, something that may dramatically change the ethnic balance in that region – there are more than five million Circassians abroad but only half a million now in the Russian Federation. The Russian government also fears that Circassian return will undermine existing ethno-territorial arrangements in the North Caucasus. Circassian ethnic identity and participation of the Circassians in politics have been assessed from different perspectives: Circassians after the fall of the Soviet Union (Derluguian, 2005; Henze, 2007); Circassians and gender (Shami, 2007); Circassians and the Internet (Besleney, 2010; Hansen, 2012); Circassians in Turkey (Kaya, 2006); and the strategic goals of Circassian nationalism (Zhemukhov, 2012).

As Zhemukhov argues, while composing a common ethnic community, the Circassians did not represent a unified mass national movement, either at the time of Russian conquest or during the Soviet ethno-territorial delimitation. Instead, they share a common ideology based on a common memory of what they regarded as genocide committed during the conquest of the North Caucasus in the 19th century. The Circassians organizations maintain three main goals – recognition of the genocide, unification of Circassian territories in one homeland, and repatriation of the expelled population (Zhemukhov, 2012). Zhemukhov provides a new typology of Circassian movements: nationalists; sovereigntists (unification of the Circassians as a single autonomous region within Russia); culturalists; accommodationists; and centrists (unification of the Circassians as a single nation within a number of regions). The main differences between opposing Circassian positions are based on different views of the Russian role in this process. Accommodationists and culturalists regard the Circassian issue as an internal Russian problem, while sovereigntists and nationalists claim that it is an international one, causing further polarization of the contemporary Circassian movement (Zhemukhov, 2012).

The upsurge in violence in 2012–2014 beyond the North Caucasus contributes to Russia's drift away from democracy. Just as Putin did during the second Chechen war, the incumbent government invokes again public safety to justify the further restriction of civil liberties and concentration of power inside the Kremlin. The ongoing insurgency in the region has now spilled over north of the Terek and Kuban rivers, both natural and symbolical barrier between central Russia and its southern republics. The terrorist attack in Chechnya on December 4 2014, the day of President Putin's state of the nation address, became another reminder that the problem of insurgency in the North Caucasus region remains an imminent danger to the stability of the federation in general and Putin's regime in particular. Although preliminary evidence suggests that this was a locally recruited group, part of the so-called Caucasus Emirate[1] loyal to Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria, the more serious problem that this attack highlights is domestic rather than international — the risk that the pro-Kremlin elites in the region will lose their ability to control the situation in their respective republics. There are reportedly over 1000 Russian-speakers

[1] The major attack sponsored by the Caucasus Emirate was the suicide assault on Domodedovo International Airport in January 2011, that killed 38 people.