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Could Kabardino-Balkaria Become the Kosovo of the Caucasus?

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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Kabardino-Balkarian President Arsen Kanokov is pursuing policies that are boosting the status of his own branch of the Circassian nation and threaten to transform the hitherto relatively peaceful republic into a Kosovo of the Caucasus, according to leaders of the Balkar minority from that republic and academic specialists on the region.

Duma deputy and Russian Academy of Sciences member Mikhail Zalikhanov told a roundtable session in Moscow on Friday that interethnic tensions have been on the rise in the North Caucasus republic since 2005, when the local parliament stripped the Balkars of their status as "a subject-forming" nation.

The scholar added that Kanokov had also been an active supporter of "Greater Circassia," a project that would reunite all the Circassian peoples into a single republic in the north Caucasus and ultimately seek its independence, and a project Zalikhanov somewhat incongruously called "a pan-Turkic formation." (His formulation is strange because while

the Balkars are a Turkic-speaking group, the Circassians, of whom the Kabards are but one branch, are not.)

But Kanokov's actions have not been limited to this ideological sphere. Ismail Sanchiyev, the chairman of the Council of Elders of the Balkar People, told the Moscow session that Kanokov was pursuing the creation of a "mono-ethnic" republic by confiscating land and thus changing the balance of power there.

According to the Kabardino-Balkaria constitution, republic laws take precedence over federal ones, and the parliament has put a 40-year moratorium on the privatization of land, lest such actions sharpen ethnic feelings or remove territories from an ethnic community that said community has occupied in the past.

However, Kanokov has followed Moscow, which insists on the supremacy of federal laws and ignoring his republic's constitution, and run roughshod over that limitation, privatizing enormous amounts of land, thus effectively confiscating it from the population as a whole and the Balkars and ethnic Russian minorities in particular.

One of the reasons Kanokov has been able to do this, Sanchiyev said, is because he has packed the republic parliament with his relatives: 43 of the 70 deputies are related to the president or his personal friends. And in Balkar regions, there are no people of power who do not fall into that category.

In the past, the Balkar leader said, there were no tensions between Kabards and Balkars, but now they "artificially" exist as a result of the actions of Kanokov. In addition to land grabs and intimidation, such actions include efforts by the republic president and attacks to bring charges of extremism against his Balkar opponents.

Like Zalikhanov, Sanchiyev also accused Kanokov of "separatist tendencies" and support for Greater Circassia. And also like the Duma deputy, he said that there is a growing risk of clashes between the Circassian (Adygey-Abkhaz) and Turkic (including Balkar) groups of peoples in the North Caucasus.

At least three aspects of this meeting merit close attention. First, Moscow's effort to create a common legal space across the country is creating serious problems in places like Kabardino-Balkaria, where land, power and ethnic status are so tightly interwoven and where incautious efforts to cut this knot can lead to violence.

Second, increasing activism by Circassians in recent months is rapidly generating a reaction among groups who live among them, such as the Balkars, because they feel genuinely threatened and because they clearly believe that they can gain allies in Moscow against local leaders who may be inclined to support the Circassian national cause.

And third &mdash and far and away the most important &mdash to the extent that the Balkars are right that there is a rift developing in the North Caucasus between Turkic and Caucasic speaking groups (among whom the Circassians are prominent), that could indeed presage a North Caucasus Kosovo, perhaps even more violent than the original Balkan

one.

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