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Dagestan Now Has 50 'Representative Offices' Across CIS

By Paul Goble

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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.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Dagestan now has 50 "permanent representative offices" in Russian regions and CIS countries to help promote trade and to support the rights and interests of Dagestanis living there, the latest in a remarkable evolution of a Soviet-era institution that became the foundation for the embassies of most post-Soviet states in Moscow.

Earlier this month, officials from these 50 offices assembled in Makhachkala not only for their annual meeting with the republic's Ministry of Nationalities, which oversees their activities, but also to celebrate the 10th anniversary of 14 of them, including those in Minsk, Bashkortostan and Karachayevo-Cherkessia.

Zikrula Ilyasov, the First Deputy Minister for Nationality Policy, Information and Foreign Ties, told them that among their most important achievements and tasks was the promotion of trade with and investment in Dagestan by dealing with the headquarters of companies and concerns involved.

The permanent representatives, for their part, complained that officials in Makhachkala have not always done what they could to create favorable conditions for trade and investment. Indeed, some of them said that republic officials sometimes have shown little interest in this aspect of their work, Makhachkala journalist Nurmagomed Magomedov wrote.

But another aspect of the work of these representative offices appears to be equally important. As Magomedov suggests, these offices have become "the connecting link between the republic and those regions where they are located," assisting, among other things, in promoting "the preservation and development of the national culture and languages of Dagestanis" living there.

Their work is especially important for those Dagestanis "who were born and have grown up in a different ethnic milieu," lest "they forget their ethnic roots." These agencies also work with "military units in which Dagestanis are serving in order to help improve the moral and psychological atmosphere" and "stabilize the situation" in them.

At the dawn of Soviet times, when communication between Moscow and the regions and republics was often difficult, such permanent representations were common, with almost every republic and many regions maintaining such institutions in the Soviet capital and in neighboring areas.

But as the country's infrastructure improved, most of them disappeared. However, near the end of the Soviet period, the permanent representatives of the union republics, as well as of a few autonomous formations within the Russian Federation, assumed a more prominent role, not only as coordination and cultural centers but also serving as important symbols of sovereignty.

They occasionally figured in the fiction of non-Russian republics as a kind of proto-embassy, and on at least one occasion, they played a critical role in the development of a national movement: In January 1990, after Soviet troops used force in Baku, Heydar Aliyev visited the Azerbaijani permanent representation in Moscow, an act that boosted his standing at home.

While Dagestan has the most extensive network of such institutions, other non-Russian republics within the Russian Federation also maintain offices of this kind, providing both a kind of consular service for their co-ethnics "abroad" and a symbol of statehood that could, under certain conditions, assume greater importance.

Indeed, given the continuing problems with *dedovshchina* (hazing) in the Russian army, it seems likely that ever more republics will consider such representative offices as a useful or even necessary means of defending their people. Such defense in and of itself will send a message not only to their own people but implicitly to Moscow as well.

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