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Khloponin Considers Cossacks for North Caucasus

By Paul Goble

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Staunton ◙ Alexander Khloponin, the president's special envoy to the North Caucasus Federal District, has said his "first task" should be to support and rely on a Cossack revival as part of Moscow's effort to return ethnic Russians to that troubled part of Russia.

Cossacks, however, were the shock troops of Russian expansion in the North Caucasus. Though the Cossack movement of today is best described as "neo-Cossackry," as Sergei Markedonov makes clear in a new analysis, the history of tensions between North Caucasus ethnic groups and the Cossacks makes this a problematic, even dangerous tactic.

About The Columnist

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Markedonov's analysis is all the more timely because the neo-Cossacks are more Russian nationalist in their sensibilities and likely to prove more hostile to the non-Russian nationalities of the North Caucasus than were the Cossacks who moved south into that region in the 18th and 19th centuries.

As Markedonov, now a visiting scholar at Washington's Center for Strategic & International Studies, makes clear, the new Cossacks are not so much a continuation of the older groups but rather a new phenomenon, one that draws on Cossack ideas but that lacks the corporate sense and social conditions in which the pre-1917 Cossacks existed.

The neo-Cossack movement emerged in the early 1990s, Markedonov says, as "a reaction to the growth of ethnic nationalism in the North Caucasus republics under conditions of the crisis and disintegration of the U.S.S.R." As a result, the Kuban and Terek "neo-Cossacks" began "to play the role of a certain counterweight to the ethnocracies being formed there."

Markedonov details the struggle of revived Cossack units within the non-Russian republics in that region during the early 1990s. Those struggles sometimes resulted in violent clashes and deaths, and they sometimes featured calls for the establishment or re-establishment of Cossack territories from imperial times, but ultimately they led to no real changes.

Initially, ethnic Russians in the North Caucasus supported the idea of creating a Cossack Republic, with "almost 65 percent" in one poll backing that idea. Several Cossack communities proclaimed such republics, but the central government authorities were unprepared to support them, preferring instead to rely on the leaders of existing republics.

Although there was a brief uptick in local interest in the creation of a special Cossack territory, the so-called Terek Oblast, at the start of Moscow's military efforts in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999, no such "'second Transdniestria'" was formed, in large measure because of the rapid outflow of the ethnic Russian population from the North Caucasus.

During the last decade, Markedonov continues, "the neo-Cossacks as a political project" have more or less disappeared as an issue. By the 1990s "the Russians and Cossacks had ceased to be considered 'elder brothers'" by the non-Russians. The Cossacks never learned to use the language of human rights and thus were condemned to be viewed as "revanchist" and as a group "not about the future but about the past."

But perhaps most important, the Russian analyst says, "the neo-Cossacks of the North Caucasus did not receive the necessary 'signals' from the center," meaning Moscow.

It is possible that Khloponin's remarks represent a shift, but Markedonov suggests that is probably not the case.

Yet, some Cossacks may see Khloponin's words as the signal that they haven't received in the past. That in turn could create serious problems in the region ◙ even if it is not “the signal” that anyone, including Khloponin, thought he was sending by his rather incautious remarks during a Cossack meeting in late October.

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