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Sochi Olympics Makes the Circassian Genocide an International Issue, Analysts Say

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Moscow's drive to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi has transformed the question of the recognition of the Circassian genocide from a narrowly local issue into an international one by attracting the attention of intellectuals around the world, according to a Circassian scholar.

During a roundtable at Russia's Social Chamber earlier this month, Samir Khotko, a researcher at the Adygey Republic Institute of Humanitarian Research, underlined what many suspect but few will say: Russian leaders badly miscalculated by ignoring the Circassian factor.

As Khotkov pointed out, "the Caucasus is one of the few regions where the ethnic composition of the population was almost entirely changed" as the result of human actions, in this case

because of the Caucasus wars, the end of which was "extraordinarily tragic" because it was "connected with unbelievably enormous humanitarian losses."

During those wars, he continued, Russian forces used almost all available weapons against the North Caucasians in general and the Circassians in particular. Then, at the end of that conflict, the Russians deported, with enormous loss of life, almost the entire Circassian population, most of it through Sochi.

For many Russians, Sochi, where Russia plans to hold the Winter Olympiad in 2014, is a symbol of "the sweet life," but for Circassians, it is "a symbol of a lost country, of a lost Circassia which disappeared from the map of the world." It is indeed "a symbol of the Adyg tragedy, the Ubykh tragedy, and the Ubykh-Abaza tragedy."

For most of the last 150 years, the Circassians have remembered what was done to them as the greatest tragedy in their national lives, and in recent times they have talked about it as a genocide. But "precisely thanks to the upcoming Olympiad," Khotko said, "the recognition of a genocide of the Circassian people has been transformed into an international issue."

Moreover, the Adygey scholar says, Moscow has compounded the problem for itself by insisting, whenever anyone brings up what happened to the Circassians in Sochi in 1864, that "there was nothing" to talk about. In short, "it was proposed that the people stop talking about their own history."

"But we cannot fail to speak about this," Khotko said. "If we will be silent about this, then we as historians will not be fulfilling our responsibilities to society." That is all the more so, he suggested, because the Russian mass media present such a one-sided story of the Caucasus wars, praising many who behaved in a bestial fashion.

Some of those Russian military men have been etched into history, he noted. In Armavir, for example, there is a monument to a certain Zass, "who paid ten rubles to his soldiers for each head [of a Circassian] they cut off. This was done for years," and both Russians and Circassians deserve to know the truth.

In the audience when Khotko made these remarks, Kavkaz-Uzel.ru reported, were scholars from the Academy of Sciences, Moscow State University, MGIMO, the Foreign Ministry, the State Humanitarian University, "and also representatives of the Plenipotentiary representation for the North Caucasus, the Presidential Administration and the Duma."

Other speakers took a somewhat different line than Khotko. Maksim Shevchenko, head of the Center for Strategic Research on Religion and Policy and a member of the Social Chamber, said that all too often those on both sides of this issue are guided by overheated passions rather than sober analysis.

It is certainly true, Shevchenko noted, that "an enormous population of Circassians" were killed or removed from their homelands by the tsarist authorities. But, the religious specialist said, that was hardly unusual in the 19th century when imperial powers often behaved brutally to strengthen their borders.

To try to connect present-day Russia with this, he continued, is "simply absurd." Turkey used

the Caucasus wars too in the pursuit of its foreign and domestic goals, he points out, and they even "purchased Circassians as slaves" and behaved in other ways that were beyond any doubt wrong.

Because of all that, Shevchenko said, to call for the international community to label what was done to the Circassians a genocide is to engage in "political pressure" against Moscow, something which he suggested, he was completely against, although he said he believed the Circassians should "receive moral satisfaction" by the acknowledgement of history.

A third speaker, Barasbi Bgazhnokov, a senior scholar at the Kabardino-Balkaria Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, said such compensation might take the form of the restoration of the Shapsug National District, which was suppressed by Moscow in 1945.

"We now talk about national-cultural autonomies, about the support of national minorities. Let us take this as an act of good will," he continued, rather than feeling under any compulsion or pressure to do so. If Moscow did so, Bgazhnokov argued, that would close the Circassian dispute for many if not most Circassians.

But a fourth speaker, Akhmed Yarlykapov, a senior scholar at the Moscow Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, suggested that while Russia should not "stick its head in the sand" and act as if there was nothing to the Circassian argument, "we all understand that the demand to recognize this as a genocide converts it into a political question."

"Yes, Russia could repent, but after such a repentance," he said, he believed that "there would appeal a mass of politicians who would begin to advance new demands." Thus, he implied, it may be best not to take even the smallest of first steps. In any case, Russia must have a clearly defined policy on this question.

What is important about this discussion is that it highlights movement in Moscow away from a simple rejection of the Circasssian call for recognition of what happened in 1864 as a genocide to a more nuanced response, an indication that the Circassian campaign in Georgia and elsewhere is having an effect.

And that in turn suggests that the Russian authorities may be planning some moves in the near future to try to divide the Circassian movement both within the Russian Federation and abroad by offering that community something in the hopes of getting it to drop these demands, at least in the run up to the Sochi Olympiad.

Whether that will work remains to be seen, but the February 14th meeting is the clearest publication yet that the drive by Circassians and their friends is having an effect, one that may lead some in Moscow to ask themselves whether pushing for the Sochi Olympiad may in fact prove a counterproductive enterprise.

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