The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

In Russia's Caucasus, a Tentative Border Redraw Edges Republics Closer to Instability

By Leyla Latypova

October 04, 2024



Tower complex in the ancient Ingush town-settlement of Pyaling in the Dzheyrakhsky district. **Timur Agirov (CC BY-SA 4.0)**

Last month, Fortanga, an independent news outlet from the republic of Ingushetia in Russia's North Caucasus, broke the news that the neighboring republic of North Ossetia-Alania was plotting to redraw the two regions' shared border.

Documents obtained by Fortanga revealed that North Ossetian officials were hoping to incorporate into their territory parts of Ingushetia's Dzheyrakhsky district, including a section of Stolovaya (Myat-Loam) mountain where large deposits of dolomite are located.

"There was a huge public outcry [in Ingushetia]. Everyone was talking about it, except perhaps the infants and the mute," said Isabella Evloeva, journalist and founder of Fortanga.

Evloeva told The Moscow Times that many residents of Ingushetia, Russia's smallest ethnic republic, took to community groups in messaging apps such as WhatsApp to express their outrage and pledge to stage protests if the border deal goes ahead.

"People calmed down a bit when they saw the responses from [Ingush] ministries and government agencies," said Evloeva, referring to letters by heads of two of Ingushetia's districts and several ministers obtained by Fortanga, whereby they declared the border redraw "unacceptable" and "impossible."

"Many people in Ingushetia faced repression during the protests [against a similar border deal with Chechnya] in 2018 and 2019, which significantly weakened civil society and made them afraid to express their opinions, including on social media," Evloeva explained.

"But this issue forced people to speak out again," she said.

Embed:

Learning that parts of their republic's territory could be handed over to neighboring North Ossetia was like rubbing salt in the wounds for many in the largely ethnically homogenous Ingushetia.

In 1944, between 450,000 and 650,000 residents of the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic were loaded onto cattle cars and deported to Central Asia during the Soviets' Operation Chechevitsa (Lentil).

Nearly one-third of the Chechen and Ingush populations died as a result of forced deportation.

Meanwhile, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was disbanded and its territory was allocated to neighboring regions and republics, including the present-day Stavropol region and Russia's republics of Dagestan and North Ossetia.

Chechens and Ingush were allowed to return to their homeland 13 years after the deportation, but the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was never restored in its entirety.

One of the territories alienated from Ingushes after the deportation was the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia, which borders the Dzheyrakhsky district of modern-day Ingushetia.

In 1992 the two republics fought a brief war for control over Prigorodny, which resulted in the death of 192 Ossetians and 409 Ingush, as well as the expulsion of up to 60,000 ethnic Ingush from North Ossetia.

The latest rumors of a potential border redraw would see North Ossetia's Prigorodny district expanded further by taking swaths of Ingushetia's territory — a deal that would risk large-scale unrest and possible ethnic violence, analysts and locals agree.

Embed:

An activist from Ingushetia who requested anonymity due to safety concerns told The Moscow Times that documents confirming North Ossetia's intent to get ahold of Ingushetia's territory are leaked to the media "almost every year."

"But nothing actually changes — this is why there are no large-scale public protests," the activist said. "In any case, this does the opposite of improving interethnic relations in the region."

North Caucasus analyst Harold Chambers believes the latest land deal "has obviously been in the works for some time," but notes that "it is not clear why this proposal is being pushed specifically now."

"Such a blatantly inflammatory initiative would seemingly be uncharacteristic of [North Ossetia's head Sergei] Menyailo; it is debatable whether the Kremlin would realize it as being so risky, however," Chambers told The Moscow Times.

In 2018, Moscow greenlit a controversial land swap deal between Ingushetia and neighboring Chechnya, which saw the former give up disproportionally more territory than its neighbor ruled by strongman Ramzan Kadyrov.

The move, which violated Ingushetia's constitutional order, led to a protracted standoff between the republic's government and tens of thousands of residents who disapproved of the border deal.

The tensions brought about one of the largest waves of political repression in modern Russia.

At least 52 people faced criminal prosecution in connection with rallies against the border deal and seven people dubbed as "protest leaders" by the prosecution received prison sentences ranging between 7.5 and 9 years.

Chambers said that the possibility that the Kremlin would secretly rubberstamp a similar border deal with North Ossetia cannot be ruled out. He noted that even though letters of protest issued by Ingush officials were plenty, not a single one of them was authored by the republic's Kremlin-installed head Mahmud-Ali Kalimatov.

"Kalimatov will do as he is ordered [by Moscow]," said Chambers, drawing parallels with Ingushetia's previous leader Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who was widely dubbed a "traitor" by Ingushes for giving away historical lands to Chechnya.

"Should the deal proceed, the probability of large protests is very high...There is also a legitimate risk of violent instability, as enflamed emotions could make some young men take a different course of action," he added.

Chambers' words were echoed by the activist who spoke with The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity.

"I am convinced that the Kremlin deliberately keeps this issue unresolved, like a trump card up its sleeve, which would allow it to destabilize the situation here and start a war at a moment when they deem it beneficial for one reason or another," said the activist, noting that Moscow could resolve the issue "with the stroke of a pen" if it wished.

“A time when the Ingush go to war for this land is only a matter of time, without a doubt. 100% of the Ingush people are raised with the firm belief in the inevitable return of these territories by any means.”

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/10/04/in-russias-caucasus-a-tentative-border-redraw-edges-republics-closer-to-instability-a86571