

## Kabards and Balkars

### Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 519,958 Kabards and Balkars in the Russian Federation. Kabards form part of the Circassian ethnic group and share a language with the Cherkess in Karachay-Cherkessia. They were among the last of the North Caucasian people to be converted to Islam.

Balkars (total population 108,426) formed following the merging of tribes from the Northern Caucasus with Iranian and Turkic-speaking peoples. Balkars are ethnically, linguistically and culturally close to Karachai. Kabards and Balkars live in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (pop. 786,200: Kabards 50 per cent, Balkars 10 per cent, Russians 32 per cent, others 8 per cent).

Both groups are Sunni Muslim.

### Historical context

As early as 1557 Kabards formed part of the Terek Cossack district. In the pre-Soviet period, along with Cherkess and Adygei, Kabards were considered part of the Circassian people. In the 1930s, Kabards were given the status of a distinct ethnic group.

The Kabardin AO was created in September 1921 and amalgamated with Balkaria to form the Kabardino-Balkar AO in January 1922. In December 1936, the AO became the Kabardino-Balkar ASSR. Balkars were forcibly deported to Central Asia and Siberia in 1944. Balkar territories were transferred to the Kabard ASSR. Balkars were permitted to return to the reconstituted Kabardino-Balkar ASSR after 1956. They were not allowed to resettle in their former lands and were instead dispersed throughout Kabardino-Balkaria. In November 1991, Kabardino-Balkaria declared its sovereignty.

After independence, there was some tension between Kabards and Balkars, the main problem being the issue of the full rehabilitation of the Balkars. In a referendum held in December 1991, Balkars voted to create a separate Balkar republic. The Congress of Balkars demanded restoration of the Balkar homeland and a return to Balkars of their pre-1944 territories. These claims on former lands worried Kabards. In April 1993, the Congress of the Kabard People requested the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation to refrain from passing a resolution 'On the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Balkar People'. There were also calls for the republic and the neighbouring region of Karachai-Cherkess to be broken up into separate Karachai-Balkar and Kabardino-Cherkess regions.

In 1996 the Balkar National Congress convened to consider a number of Balkar grievances. These included the transfer of four districts populated by Balkars to Kabardia in 1957, the creation of a post of vice-president in the republic, which would be reserved for an ethnic Balkar and the creation of a separate Balkar republic. On 17 November 1996 the Congress unilaterally declared a separate Balkar

republic in the Russian Federation. The republican leadership, dominated by ethnic Kabards, responded to these demands with mass arrests and the closure of Balkar political parties and groups campaigning for separation.

Balkar grievances continued to simmer through the late 1990s, and in 2001 members of the Balkar national party Tere again accused the republican leadership of discrimination against Balkars. Their grievances were exacerbated by the widely acknowledged corruption of the republican leadership, headed by President Valerii Kokov and his family, high unemployment in the region (reportedly in the region of 20 per cent, rising significantly in mountainous areas), Kabard domination of high-ranking posts and security forces, and knock-on effects from the conflict in Chechnya, including displaced Chechens and the reported increase in militant Islam. President Kokov presided over a policy of shutting mosques and targeting expressions of Islamic faith that some analysts see as only having encouraged the embrace of Islamic identity in the republic.

## **Current issues**

In May 2005 territorial-administrative revisions, which re-designated four small municipalities including two Balkar-populated villages as suburbs of Nalchik, were met with mass protests by Balkars in the republican capital Nalchik. A further inflammatory factor was the killing of the mayor of one of the villages, Khasanya, after he had filed a complaint against the territorial revisions with the republic's Supreme Court. The Nalchik City Court also banned a planned referendum in the village, which would have elicited the population's views on the proposed changes.

Security forces in the republic claimed to have neutralized a number of what they claimed were militant Islamic djamaats or communities in 2005. Police claimed to have killed most members of one djamaat, known as Yarmuk, in January; another group was claimed as destroyed and its members arrested in March. Another operation resulted in a spate of 'anti-terrorist' arrests in July. Nonetheless, according to police sources, a further 22 Islamic youth groups were thought to exist in Kabardino-Balkaria outside the control of the state-endorsed Muslim Spiritual Directorate.

In September 2005 President Valerii Kokov submitted his resignation as president of Kabardino-Balkaria on health grounds. His successor was Arsen Kanokov, an ethnic Kabard and formerly a businessman and Russian State Duma deputy for Vladimir Zhirinovskii's Liberal Democratic Party (he later defected to the Unified Russia party).

In October 2005 armed raids struck the republican capital Nalchik, resulting in heavy fighting between militants and security forces and the deaths of over 130 people. The Chechen separatist leadership and the 'Yarmuk' local militant Islamic group claimed responsibility. Some 95 young Muslim dissidents were killed in the raids. Following the clashes, President Kanokov pledged to revise the heavy-handed anti-religious campaign of his predecessor. Nonetheless, Russian human rights campaigners allege that many of those detained in the aftermath of the raids were innocent of involvement and were targeted only on account of association with Islam.