Karachay and Cherkess

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 191,182 Karachay and Cherkess in the Russian Federation. Karachay are ethnically Turkic and share a literary language with the Balkars (Karachay-Balkar). The language is from the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altaic language family.

Cherkess (total population in 2002 60,517) speak the same language as Kabards (Kabardino-Cherkess), which is close to Adygei, and belongs to the North-West Caucasian language family. The majority of Karachay and Cherkess live in the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, formerly the Karachay-Cherkess AO in Stavropol Krai (pop. 439,470: Karachay 38.5 per cent, Cherkess 11.3 per cent, Russians 33.7 per cent, others 16.5 per cent) and in Stavropol Krai.

The ethnic profile of the republic is an inversion of that in neighbouring Kabardino-Balkaria, where the Circassian population forms a majority and it is the Turkic population that finds itself in a minority. Both republics feature a large Russian population. Karachay tend to be concentrated in the highlands and foothill regions, while Cherkess tend to be concentrated in the lowlands of the republic.

Historical context

Cherkess were part of the Circassian people until this group was divided in the 1920s and 1930s into Kabards, Adygei and Cherkess.

In January 1922 the Soviet authorities established the Karachay-Cherkess AO. In 1944, Karachay were deported to Central Asia, where they remained until 1958-9. Roughly half of the Karachay died in the first year of deportation. The AO was dissolved and most of the territory was transferred to Georgia. The region was reconstituted as the Karachay-Cherkess AO in the 1950s.

On 17 November 1990 the region's Soviet of People's Deputies proclaimed the area a republic. The main Karachay organization, the Islamic Rebirth Party, has called for the full rehabilitation of the Karachay and the restoration of their statehood within former borders. Leaders of the Cherkess have been active in movements to reunite the Circassian people. Disputes over land have led to tension with local Cossack groups.

From 1979 until 1999 the republic was governed by an unelected Karachay, Vladimir Khubiev. In May 1999 Vladimir Semyonov, ethnically half-Karachay and half-Russian, won the republic's first free presidential election, continuing the long-standing ethnic Karachay domination of the republic's leadership. Supporters of his ethnic Circassian rival, Stanislav Derev, mounted protests in response, alleging electoral fraud. The result was upheld by a court ruling. Since 2004 the presidency has been held by Mustafa Batdyev, another ethnic Karachay.
Current issues

Ethnic relations in Karachay-Cherkessia continue to be dominated by ethnic rivalries in the election and appointment of influential officials and the perceived rewards for their ethnic groups. Relations between the dominant Karachay population and the generally subordinate Cherkess population worsened in 2005, with the Cherkess claiming marginalization at the hands of the Karachay.

According to reports Karachay-Cherkessia has also been subject to the influence of more radical strands of Islam spreading across the North Caucasus. Some analysts believe that there has been a significant growth in ‘unofficial' mosques, as a result of which the state-endorsed Muslim Spiritual Directorate has lost all influence.

In June 2005 Karachay-Cherkessia's small Abaza minority mounted an occupation of the republican parliament building in protest at proposed boundary changes they believed would deprive them of land. Some 30,000 Abazas live in Karachay-Cherkessia. Abazas were concerned that deprivation of land and agricultural resources would promote migration to the republic's cities, where Abazas are at greater risk of assimilation.