

Ossetians

Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 514,875 Ossetians in the Russian Federation. The majority of Ossetians are Eastern Orthodox, although one group converted to Islam during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (estimated 15-30 per cent of Ossetians). Most Ossetians in the RF live in the North Ossetian Republic (pop. 632,428: Ossetians 53 per cent, Russians 30 per cent, others 17 per cent).

The language generally spoken by Ossetians has used, with only minor interruption, a Cyrillic script since the middle of the nineteenth century.

Historical context

The Ossetian region became part of Russia in 1774. In July 1924 the Ossetian AO was created and in December 1936 it became the North Ossetian ASSR. Ossetian Muslims, the Digor, were deported in 1944 along with other Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus. Some of the survivors were allowed to return in the 1950s. The mass deportation of Ingush was followed by the abolition of the Ingush region and North Ossetia took control of the frontier districts of Ingushetia (Prigorodny district) and parts of the city of Vladikavkaz. After 1944 this area was populated by Ossetians. Despite the rehabilitation of Ingush and the restoration of their autonomy, these territories remained under North Ossetian control.

Growing tension with Ingush over the status of the land they had lost in 1944 led the Supreme Soviet of North Ossetia to suspend the citizenship rights of Ingush in September 1990. The introduction in 1991 of the Union-level 'Law on the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples' intensified the tension between Ingush and Ossetians.

In 1992 fighting flared up over disputed territory and President Yeltsin introduced a state of emergency in North Ossetia and the Ingush Republic in November 1992, and sent in thousands of troops. In 1993, conflict over the Prigorodny district continued. Over 30,000 Ingush refugees fled the area. North Ossetia sent aid to its ethnic kin in South Ossetia to support their struggle with Georgia. There have also been calls for the unification of the two regions, although mainly from South Ossetia. North Ossetian leaders periodically make public statements in favour of the union of North Ossetia with South Ossetia, formally part of Georgia but *de facto* enjoying a kind of quasi-independence.

In 1998 Aleksandr Dzasokhov, a former Communist official, became president of North Ossetia; he was re-elected in 2002. Dzasokhov's presidency was associated with the entrenchment of clan politics and corruption, one of the factors contributing to the rise of a rebel movement with ties to the Chechen resistance. Rebels carried out bombing attacks on Russian border guards, passenger trains and military targets in 2002-4.

Current issues

The authority of the North Ossetian leadership was rocked by the Beslan massacre in September 2004, when a hostage-taking operation mounted by Chechen militants resulted in the deaths of over 300 people, most of them children. Residents of Beslan and regional opposition parties mounted continuous protests against Dzasokhov's leadership after the massacre. He announced his resignation on 31 May 2005. According to some analysts, Dzasokhov had also lost credibility with the Kremlin due to the prominence of corruption and clan politics in North Ossetia. Dzasokhov was replaced by Taimuraz Mamsurov.

Despite its reputation as the most loyal territory to Moscow in the North Caucasus, North Ossetia was also affected by wider instability in the region in 2005-6, suffering a number of attacks that some observers defined as an insurgency. According to reports leader of the Chechen resistance Abdul-Khalim Sadullaev designated North Ossetia a separate 'front' in the struggle against Moscow and appointed an Ossetian as commander of operations in the republic. North Ossetia was subsequently struck by a number of attacks, including an attack on an electricity substation in June 2005, an attempt to blow up gas pipelines supplying Georgia in September, an ambush of transport carrying officials from the Chechen Prosecutor's Office and an attack on Russian Interior Ministry troops in October. In February 2006 three home-made bombs went off in casinos and gambling clubs in the republican capital Vladikavkaz, killing two and wounding 25.

These developments, and the Beslan tragedy, have fuelled anti-Ingush sentiment in North Ossetia, further promoted by government propaganda portraying the Ingush as responsible for the attacks. Most analysts agree this is unlikely, and that there may be enough disaffected Muslim Ossetians to supply the rebel movement with manpower. This would appear to be confirmed by reports suggesting that one of the perpetrators of the Beslan tragedy was an ethnic Ossetian. In 2007, tensions flared again following the disappearance of two Ingush men in the Ossetian capital in July. Their abductions were followed by protests in the mainly-Ingush village of Chermen, where local people called for a proper investigation into the disappearance of the two men.