10. Migration and Contemporary Ethnopolitical Conflicts in the North Caucasus

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Since the 14th century, the North Caucasus region has been economically, politically, and ethnically homogeneous.¹ This has been a consequence of successive migration patterns that, in turn, have served as both cause and effect of local conflict. In short, migration has provided the foundation for intra-Caucasian, as well as Caucasian-Russian (Slavic) relations in the region.

The first wave of intensive migration in the region was prompted by the ethnic-based deportation policy promulgated by the Soviet leadership under Stalin. In 1944, the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus—such as the Balkars, Karachaevs, Ingushes, and Chechens—were evicted from their native lands and sent to Central Asia and Kazakhstan. The vacated territories were subsequently re-populated by extra-regional nationalities, such as the Cossacks and groups from Dagestan—themselves displaced from their own native lands.

In 1957, the groups exiled from the North Caucasus were permitted to return. Despite this official policy reversal, not all groups took advantage of the opportunity. In fact, it was not until 1991, when the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (the Russian Federation) passed the “Law on Assisting Rehabilitation of Oppressed Peoples and Nations,” that the Chechens, Balkars, and Karachaevs returned to their homelands in significant numbers from Central Asia. This sudden explosion of migration, however, exacerbated political instability throughout the region. For example, the mass migration of Ingushetians to the Prigorodny province of North Ossetia precipitated the first armed conflict in the newly independent Russian Federation.

Similarly, the return of previously exiled national groups severely complicated pre-existing ethno-political tensions in the Kabardino-Balkaria region. Despite the Russian president’s tacit endorsement of the Balkar people’s territorial claims on the eve of the 50th anniversary of their deportation, official action

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¹ The North Caucasus region includes Adygea, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, and Chechnya, and also Krasnodar, the Stavropol territories, and the Rostov region.
encountered prolonged delay. Representatives of the National Council of the Balkar People (NSBP), in particular, opposed the initiatives embraced by the president of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic (KBR), V. Kokov, and rejected the proposal for creating a confederation of Caucasian nations that would concede division of the KBR and preempt attempts to establish an autonomous Balkar republic. In fact, it was not until Moscow signed bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for assistance in the re-location of the Balkar people to the KBR that the legal and practical provisions for the return of 15,000 “refugees” were finally in place. These agreements, in practice, broke the political stalemate by apportioning land rights, social security, and financial stability among the returning migrants.

According to the leaders of the NSBP, the political rehabilitation of the previously deported victims constituted the crux of the relocation program. They hoped that such rehabilitation would pave the way for a national referendum conferring Balkar national status to a group of regions in the republic. It was hoped that such measures would be the precursor to the formation of an autonomous Balkar republic. The clear intent of these measures was to provide a constitutional basis for reasserting Kabardin control of the region. Popular Kabardin spokesmen insisted, in particular, that the Russian government fully rehabilitate the oppressed descendants of the Muchadzirs that were expelled as early as the Caucasian War. This was motivated primarily by Kabardin ambitions to secure majority representation in the newly reconstituted republican government.

These designs notwithstanding, republican leaders, as well as the heads of several prominent Kabardin (and Cherkess) social movements such as KNK (the Congress of the Kabardin People), Adyge Khasse (the Adygean National Congress), lost patience and acquiesced to the compromise proposal. In justification, these proponents of a quick settlement argued that demands for federal assistance and privileged residential status would inevitably carry deleterious consequences for intra-regional ethnic relations.

As demonstrated by this episode, the Russian government’s approach to providing formal restitution to previously oppressed peoples (via Article 13 of the “Law on Assisting Rehabilitation of Oppressed Peoples and Nations”) has been misguided. In general, it has fostered massive and uncontrolled ethnic migration that has carried negative externalities for regional security. First, such large-scale relocation has exacerbated conflict between local ethnic groups over the division of scarce resources and access to political privileges. Second, the migration has intensified the search for allies among political opposition groups. In this context, the division of national movements into pro-president, pro-
government, and opposition forces has significantly intensified local disputes and incited different political groups to play the nationality card on peripheral issues. Third, migration to the North Caucasus has altered the demographics within the region. Since 1990, Caucasians who had earlier resided in other regions of Russia (Azerbaijan, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Georgia), have returned to the different republics of North Caucasus and demanded permanent residency status (citizenship). Roughly 22,000 people, for instance, were registered in Dagestan over the past five years as a consequence of the “administrative discrimination” practiced by the Caucasian leaderships.

This influx of Caucasians has prompted Russian and non-titular minorities in the region to leave in greater numbers than in the past. While the decline of the local Russian population has been part of a broader trend that originated in the 1960s, the intensity of the current wave of emigration is noticeably more severe. In fact, the Russian presence in the region has plummeted from 20 percent in 1959 to 7.26 percent in 1995, including the departure of over 150,000 Russian nationals from Chechnya and Ingushetia.

Regional political reform measures have provided the impetus for the mass Russian exodus from the North Caucasus. Specifically, Russian minorities have reacted negatively to the constitutional codification of new language requirements for the conduct of official business and political activity, and access to education in the region that have compromised their previously privileged official status in these spheres. This anxiety has also been fueled by initiatives designed to promote greater titular majority representation in regional governing structures at the expense of traditionally dominant local Russian minorities. In general, these trends have bolstered national unity among local majority groups, empowering them with political rights to challenge the traditionally elevated status of the local Russian minorities.

In contrast to the Caucasian peoples, who have formed strong national movements that are premised on the protection of political and economic interests, the local Russian population lacks political cohesion. While the Cossacks have become more adept at exploiting ties between ethnic groups and republican administrative bodies in defense of Russian interests, they have provoked a reaction among indigenous national groups. The agitation of the Cossacks in Dagestan, Adygea, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, for example, fostered resentment among other national movements, which, in turn, accentuated inter-ethnic tension throughout the region.

Under these conditions, the prevailing migration patterns will have several distinct political consequences for the region. First, the exodus of the Russian-
speaking population will continue until measures are adopted at both the federal and regional levels to secure the political status of the remaining Russian minority groups in the region. Second, given the economic recession and significant departure of highly trained personnel from the region, the percentages of professionals that will emigrate will continue to soar. Finally, the population explosion among titular groups in the North Caucasus will spill over into neighboring regions, such as Krasnodar, Stavropol, and the Rostov province. The attendant spread of the Caucasian cultural affinity for collective ownership of property will, in turn, compel other groups to rally in defense and demand special ethnic privileges from the federal government.

These trends break from the traditional migration flows in the region. Traditionally, large-scale industrial development in the region stimulated a flow of Russian immigration because the natives, with less education and professional training, could not be employed in industries requiring technically advanced skills (for example, in the oil refining complex in Chechno-Ingushetia). Today, in contrast, acute population increases and shortages of arable land in the mountain regions have spurred indigenous migration to the plains and urban areas. For example, the populations of the Agul and Kurakh provinces of Dagestan decreased by 24.5 percent and 26.2 percent, respectively, in one decade (1979-1989). At the same time, the number of people arriving from the republics of the North Caucasus has increased sharply in the Krasnodar, Stavropol, and Rostov provinces. Studies of migration patterns among North Caucasians reveal that for every two officially registered migrants, there is at least one more unregistered relative or clan “sibling.” Moreover, this migration has precipitated a resurgence of inter-ethnic conflicts within each of these territories. In the Rostov province, for example, the sudden migration of groups from Central Asia and the North Caucasus has disrupted the delicate ethnic balance that existed on the banks of the Don River and preserved peace among various national groups for centuries. Conflicts have broken out as migration led to a labor surplus in the region and intensified rivalries among national groups for scarce land and capital resources.

Such competition has assumed an ethnic character because migrants from Central Asia, the Trans-Caucasus, and the North Caucasus dominate certain sectors of the local economy and are suspected of conducting illicit business activities that are disapproved by titular majority groups. The majority of these migrants, for instance, are employed in the service sector and act as transactions “facilitators.” Given that market mechanisms remain inchoate and that the demands for surrogate measures for reducing uncertainty in business transactions are acute, the opportunities for speculation presented to entrepreneurial “facilitators” in the region reinforce national stereotypes
regarding the criminal disposition of clan-oriented Caucasian groups. Thus, within the fluid and uncertain economic environment, such informal mechanisms for organizing business activity reinforce primordial prejudices that, in turn, fuel ethnic tensions.

In addition, this dynamic has provoked a visceral reaction on the part of non-Caucasian groups. The Cossacks, in response to the perceived criminal predisposition of the Caucasian migrants, have closed ranks and sought to preempt an expected ethnic backlash. In particular, the Cossacks have taken the initiative to organize rallies calling for the expulsion of Caucasian immigrants. Typically these efforts are carried out in violation of the law and tend to spiral out of control. Moreover, discrimination against citizens on the basis of national affiliation occurs not only in the form of calls for “national” defense and vigilantism, but has formed the basis for the propagation of negative ethnic stereotypes designed to coerce Caucasian emigration. The Cossacks, in particular, have asserted the principle of “collective responsibility” toward the non-Russian peoples, attributing the sins committed by individual members of the group to an ethnic “peculiarity” shared by all members of the “outside” group. In addition, the Cossacks tend to refer to these groups with derision.

In Rostov, the provincial legislative assembly enacted a “Law on Measures Directed to Strengthen Control of Migratory Processes in the Territory of the Rostov Province.” At present, there is widespread dissatisfaction with the law, as opponents attack it for being both too lenient and authoritarian. Against this backdrop of political manipulation by the Cossacks, the local media has drawn special attention to the ills of migration. In response, however, more sophisticated claims have materialized that draw attention to the economic costs

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2 A very representative example of this principle is the repeated announcement of the head of the local government of one village, Mr. I. Balakhnin, on the cause of the conflicts in his village: “For about the last 1.5 years, the behavior of the Kurdish nationality has become very defiant. . . .” But since “Kurdish nationality” as a whole cannot assume legal responsibility for crimes committed by one of its people, this characterization of the situation can be considered a negative ethnic stereotype and a violation of human rights based on the individual’s nationality.

3 One example can be taken from the local newspaper Vecherny Rostov, dated June 29, 1994, in which an article quotes the words of the ataman (chief) of Rostov Province, V. Zentsov, comparing non-Russian Peoples to “mushroom-parasites.”

4 Examples of this can be found in speeches by citizens held at public meetings, in arguments regarding the reasons for conflicts between the locals and the Kurds (the migrants from Middle Asia), and by I. Balachnin himself, the head of the local government of the village of Novopolitavsky, in the newspaper Priazovye. For instance, in a speech by the ataman (chief) of Rostov Province, V. Zentsov, there are statements about the Kurds asserting that they “don’t work, steal, insult, or rape women.” Herein also is contained the threat directed, judging by the context, to all people of this nationality: “I’ll show you the rapes!”
of overtly suppressing migration. This commentary typically stresses the constriction of the local tax base in reaction to measures aimed at disrupting profitable business activity performed by Caucasian immigrants. In fact, there have been rumblings among certain groups for a differentiated approach to regulating migration that provides assistance to those parties whose activities generate high revenues for the local economy. There is talk of charging immigrants not only a fee for registering as a local resident, but for use of regional communications, transport, and infrastructure services in economic sectors that compete favorably against Slavic businesses.

The other important problem tied to the issue of migration is the inefficiency of federal regulatory practices. Administrative bans on the relocation of citizens from Central Asia and the North Caucasus in the Rostov province would likely intensify corruption within administrative and regulatory bodies. According to the estimates of experts, it would also lead to the proliferation of “illegals” residing in the major urban areas of the province. The inevitable swelling of this number to 30,000-50,000 “illegals” would impose a crippling burden on local law enforcement offices. This would also reinforce stereotypes that depict Caucasians as criminals, thus exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions. Moreover, the promulgation of legislative acts in North Ossetia (“About Migratory Politics in RSO-A’’), Kabardino-Balkaria (“About Migratory Processes in KBR”), Krasnodar (Charter of the Krasnodar Territory), and the Rostov province (“Law on Measures Directed to Strengthen Control of Migratory Processes in the Territory of the Rostov Province”) have proved to be inconsequential for reconciling ethnic rivalries. In sum, these local ordinances have tended to contradict the rulings of the federal government by circumscribing the constitutional rights and freedoms of all Russian citizens, and to undermine the coherence of the national legal system and the precarious stability of nascent Russian federalism.