Map 45

1989–2010: An Ethnic Map of the Caucasus

The 1989 Soviet census provides an ethnoterritorial snapshot of the Caucasus as the Soviet era was coming to a close. It shows two opposite trends that first began to develop in the stable sixties and seventies. The first is the shrinking share of the "nontitular" population (those not belonging to an ethnic group for which a given autonomy was named) within the boundaries of most of the ethnic entities, and an associated increase in ethnic homogeneity in these territories. This trend does not stem simply from differences in birth rates between titular groups on the one hand and Russians on the other (Russians make up the largest share of the nontitular population of autonomies). It also stems from clearly evident migration trends.

The development of an informal system of ethnic preferences within "national" territories spurred migration among nontitular groups, especially the young and well-educated. The social structure of these groups began to replicate itself in truncated form, and upward social mobility became harder to achieve without migrating beyond the boundaries of the "titular" ("alien" for these groups) territories.

The second trend concerned nontitular territories, mostly Russian Krasnodar and Stavropol, which were becoming increasingly complex in their ethnic makeup, primarily due to influxes of ethnic minorities as economic migrants. Some regions of ethnic entities—for example, the lowlands of Daghestan—were also part of this trend.

The rapidly diminishing motivational force of Soviet ideology, with its unifying myths and appeal to supra-ethnic values, brought ethnic issues to the forefront of popular political discourse in the Caucasus in the 1980s. The "national idea" (or ethnic revivalism) became a dominant principle there in constructing a picture of the future and defining social threats, along with the collectives seen as standing behind these threats. Between 1987 and 1989 the first public campaigns and national congresses appeared, at which these threats were often attributed not only to "the regime" but to some collective ethnic other. Ethnicity became the organizing principle around which new influential social and political associations were created. Ethnicity also appeared to be the basis for claiming the exclusive right to control the levers of power in the approaching redistribution of state property. A complex of historical myths, "traumas," and mutual grievances was revived. Within the context of the intensifying crisis of the Soviet state and its economy, ethnopolitical debate aroused ethnophobia and the growth of violence toward ethnic others—violence that initially was symbolic and random but later, in several hotbeds of social and political tension, was organized on a large scale to serve specific objectives.

The channeling of social conflict through interethnic rivalry in the late eighties and early nineties led to a catastrophic acceleration of a number of migration trends that had emerged during the Soviet period and the dwindling of others, and to a fundamental restructuring of the ethnic composition of many Caucasian territories. The collapse of the unified Soviet state and the escalation of a chain of violent conflicts (in Mountain Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, North Ossetia and Ingushetia, and Chechnya) became factors prompting large-scale forced migration.

LOCAL DETAIL

After ethnic violence against Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in 1989 and their subsequent departure from Uzbekistan, a major Meskhetian diaspora emerged in the North Caucasus. A portion of the group wanted to repatriate to Georgia, from which they had been deported in 1944. As prospects for this repatriation faded, many Meskhis became permanent residents of the Russian North Caucasus, and a number of problems developed in conjunction with their social adaptation in the region, leading to constant eruptions of tension between the local populations of the Kuban and the Meskhetian community. In 2004 a program was launched to settle 20,000 Meskhi Turks from Krasnodar Territory in the United States.

When the Chechen population returned from exile in the late fifties and early sixties, instead of coming back to the villages they had left in the highland zone of Chechnya-Ingushetia, a significant portion of them settled in the Russian Cossack Naur (Naursky), Kargalinsky, and Shelkovskoy Districts (raions), while the Ingush moved into the stanitsas of the Sunzha District (Sunzhensky Raion). Most of the stanitsas and villages of these districts were left with a mixed Russian-Vainakh population (i.e., Russian-Chechen and Russian-Ingush). In the seventies and eighties Russians started to leave Chechnya-Ingushetia. The pogrom against Russians (Cossacks) in the stanitsa of Troitskaya (in Ingushetia) in 1991 prompted the departure of Russians from mixed Russian-Ingush villages and stanitsas, and when law and order broke down after Jokhar Dudaev's ascent to power in Chechnya, Russians fled en masse from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The exodus continued through Russia's 1994–1997 military campaign against the separatists, by the end of which virtually all the Slavic population had departed. Ingushetia's attempt from 2002 to 2008 to conduct a special program for the return of Russian-speaking residents to the republic was not successful.

During the sixties, seventies, and eighties a dramatic change took place in the ethnic profile of the lowland (Kumyk, Russian/Cossack, and Nogai) districts of Daghestan and neighboring districts of Stavropol to which Avars, Dargins, and other highland groups were migrating. The emerging ethnic mosaic of the Kumyk lowlands, Nogai steppe, and cities of Daghestan became a new unifying space for the republic's peoples, both serving as a factor in the development of a supra-ethnic Daghestani community and presenting new risks for intergroup rivalries within it. In the eighties there was an upsurge in Russian migration out of the republic, including from the Kizlyar and Tarumovka Districts (Kizlyarsky and Tarumovsky Raions).