

Renewed conflict around Ethnicity and Education among the Circassians

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Introduction

2019 was the International Year of Indigenous Languages (IYIL 2019). The decision was taken by the UN General Assembly in 2016, based on reports concluding that “40 per cent of the estimated 6,700 languages spoken around the world were in danger of disappearing. The fact that most of these are indigenous languages puts the cultures and knowledge systems to which they belong at risk.” The Circassian language is also facing these threats as an endangered language that has become subject to renewed pressure from decisions and policies made by the Russian authorities.

The opportunities for learning the indigenous Circassian language in the schools and high schools of the North Caucasus have been significantly reduced during the last ten years. This, in spite of the fact that the Circassian language is recognised as regional state-languages in three of the republics of the North Caucasus.¹ In 2018, the Federal Russian authorities changed the status of teaching in the local indigenous languages to ‘optional’, following a suggestion from President Putin. This resulted in a reduction in the hours of teaching offered to the pupils and many teachers with specialisation in the local indigenous language now had to accept a significantly lower salary or had to find other jobs elsewhere. This led to protest from many different sides, including Circassian activists and organisations, professors, teachers etc. Also representatives from the Circassia diaspora responded and the internet was used to gather transnational support for their protests. Within the neighbouring Krasnodar Krai, the Circassian minorities that mainly live along the Black Sea coast had already a decade earlier experienced similar reductions in the hours of teaching in the Circassian language.

Two other events featuring a significant role of the Circassian language unfolded in 2017 and 2019, respectively. In both cases key Circassian activists were arrested or fined

¹ Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and Adygea.

by the police following events related to the annual Circassian Commemoration Day on May 21st, where both used the Circassian language instead of Russian for key parts of the public commemoration. These events apparently provoked the authorities into renewed clampdown on Circassian activism.

In this paper, different recent examples or cases will be presented as part of a discussion of the different challenges facing the Circassian language that, according to UNESCO, is being classified as *vulnerable*, though in reality the situation is worse. The situation of the Circassian language in the North Caucasus will also be assessed in relation to the wider and ongoing Circassian revival over the last ten to fifteen years. Teaching in local indigenous languages is, together with topics such as local history and knowledge production in Russia and much of the former Soviet Union, known as '*kraevedenie*'. This is a relatively broad field covering the teaching of local history, culture and languages in schools; the publication of books and newspapers – lately also on the internet; also tourism is a sphere of various forms of local history and knowledge production. The field of *kraevedenie* has now again become a field of repression, resistance and competition, as was also the case in the much of the Soviet period, even to a larger degree than during the years of the late 1980's perestroika, when new television programmes in the Circassian language no longer just presented exotic folk dancing but had also begun to present different aspects of Circassian history that had been silenced during the preceding Soviet era.

Background, History and Demography: 'Mountain of Languages'

The Caucasus region has for centuries and millennia been characterised by a unique linguistic and ethnic diversity – and ancient Greeks and Romans came in close contact with the Caucasus through trade and various expeditions. For instance the Roman historian Pliny stated that in order for the Romans to travel to the Caucasus, 134 interpreters were needed. The Arab geographer and historian al-Azizi already in the 10th century famously referred to the Caucasus as the “mountain of languages” (Pereltsvaig, 2014, 2017). In the group of indigenous Caucasian languages, the Circassian language belongs to the North-Western category together with Abkhazian-Abaza and the now

extinct Ubykh.² The Circassians own term for their language is ‘Adygabze’. Partly due to Soviet institutionalisation, Circassian is today regarded as comprising two different languages in Russia, namely Kabardian or Eastern-Circassian and Adyge or Western-Circassian. However, a number of Circassian linguists, professors, activists etc. regard these as dialects and are working for recognition of Circassian as one language (Open Caucasus Media, 2018a). The distinct character and the long history of the Circassian language(s) has resulted in many academic studies undertaken in Russia as well as in the West from the mid-19th century (Jaimoukha, 2001: 247).

The current status as the officially recognised language of three republics is rooted in the Soviet model of establishing ethnically defined republics among the minorities of the North Caucasus (and elsewhere). Circassians are found mainly in four units of the area: as Kabardians in the Republic of Karbardino-Balkaria, as Cherkess in the republic of Karachai-Cherkessia and as Adygs in the Republic of Adygea and finally as a minor Shapsug minority by the Black Sea coast in Krasnodar Krai (Jaimoukha, 2001: 249). On the one hand this generally strengthened the Circassian language; it became an official language in republics, written standards were established, schoolbooks published and used in schools, etc. However, in the two double-titular republics as well as in the Republic of Adygea or areas with a minority of ethnic Russians or so-called Russian-speaking groups (Ukrainians, Armenians etc.) in reality Russian became the main language of politics and large parts of administration and public affairs.

The Circassian language became part of the shifting Soviet nationality policies at first designed to appease the peoples of the North Caucasus as part of the emerging Soviet Union following the Russian revolution. Subsequently, periods of policies shifting between indigenisation and Russification have in different ways altered the conditions of the local languages in the North-Western Caucasus (Zhemukhov and Aktürk, 2015: 38). This became known as processes or periods of indigenisation, through which some languages were created while others were marginalised or ignored. Russian was still largely a marginal language in the region, not least in the rural areas, in the beginning of the nineteenth century. These language and nationality policies have been described by Rogers Brubaker and others as ethnic engineering, where the shifts between policies of

² North-Eastern (Chechen, Dagestani) and Kartvelian (Georgian) constitute the two other categories.

indigenisation and Russification can be characterised as overall policies of divide-and-rule (Brubaker, 1996). It is the results of these shifting trends that still live on in North Caucasus today, where a number of Circassian language teachers, activist and organisations are working for the creation of one joint Circassian language and alphabet for both the eastern and western variants (Lash, 2018). The slogan ‘one people, one republic, one language’ has been used as a suggestion and as part of a public campaign, from some of the Circassian organisations and individuals, inspired for instance by watching the experiences from the neighbouring Chechens, Ossetians etc. In relation to the 2020 population census in the Russian Federation, Circassian activists encourage fellow Circassians to answer ‘Circassian’ (‘Adyg’) – and not use the divisions made by the Soviet powers that are still in use as categories of ethnicity today.³

Among the several million strong Circassian diaspora, the language has largely survived during more than seven generations in exile. This is especially due to the location in mostly monolingual rural areas in Turkey or countries of the Middle East, where Circassians ended up after the forced expulsion from the Caucasus in 1864. Now, however, rapid urbanisation and globalisation in general has resulted in a substantial decline in the number of speakers of the Circassian language. Almost in the course of one generation. Alas, almost the same trend as in the Caucasus, but only partly for the same reasons.

The dominant role of the Russian language is enhanced by the strongly increased role of the media – especially television and the internet. Only ten years ago, children spoke almost exclusively their local language in the villages, but especially due to television this has now changed.

Associations in the diaspora have for decades offered extra-curricular language learning courses for children as well as for adults, often combining text-books published in the North Caucasus with teachers speaking the other languages. The use of the Cyrillic alphabet has often proven to be an obstacle in contexts generally used to the Latin alphabet, which has regularly led to suggestions of using different or revised alphabets.

³ In a formal answer (25 May 2010) to a request from the International Circassian Association, the Russian Academy of Science acknowledged that the Circassians are ‘one people’ (Hansen, 2012; Kabard, 2019).

A number of different online learning tools for various target groups have been developed and made available on various platforms. These are generally useful and relevant but it is still too early to assess whether this will have a significant outcome for the preservation and use of the Circassian language beyond a few percent. Still, the Circassian language is increasingly used on social media, though mostly as a supplement to other languages. When Circassians in the diaspora meet at various events, those who speak Circassian are generally shown great respect.

Circassians in Krasnodar Krai: forced reduction of teaching in Circassian language

Between ten and twenty thousand Circassians live along the Black Sea coast, where especially the villages located closest to Sochi have experienced a significant boom in the number of visiting tourists, predominantly Russians or Russian-speaking persons, and almost all events are performed using the Russian language. Local Circassians have successfully established a number of so-called ethno-touristic initiatives in the village of Bolshoi Kichmai, just fifty kilometres north of Sochi. Shortly after opening a newly built school in the village in the late 2000s, the school was forced by the authorities of Krasnodar Krai to reduce the number of hours of teaching in Circassian language, history and culture. The headmaster of the school, who had just played a key role in the project of building a new school, resigned from his job in protest (Kavkazskij uzel, 2014).⁴ He subsequently went into the business of fish-farming and also began working as a toastmaster (*tamada*) in one of the increasing number of popular evening shows for tourists. The *tamada* guides the show and tells the story of the Circassians, their culture and history, between spectacular dance performances, which is the key attraction of these shows.

However successful this initiative has been in presenting Circassian narratives told by Circassian voices to a large audience – though in the Russian language – the village has at the same time become a field of contested interests as the new policies of the regional and federal authorities have reduced the number of hours of teaching in local

⁴ Interview with former headmaster of the school in Bolshoi Kichmai, Aslan Gvashev, on reduction of hours of teaching in Circassian language, history etc. within the field of Kubanovedenie (local history and culture in Krasnodar Krai).

Circassian language, history and traditions – a field known as *kraevedenie* or in Krasnodar Krai known as *Kubanovedenie* – while simultaneously requiring increased teaching in patriotic Russian history, including Cossack history, as a positive factor.⁵ These allegedly positive versions of Russian history very often counter the results of academic research as well as the content of many Circassian campaigns – local as well as transnational - for recognition of the nineteenth century forced expulsion from historical homelands in the Caucasus as an act of genocide (for instance, Richmond, 2013). In other words, *Kubanovedenie* is actively used to marginalise *Kavkazovedenie* (Studies of the Caucasus), which is a term and a subject that appeared with the Russian colonisation of the Caucasus, as it became apparent that this was a region with a very specific and long history and ethnography.⁶

In the village this situation has led to much frustration and to many this signals a return to an earlier period of repression against minorities. In this location, local *kraevedenie* is put under pressure from higher levels of authority that increasingly insists on promoting patriotism, also through the use of *Kubanovedenie*. To many local Circassians, the success of the ethno-tourism that contributed to the revitalisation of the overall economy of the village and its citizens came at a high price considering the simultaneous loss of Circassian language and history teaching in the school.

Until recently, the main attraction of Bolshoi Kichmai used to be the ‘33 waterfalls’ located a few kilometres up-river from the village. In many Russian tourist information materials this place is mentioned as a spectacular natural phenomenon, but the century old Circassian legend of the creation of the place is often ignored or presented as simply a ‘local legend’. Still, orally, many tour-guides visiting from Sochi also manage to include the Circassian version as well. Due to the dance shows and the other so-called ethno-touristic offers in the village, the legend has achieved a more prominent role in the narratives told locally.

⁵ In the Circassian ethno-touristic presentations of the historical role of Cossacks and the Russian army in the 19th century, they attempt to present a more neutral or balanced version. For instance, generally avoiding to use the term ‘Circassian genocide’ that could be perceived as provocative by parts of the mainly Russian audience as well as the authorities of the region.

⁶ On local Circassian protests, see also AdygPlus (2017).

Another case from Circassians by the Black Sea coast

The annual day of commemoration among the Circassians – May 21st – has successfully become a well-established event among all Circassian communities worldwide. In the town of Golovinka, located not far from the above-mentioned Bolshoi Kichmai, during this event in 2017, a prayer was held in the Circassian language at an ancient tree with symbolic importance among the Circassians. In spite of the fact that this has been a regular annual event, in 2017 the person/Ruslan Gvashev, who led the prayer, was arrested and subsequently he was fined for not seeking permission from the authorities. He then went on hunger strike and became famous all over the Circassian world, where his portrait was made into posters, avatars etc. in the manner of well-known graphic portraits of Barack Obama or Che Guevara – and then circulated again and again on the internet. The prayer was a mix between a Muslim prayer and traditional ancient religious ceremonies that generally have disappeared.

This became a case of both renewed pressure on indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus and a case of resistance and joint actions to protest against the authorities. He was persuaded to stop his hunger-strike before it became fatal, but is still in bad health. He became a celebrated hero among Circassians worldwide, but all of this symbolic support could end up as counter-productive, as the authorities in Russia still have many options left to handle or contain this form of protest.

The tree is the most famous tourist attraction of Golovinka where it is known as the old tulip tree. There are competing narratives surrounding this tree and the Circassian versions have for large parts of the last hundred years been ignored, but they have survived in family and village history on a basically oral level – transferred from generation to generation via the Circassian language. Here the official story of the tulip tree begins with the Russian commander leading his troops in the wars against the Circassians in the mid-nineteenth century, which is the story presented in much tourist information material and at a large sign-post by the tree. However, among the local Circassians this tree has been known and has constituted a significant location for various events over several centuries. Circassians working in the tourism business by the tree tell a Circassian version and have in cooperation with Circassian organisations produced a folder providing the information often left out of the official versions.

The new amendments to the law on teaching in indigenous languages – and the Circassian protests

In 2018, a number of Circassian organisations, activists, teachers and others protested against the amendments to the Federal Russian law on Education, adopted by the State Duma in July 2018. According to these changes it became optional to learn a local indigenous language, in spite of its being classified as a republican state-language. These new amendments were the result of a decree issued by President Putin in 2017, according to which school children in the republics of the Russian Federation “must not be forced to learn languages that are not their mother tongues, ending mandatory indigenous language classes in the regions” (Language Magazine, 2018). This marked a significant shift for many of the so-called titular-nations of the republics of the North Caucasus, where many local languages constitute state-languages according to the constitutions of these republics, together with Russian as the federal language. One example is the case of Kabardian and Balkarian in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria.

Protests quickly spread among many other peoples of the federal republics, where many constitute titular-nationalities, driven especially by civil society actors though significant local politicians also took part (Novaya Gazeta, 2019). Dissatisfaction with the law resulted in the creation of the Democratic Congress of the Peoples of Russia in May 2018, which following the results of the first meeting, adopted a resolution stating that the new rules threaten the “basic foundations of respectful international cooperation” (The Conversation, 2018). “More than 200 scientists, educators, and public figures met at the North Caucasus Academy of Management on 26 June and voted unanimously in favour of a resolution demanding the resignation of Kabardino-Balkaria’s representatives in the Duma” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018c). More than 100 North Caucasian diaspora organisations in Turkey signed an appeal in August 2018 that also included support from Crimean Tatars and other diaspora groups. This appeal encouraged the issue to be raised with the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation and furthermore it was suggested that the issue be passed on to the Council of Europe and the UN. According to the appeal, the amendments could be seen as “an attack on national identity and assimilation” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018d).

In Kabardino-Balkaria, the Human Rights Centre published a protest to the authorities, supported by intellectuals and civic activists: “The bill proposed by the State

Duma flagrantly violates the constitutional rights of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, as well as those of other national republics: all of them are legal state entities that have a right of self-determination within the legal framework of the Russian Federation, including the right to choose a model for preservation and development of their native languages. On that basis we categorically object to the adoption of the bill, and we demand that it be removed from the [legislative] agenda immediately because, apart from its destructive power that aims to completely obliterate national languages, it can also seriously destabilise the socio-political climate of the multinational state” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018b).

The number of native-speakers is decreasing more than in any of the non-Russian republics: “...the head of Kabardino-Balkarian Human Rights Centre Valery Khatazhukov confirmed this trend: ‘I can claim without any exaggeration that ethnic cultures in Russia are facing a deadly threat. And this is connected first and foremost to federal-level initiatives aimed at diminishing the public and political roles native languages play in these regions’.” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018b).⁷ According to Zaurbiy Chundyshko, who is chairman of the Maikop-based organisation Adyge Khase, “...the voluntary study of native languages will lead to the disappearance of the national culture of nations” (Circassian Times, 2018).⁸

Various Circassian civil society organisations protested against these amendments, as have also Balkarian organisations. Several have, for instance, referred to these new policies and practices as a return to the divide-and-conquer policies of the earlier period – some even argue that these have never really been abandoned in the North Caucasus (Novaya Gazeta, 2019; Windows on Eurasia, 2019b). Still, the protests are mainly ignored.

A specific case on the new amendments from Kabardino-Balkaria also involved the Human Rights Centre in 2018 and 2019. The director of a high school in Nalchik had reduced the number of working hours and salaries of teachers in the Circassian language prior to the school start in September 2018. According to another report from the Human Rights Centre in December 2018, the school had also put pressure on pupils not to enlist

⁷ The Human Rights Centre is a non-governmental organisation.

⁸ Also Walter Richmond (2019) notes: “Loss of language inevitably leads to the loss of the nation”.

for the optional Circassian language classes. This was done unofficially and was potentially illegal, and came as a surprise to many. The director subsequently filed charges against the teacher and the Human Rights Centre (Open Caucasus Media, 2019).

Another example is the case of Martin Kochesoko, leader and co-founder (2018) of the organisation Habze, who in June 2019 was arrested on charges of possession of drugs.⁹ Subsequently the offices of Habze were searched by the police and all computers seized (Open Caucasus Media, 2019a). However, as the ensuing protests illustrated, many people could attest to the fact that he was neither a substance abuser nor a drug dealer. The protests quickly spread from the Russian-language sphere of Kabardino-Balkaria and was internationalised via the use of the internet.

In May 2018, Kochesoko wrote an appeal to President Putin and the leadership of the Russian Federation, which was published on the website of the Human Rights Centre in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (Zpravakbr.com, 2018). “In this appeal, I criticized the adoption of the resonant law on the voluntary study of native languages and opposed the restriction of the national languages of the Russian Federation” (Habze 2019).¹⁰

In May 2019, Kochesoko played an active role in two conferences, in Moscow and Nalchik, respectively, where the issue of indigenous language rights were discussed within an overall discussion on the development of federalism within Russia. Several academics and other public figures took part and many supported the criticism raised by Kochesoko in subsequent media reports. One of the conclusions Kochesoko pointed out was that “the Constitution does not work, federalism is abolished, and power is moving away from the people, and thereby aggravates the systemic crisis” (Habze 2019).

Valery Khatazhukov, head of the Human Rights Centre in the republic, stated that he was sure that the detention is connected to the “social and political activities” of Kochesoko (Novaya Gazeta, 2019). Also Aslan Beshto from the public organisation Congress of the Kabardian People stated that: “The very fact of a search and seizure of computers and electronic media in the office of the public organization Habze says that

⁹ Planting of drugs on suspects is a well-known method of the police in the North Caucasus as well as in Russia in general, as documented by a number of human rights organisations.

¹⁰ Statement from Martin Kochesoko (1 July 2019). Here Kochesoko also stated that “...as a Russian citizen, I exercised my constitutional right to send letters and appeals to government bodies, provided for by Articles 29, 33 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation”. (My translation, 9 Dec. 2019).

the real reason for the persecution of Kochesoko is his public activity” (Open Caucasus Media, 2019a).

Two other cases had contributed to make Kochesoko a well-known figure in the public sphere, also beyond the borders of Kabardino-Balkaria. Kochesoko has as a representative of Habze advocated on behalf of Circassian refugees from Syria presently in the republic.¹¹ They are regularly faced with different forms of discrimination. For instance, Habze has published appeals to the authorities, when lack of skills in the Russian language are used against the refugees/repatriates in spite of the fact that they are actually returning to their historical homeland, which their ancestors were forced to leave in the 19th century. But only the Russian language is officially accepted as mother tongue. Kochesoko also spoke publicly in the Circassian language during the annual May 21 commemoration event in Nalchik (Circassian World).

Kochesoko was finally released at the end of August 2019 after having spent most of the summer in house arrest. This came suddenly and unexpectedly, following several repeated charges and preliminary convictions against him.

Discussion

A renewed level of activism among the Circassian civil society organisations and initiatives, as well as renewed (counter-)pressure from the authorities, can be observed during the last three or four years (Novaya Gazeta, 2019). Information activism and substantial use of social media have become a significant part of, or even extension of, Circassian civil society action, which could quickly spread and increase in volume via the many potential linking and sharing options of social media (Hansen, 2015). Discussions on the future of the Circassian language have increasingly been one of the key issues raised at these events and discussions.

According to key experts on the Circassian language, the Kabardian researcher and Doctor of Philology, Madina Khakuasheva, loss of the language is a serious threat to Circassian identity: “[...]the only objective sign of national identity is native language: all other markers are derivative” (Window on Eurasia, 2019a).¹² And since the

¹¹ Approximately 1500 Circassian refugees from Syria are presently in Kabardino-Balkaria.

¹² For an elaborated presentation in Russian, see Zapravakbr.com (2019b).

Circassians, according to many activists, find themselves in a situation of ‘identity crisis’, this hints at the challenges associated with the potential loss of language. Khakuasheva has referred to this as an ‘existential crisis’, where those who no longer speak the language experience both social and psychological problems, for instance, in their interactions with those who speak the language (Window of Eurasia, 2019a).

In her analysis of the recent deterioration in the situation of the native languages in Russia, she points at two articles written by the ethnographer Valery Tishkov, former minister and advisor to several Russian governments on questions of nationality in Russia.¹³ He has on several occasions promoted the idea of “Moscow’s push for the assimilation of non-Russians under the guise that Russian can be the native language of these nations”.¹⁴ According to the understanding of Tishkov, “Russian culture and language” is the basis of the multi-ethnic Russian nation – i.e. Russia as a nation-state, also in an ethnic understanding (Zpravakbr.com, 2019b). The understanding of Tishkov, as apparently adopted by the Russian Federation, according to Khakuasheva, is a type of chauvinism which results in counter-reactions from ethno-national groups in the periphery and can lead to reactions that can be labelled ‘ethno-centrism’. An ethno-centrism that “bears a defensive, compensatory character” and a “form of resistance”. According to Khakuasheva this ‘compensatory ethnocentrism’ that is found all over the Russian Federation “[...] represents an attempt to regain lost national foundations, including a disappearing language, maintaining ethnic integrity, and overcoming the dramatic situation of the Circassians in the historical motherland and diaspora” (Window on Eurasia, 2019a).

Khakuasheva presents three suggestions on how to strengthen the Circassian language: A) Stronger lobbying-efforts for the rights and interests of native peoples at state and regional levels – for instance, in relation to the framework of the constitution; B) to promote the understanding of the ‘real advantages’ that can be obtained by bilingualism, and C) the ‘return to democracy’ is needed – but will probably have a ‘national coloration’, considering the current trend of compensatory ethnocentrism (Window on Eurasia, 2019a).

¹³ According to Khakuasheva, the key articles by Tishkov are from 2008 and 2017, but also others can be found.

¹⁴ Tishkov’s has presented three arguments on how to define nationality in contemporary Russia (Zpravakbr.com, 2019b).

March 14th is the annual ‘Day of Circassian language’ and is celebrated locally by various events both in the North Caucasus and among the diaspora.¹⁵ As stated by a Caucasian media on this day in 2018: “Circassian, a native language of the North Caucasus, faces many serious challenges, including a lack of official support, a divided literary standard, a decreasing interest in learning it in educational institutions, and a diminishing presence at home” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018a). Comparing the Day of the Circassian Language, that is mainly initiated by civil society actors, though sometimes supported by, for instance, local academic experts on linguistics, with the similar annual Day of the Russian Language on June 6th (birthday of the popular Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin), the main difference is the huge public budget available for the latter. This includes events around the globe organised by Russian embassies and/or cultural centres.

Circassian scholars have on several occasions over the last twenty years called for the creation of a single alphabet, including this example from 2018: “A number of school teachers at the conference expressed concern about recent amendments to Russia’s law ‘On Education’, adopted by the State Duma on 25 July [2018]” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018d). According to the Circassian activist Asker Sokht, “[...] devising a common alphabet is a relatively straightforward task; a well-known professor of linguistics, Mukhadin Kumakhov, has already provided a foundation for such work” (Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2016). This is also supported by a number of key political leaders in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Concluding remarks

Teachers of indigenous local history and knowledge have been put under pressure by active attempts from the authorities to reduce the number of hours of teaching as well as potentially reducing the number of students enrolling for these classes – as the examples from Kabardino-Balkaria have illustrated. While in the neighbouring regions that predominantly are inhabited by ethnic Russians, we can observe the opposite trend vis-à-vis Russian language and history teaching. It is obvious that the authorities are using the field of *kraievedenie* to reduce the role of native Caucasian languages, which could be labelled as a subtle form of discrimination.

¹⁵ “It was on this day in 1853 that the first Circassian language textbook, by famous Adygea educator Umar Bersey, was published in Tbilisi.” (Open Caucasus Media, 2018a).

In the western part of the North Caucasus, *Kubanovedenie*, including the revival and manipulation of Cossack history, is used to marginalise Circassian history, language and culture. Ironically so, in a period also characterised by increased information and research into Circassian issues, which actually supports knowledge that is deliberately downplayed within the field of *Kubanovedenie*. In other words, a field of competition but also domination with unequal positions.

However, it is important to stress that the link between language and activism has been strengthened in recent years, in spite of the attempted repression, or even because of this. The use of social media and the internet plays an important role in these processes, where audio and video options have not only increased the opportunities for linking and increasing information-activism, but also the possibilities for listening, speaking and writing in the Circassian language. This has increased the cooperation and the level of information sharing between the Circassian diaspora and the homeland. Still, it should be remembered that the increasingly restrictive Russian laws and legal practises on the requirement that non-governmental organisations register as foreign agents, are actively hindering increased cooperation.

In spite of the repression and the uphill struggle in the North Caucasus, the local as well as transnational revival of Circassian culture and history, as it has been ongoing for the last two or three decades, can be expected to continue. These are not only trends supported by various international institutions and treaties but also a general trend that can be observed in many other parts of the world. Discussions on the understanding of indigeneness and cultural heritage in the North Caucasus is a trend that has only just begun. An increased level of education can be expected by the new generations of Circassians growing up and they can be expected to continue these discussions.

All in all, many Circassians complain that the general development outlined in this paper sometimes represents one step forward that is mostly followed by two steps backwards for the survival of the Circassian languages as well as potentially for the wider future of Circassian culture and history.

Obviously, the languages of the North Caucasus are also threatened by forces of globalisation and urbanisation – and by the generally increasing dominance of the Russian language in schools, in the media and on the internet.

When assessing the recent development described in this paper, it brings to mind earlier periods of competition between the processes and policies of indigenisation versus Russification. This is and has been a recurring theme in the North Caucasus throughout the last two hundred years, since Russian dominance in the region began to take hold. However, the voices of the native peoples have often been forced into the background, as the shifting trends of the political centres in St. Petersburg and Moscow have almost always guided which of the two trends achieved dominance.

The development outlined in this paper is also an example of a reduction of the general human rights of minorities and indigenous peoples in the North Caucasus – and elsewhere in Russia. These policies and actions of the Russian authorities in many ways counter the various standards and recommendations of international institutions such as the Council of Europe and OSCE, that Russia is also a part of. This raises the question of whether Russia is consciously undermining these standards and perhaps even (indirectly) attempting to redefine the European understanding of multi-cultural diversity?

The message from the Russian authorities to Circassian activists and Circassians in general appears to be quite clear: As long as you celebrate and promote Circassian culture in song and dance, this is highly appreciated and even presented on federal television in Russia as Saturday evening entertainment. However, if you wish to be an activist with ambitions to address and even attempt to promote some form of political change, you will be met with stark resistance. By formal as well as informal means.

Traditionally or historically, the connection between language and identity is portrayed as crucial – not least in a region such as the Caucasus, known for centuries as ‘the mountain of languages’ to the outside world. Still, it is important to point out – which is often forgotten – that a people can actually have a future without an indigenous language. Though depending on the conditions, including the role played by globalisation and urbanisation, it could be more difficult to maintain that collective identity.

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