

As Tbilisi Beckons, Circassians Find Ear in Moscow

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May 16, 2011

The  **Moscow Times**

In what resembled a new tit-for-tat with Georgia, Russian lawmakers on Monday [met](#) with a group of Circassian activists and promised them support.

The meeting, which is apparently the first of its kind at such a high level, comes as the Georgian parliament debates recognizing the 19th-century massacre and deportation of Circassians by tsarist Russia as genocide.

But Andrei Klimov, who organized the event for the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, said Monday's meeting had been scheduled two months earlier and could not possibly be linked to happenings in Georgia.

"The initiators were Circassians living in Russia, and we found time for them only today because of our tight schedules," Klimov, a prominent lawmaker with United Russia, said by telephone after the meeting.

The meeting with Duma deputies and Federation Council senators yielded few concrete results, but Klimov said it should be seen as a start.

"They formulated questions, some of which are easy to solve, others not. The most important thing is that we talked directly without intermediaries," he said.

Other participants could not be reached immediately for comment, but Mukhamed Khafitse, vice president of the International Circassian Association, said his organization's president, Kanshobi Azhakhov, was among the eight Circassian representatives, which also included Circassians from Germany, Israel and the United States.

"We expect concrete decisions from the Duma, and we think that the recognition of genocide in 1863 and 1864 would be a positive move," Khafitse said by telephone from Nalchik.

But Klimov said such an outcome was unlikely. "I do not see a strong need to make a parliamentary statement for something that happened way back in history," he said, adding that it was better to help people's direct needs.

The issue of the Circassians, for long an obscure topic but for a handful of specialists, achieved global media attention last year when a U.S.-based lobbying group speaking on behalf of a group of Circassians demanded that the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics be canceled or moved unless Moscow apologized for the 19th-century tragedy.

The Black Sea resort where the Winter Games will be held lies in the center of the original Circassian homeland, an area that stretches from the Sea of Azov to present-day Abkhazia. A tsarist military campaign wiped out hundreds of thousands of people and forced many others to flee in 1864.

Diaspora groups say that up to 7 million descendants are spread across the world, from the United States to Jordan and Israel. Just about 700,000 remain in the Caucasus, mainly in the Russian republics of Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachayev-Cherkessia.

While experts say the issue poses little threat to the Olympics, the Georgian government has eagerly picked up the cause. A report presented last week in the parliament in Tbilisi clearly qualifies the tsarist actions as genocide.

No nation has recognized the deaths of Circassians in the 19th century as genocide. Georgia has been an unlikely ally of this mainly Muslim nation because of the bitter conflict over Abkhazia, its breakaway republic where many Circassian intellectuals sided with Abkhaz separatists.

Khafitse, of the International Circassian Association, said he disliked Tbilisi's enthusiasm for the cause.

"The Georgians are following their own political agenda," he said, adding that the recognition issue was probably aimed at harming the Sochi Olympics.

"It would be better if they helped our brothers in Abkhazia and our neighbors in [South] Ossetia," he said.

Georgia and Russia fought a brief war over South Ossetia in 2008.

Giorgi Kandelaki, deputy chairman of the Georgian parliament's Foreign Relations Committee, said Tbilisi was trying to build bridges in the Caucasus by reaching out to the Circassians.

"It is no secret that a huge Russian propaganda machine has sewn hatred against Georgia among the people of the North Caucasus," he said by telephone from Tbilisi.

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9