



## **Who is the rightful host of the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics: Russia or Circassia?**

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*During seventeen days London has received the 30<sup>th</sup> edition of the Modern Summer Olympic Games. The "recognized" world gathered in the capital of the United Kingdom to celebrate the practice of Sports glorifying theirs best executioners. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of August the Olympic Games were closed in a glamorous ceremony and the flag handed to Rio de Janeiro that will host the next Summer Olympic in 2016. But the next Olympic event will happen on Sochi in 2014!*

Officially Sochi is part of the territory of the Russian Federation since 1864. Presently it is part of the Krasnodar krai being majorly populated by ethnic Russians (or russkyi). The Krasnodar krai is part of the Southern Federal District since June 2000. When created in May 2000 the Southern District was firstly named as North Caucasus Federal District but it was renamed shortly after because the name raised social and political tension in Moscow, due to the recently finished second Russo-Chechen War.

In 2010 the North Caucasus Federal District was created by the current Prime-Minister Dmitri Medvedev (at that time Medvedev was President of the Russian Federation) as an autonomous administrative area, splitting the Southern Federal District in to two. The Krasnodar krai, in which the town of Sochi is included, was excluded of the new district that was entitled to the Siberian businessman Alexander Khloponin. Event today the move is seen basically as a political maneuver to maintain Kremlin's control over the region and to differentiate this area from the more and more unstable North Caucasian republics.

I have already mentioned previously that "by an irony of history, the 2014 Olympic Games will mark the 150th anniversary of the Circassian defeat in 1864" (Zhemukhov, 2009: 2). In May 1864, the troops of the Tsar Alexander II were able to finish the conquest of Circassia whose capital was (surprise surprise!) Sochi. Although the



conquest is usually seen as the "definitive" conquest of Circassia, to Circassians across the globe the conquest was only temporary. Russia has the man power, and the money, but they have time and patience!

So the 2014 Winter Olympic Games are the Russian Olympics or the Circassian Olympics? That is one of those questions that usually researchers start answering using the cliché sentence: "That is a complex issue", but the fact is that this is a really complex issue that allows different answers depending on the perspective of the researcher, analyst or academician.

To Riek Smeets (1995, p. 107) "there is no such place as Circassia; and a single Circassian state uniting all Circassians has never existed in known history". That argument by itself could solve the riddle: if there was never a Circassian state so the Olympics are definitively Russian and the lands are part of Russia with all the justice and without any doubts. In this perspective Circassians across the globe are demanding the right to own something that was never formally theirs.

However, even those who declare the Circassian state has a non-existence cannot deny that its formation it is not something entirely new. There are enough evidences pointing out that "during the peace negotiations in Paris in 1856 [only] the opposition of Napoleon III effectively prevented the realization of British schemes to create at least a Circassian buffer state between Russia and Turkey" (Brock, 1956, p. 406). The opposition of France needs to be clarified: they were not opposing the recognition of Circassia *de per se*, they were just trying to block the intents of the United Kingdom their historical rival and at that time the most powerful state across the planet.

In our quest to find the legitimate host of the 2014 Winter Olympics (Russians or Circassians?) it is important to highlight this presence of the "Circassian" element during the negotiations of the Treaty of Paris. To be even more accurate we have to state that "about and before the time of the Crimean War, Circassia was frequented by Englishmen with political motives" (Brock, S., 1892, p. 173) in the region; the Scottish diplomat David Urquhart (appointed by some researchers and historians as the designer of the Circassian stars and arrows flag) being the most prominent of all.

It seems rather improbable that the British would have "dreamed" with a Circassian state without something existing previously on the region. If there was no Circassian political entity like Rieks and some contemporary Russian historians point out, why would the British suggest them has the "legitimate" people to give the right to statehood in a region ethnically complex with several dozens of other claimants?



Why not the Karachay-Balkar Five Mountain project? Or even the reconstitution of the Alania Kingdom?

The "choice" to stand for the Circassian demands by those Englishmen was actually natural if we have in mind that "in English the first reference to Circassians dates to 1555" (King, 2007, p. 242) after the important signature of the Peace of Amasya, that defined the borders and areas of influence of the Ottoman and Persian Empires. Circassians were put under the suzerainty of the Ottoman sultan, but were able to maintain a certain degree of political autonomy.

When in 1768, during the signature of the *Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca* that ended the VI Russo-Turkish War, the sultan had abdicated of the Circassian territories in favor of the Russian Empire, the Circassian elite used that degree of political autonomy to claim that "their region had long been independent, not a part of the Ottoman Empire" (King, 2007, p. 242) and consequently the territory could not be given to Russia unilaterally.

Another evidence of the existence of that political autonomy was "the remarkable step taken by the Circassian people, of sending their own delegates to Europe" (Hardwicke, 1863, p. 64) in an attempt to find political allies that would suppress the Russian invasion. It seems quite improbable that Hadji Haydar Hassan and Kustli Ocli Ismael would have presented themselves as delegates from Circassia in a requested audience at the British Parliament in 1862, if there was no Circassian state legitimizing them.

If there was never a Circassian political entity at the North Caucasus how could those two men say that "about two years ago, desiring to enter to the family of constituted nations, the Circassians and Abasians elected a kind of Parliament which is now ruling our joint nation" (Rolland, 1862, pp. 3 - 4)? It is feasible to argue that formally the Circassian state endured only for four years (from Parliamentary elections in 1860 to Deportation in May 1864), but a state of small duration is not the same as arguing that the state did not even exist. And Circassia has existed and it had a capital: (just to remember) Sochi.

Previous to the formation of the Circassian Confederation Parliament there was a line of Circassian rulers in the Caucasus acknowledged by the Russian tsardom at least since the XVI century. When in 1561 the tsar Ivan IV decides to marry, for the second time, with a Circassian princess (later Christianized as Maria Temrujkovna) he is not acknowledging the existence but also the importance of the Circassian elite.



Paul Bushkovitch gives more details about the real importance of the noble Circassians at the Russian court. According to the researcher "the Circassians lasted from 1561 into the time of Peter the Great and beyond, and were politically far more important during that period than the Tatar *tsarevichi*. The Circassians were the most important in large part because they were the only ones to repeatedly intermarry with the ruling dynasties" (Bushkovitch, 2006, p. 12). Now if the Circassians were not rulers of a powerful political entity why would the Russian rulers intermarry with them so often?

If we assume that Circassia existed has an independent political entity (let us not label it as a state for the moment) can we argue that Sochi is not a Russian Olympic event but rather a Circassian Olympic event misappropriated by the Kremlin due to past events? Once again it will depend on how you look to the question.

Circassia was a Confederation of different tribes that gathered in a single political entity to fight the Russian invasion. Previous to that the majority of the Circassian land was divided in what we can call small principalities with different political bodies. The political unification of the Circassians did not mean that the local leaders had lost their power or that the local bodies had lost their functionality. In fact the creation of the ruling Parliament only added a new layer of political and institutional power that increased the complexity of the Circassian political system.

That same complexity is the cause why some researchers, analysts, academicians and historians tend to argue that the Circassian was a non-existence. Circassia existed has a proto-state, we just need to look to the big picture uniting all the small dots. It was this complexity that culminated in the fact that although the Circassians had elected a Parliament to rule theirs country in 1860, "in September 1861, the Emperor himself, Tsar Alexander II, visited Yekaterinodar, the Russian town closest to the scene of the action, and there received a delegation of Circassian chiefs" (Shenfield, 1999, p. 151) that wanted to discuss a peace plan.

The plan was rejected by the Russians, but the fact that Alexander II received those leaders only demonstrates that Moscow knew that the land had "owners" that were trying to defend it. Paul Henze (1990, p. 8) has few doubts that in the XIX century "after the Georgians and the Armenians, the Circassians came closest of all the Caucasian people to developing the prerequisites of nationhood" as well as something that we could label has proto-statehood.

The various "owners" of Circassia elected Sochi has theirs capital, the same Sochi that is now being prepared to receive the next Winter Olympic Games. The same



Sochi that Circassians across the globe see has a land tainted with blood. Here some extra clarification might be needed. After the failure of the September 1861 negotiation and after the stalemate of the British, French and Turkish governments the Circassians were defeated in 1864 and deported "possibly up to 1.5 million left for the Ottoman domains" (Shami, 1998, p. 623) and from there they scattered around the world.

Nowadays there are significant Circassian communities from Egypt to Syria, from Netherlands to Germany, from the United States of America to Australia. One of the key matters that unites all those communities is that simple fact that they "regard the Sochi area, especially the location called *Krasnaya Polyana*, where the core of the Olympic infrastructure is to be built, as a mass grave containing bodies of thousands of indigenous Adyghes, mostly women and children, massacred during what they call the Circassian Genocide of the 19th century" (Souleimanov, 2001, p. 67).

The victory of Putin in 2007 when in Toronto he saw Sochi winning the organization of the Winter Olympics 2014 and "Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia [in 2008] has revived the Circassian national movement" (Goble, 2010, *Window on Eurasia*) that does not only demand the recognition of the Genocide (recognized by Georgia in 20<sup>th</sup> May last year), but also the boycott of the international community to the Winter Olympic Games at least until the Kremlin shows any sign of truthful willingness to compromise.

President Putin knows that some sort of political crafting might be needed, and this time he will have to be more creative because the bait and switch technique might not work again. Games like accusing Libyan Circassians of collaboration with the regime and at the same time deporting Syrian Circassians due to the high level of danger will only buy some time to the Kremlin that needs to stabilize the Northwestern Caucasus in a moment when Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia (Northeastern Caucasus) are once again raising their levels of violence and ethnopolitical uncertainty.

Regarding the question to whom the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games rightly belong, we can answer using a simple image: the Winter Olympic Games will happen at the home of the Circassians but the "catering team" will be Russian by imposition and stubbornness. But there is still some time to make the right decisions...



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