

## Ukraine's and Georgia's Recognition of the Circassian Genocide: Strategic Engagement with North Caucasian Causes

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### Abstract

This article examines the contemporary development of international recognition of the Circassian genocide by two post-Soviet states—Georgia in 2011 and Ukraine in 2025. Through analysis of media coverage related to the Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian wars, and comparative textual analysis of primary sources, this research demonstrates how Georgia and Ukraine, each within the context of their own conflicts with Russia, have emerged as key external supporters of pan-Caucasian causes. Both countries have used their recognition of the Circassian genocide and their support for North Caucasus separatist movements to position themselves as regional partners for stateless peoples resisting Russian domination. Building on existing historical research about the Circassian cause and comparing the politics of memory in Georgia and Ukraine, this study illustrates how these recognitions draw renewed attention to the events of 1864, when Russian imperial colonization led to the mass extermination and expulsion of the majority of Circassians from their homeland. Scattered across Russia, the Middle East, and the West, Circassian activists continue to seek recognition of these atrocities as genocide—claims the Russian state persistently suppresses. As Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide set a precedent, and Ukraine has followed suit, the question remains whether recognition is merely a geopolitical tool for states in conflict with Russia, or if the Circassian movement can succeed in persuading other, non-belligerent countries to follow their lead.

**Keywords:** Russo-Georgian war, Russo-Ukrainian war, nationalism, former Soviet Union, politics of memory

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## **Ukrayna ve Gürcistan'ın Çerkes Soykırımını Tanıması: Kuzey Kafkasya Davalarıyla Stratejik İlişki**

Bu makale, iki post-Sovyet devleti olan Gürcistan'ın 2011'de ve Ukrayna'nın 2025'te Çerkes soykırımının uluslararası tanınmasının çağdaş gelişimini incelemektedir. Rus-Gürcü ve Rus-Ukrayna savaşlarıyla ilgili medya haberlerinin analizi ve birincil kaynakların karşılaştırmalı metin analizi yoluyla, bu araştırma Gürcistan ve Ukrayna'nın, Rusya ile kendi çatışmaları bağlamında, nasıl pan-Kafkas davalarının kilit dış destekçileri olarak ortaya çıktığını göstermektedir. Her iki ülke de Çerkes soykırımını tanımlarını ve Kuzey Kafkasya ayrılıkçı hareketlerine verdikleri desteği, Rus egemenliğine direnen devletsiz halklar için bölgesel ortaklar olarak konumlandırmak için kullanmıştır. Çerkes davası hakkındaki mevcut tarihsel araştırmaları temel alarak ve Gürcistan ve Ukrayna'daki hafıza politikalarını karşılaştırarak, bu çalışma bu tanımların, Rus sömürgeciliğinin Çerkeslerin çoğunluğunun kitlesel olarak yok edilmesine ve vatanlarından sürülmesine yol açtığı 1864 olaylarına yeniden dikkat çektiğini göstermektedir. Rusya, Orta Doğu ve Batı'ya dağılmış olan Çerkes aktivistler, Rus devletinin ısrarla reddettiği iddiaları, yaşanan olayları soykırım olarak tanınması için çaba göstermeye devam etmektedir. Gürcistan'ın Çerkes soykırımını tanıması bir örnek oluştururken ve Ukrayna'nın bunu takip etmesiyle birlikte, tanımanın sadece Rusya ile çatışma halindeki devletler için jeopolitik bir araç mı olduğu, yoksa Çerkes hareketinin diğer çatışmasız ülkeleri de ikna ederek onların da bu yolu izlemesini sağlayıp sağlayamayacağı sorusu ortaya çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rus-Gürcü savaşı, Rus-Ukrayna savaşı, milliyetçilik, Sovyetler Birliği, hafıza politikaları

### **Introduction**

This research seeks to engage critically with the existing literature and recent scholarship on the Circassian genocide, while also aiming to broaden our understanding of the contemporary evolution of its international recognition. The *Circassian genocide* refers to the mass killing, forced migration, and expulsion of Circassians by the Russian Empire during and after the Russo-Circassian War (1763–1864). Russia's conquest of Circassia took almost a hundred years, beginning with the construction of the Mozdok fortress as a forward post for Russian expansion into the Caucasus in 1763. It continued with the incorporation of Eastern

Circassia (Kabarda) into Russia in 1822, followed by Russian advances in Western Circassia before and after the Crimean War (1853–1856), and culminated in the capture of Sochi, the last capital of Circassia, in 1864 (Richmond; King, “The Ghost of Freedom”).

The Russian Empire's complete subjugation of Circassia in 1864, part of a broader campaign to dominate the Caucasus, resulted in mass killings, starvation, and forced deportations of the Circassian people. Circassians remain dispersed across Western countries, the Middle East, and Russia. Soviet Russia applied the imperial principle of “divide and rule” when establishing administrative divisions in the North Caucasus, resulting in today's Circassians being divided within the Russian Federation and living in six different regions under different ethnonyms (Richmond; Shenfield). Three indigenous Circassian republics include Kabardino-Balkaria with Kabardian majority, Adyghe with Adyghe minority, Karachay-Cherkessia with Cherkess minority, while Krasnodar Krai has Shapsugs, and Stavropol Krai and North Ossetia has Mozdok Kabardians, who do not have representation as an indigenous people in the regional constitutions. The brutal campaigns of the Russian Empire against the Circassian people was first recognized as constituting a genocide by the parliament of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic in Resolution No. 977-XII-B, adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the Kabardino-Balkarian SSR on February 7, 1992, which declared the mass extermination and forced deportation of Circassian (Adyghe) people during the Russian-Caucasian War as an act of genocide. The resolution acknowledged that “the majority of the Circassian people, including over 90% of Kabardia's population, were physically exterminated, and more than 500,000 Circassians were forcibly deported to the Ottoman Empire by the Tsarist regime” (Zhemukhov, “The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism”). This landmark document called for the Russian Federation to acknowledge these events as genocide. It also proposed dual citizenship for diaspora Circassians, mandated repatriation programs, sought international recognition of their status as an exiled people, and established May 21 as the official Day of Remembrance. Despite subsequent appeals by Circassian

NGOs and the parliaments of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia, the Russian State Duma has consistently refused to acknowledge these events as genocide. While the Russian Federation denies these events constituted genocide, framing them as a voluntary migration (*muhajirstvo*) to the Ottoman Empire, others have recognized the atrocities. On the international stage, Georgia became the first country to recognize the Circassian genocide on May 20, 2011 (Resolution No. 4701- IS) (Rusetis), urging global acknowledgment of the atrocities committed by the Russian Empire. Ukraine followed on January 9, 2025 (*Pro vyznannya henotsydu*), when the Verkhovna Rada adopted a resolution condemning the 19th-century mass killings, forced displacement, and other atrocities perpetrated by the Russian empire as genocide, marking a significant step in recognizing the historical suffering of the Circassian people. The Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers followed suite with a corresponding executive order on March 28, 2025 (*Pro zvernennya*).

The Georgian government recognized the genocide as part of a greater strategy to gain influence and leverage with the peoples of the North Caucasus, especially the Circassians. This strategy also included the weaponization of conferences, the creation of cross-cultural and education programs, the dissemination of Georgian-sponsored media in the North Caucasus, open travel of North Caucasians into Georgia, and greater political and economic cooperation between Georgia and the North Caucasus. Although the current ruling establishment has stepped back from many of these initiatives, Tbilisi's past rapprochement with Circassians and other North Caucasus groups has led to the strengthening of Circassian activism and encouraged Ukraine since the start of the current war with Russia to embrace the mantle of Pan-Caucasus causes. By recognizing the Circassian genocide and supporting separatist movements and organizations in the North Caucasus, Ukraine has positioned itself as an advocate for stateless peoples of the North Caucasus within Russia's sphere of influence, posing to provide Circassians a state actor to support their national aspirations and to weaken Russian regional hegemony.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 birthed 15 successor states, many of which struggled to regain a clear sense of political identity and function after several centuries of colonialism (Derluguian). Georgia, nestled in the perpetually fractious Caucasus, found itself in such a position under its first president post-independence, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991-1992). Gamsakhurdia's complicated legacy, in which his unwavering commitment to Georgian nationalism brought conflict with both his countrymen and Abkhazians and South Ossetians, continues to haunt the Caucasus nation to this day, especially after Tbilisi's unmitigated defeat at the hands of Russia in the summer of 2008 led to the Abkhazian and South Ossetian republics gaining permanent autonomy.

The Circassians, like the Georgians, were enveloped into the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century, but not before Russian forces conducted a brutal, sustained campaign of extermination, forced starvation, deportation, and population resettlement (Jaimoukha; King, "The Ghost of Freedom"; Grant; Kreiten; Bullough; Khodarkovsky; Richmond). The result of this campaign has left an indelible scar on the Circassian people, which is reflected in the modern demographic reality. The vast majority of Circassians today live in the diaspora, with only about a sixth of Circassians living within the Russian Federation (Dogan; Tlis).

The modern Circassian movement has experienced both transformation and fracture, a reflection of the scattering of the Circassian diaspora (Kaya; Shami; Erciyes; Petersson & Vamling; Hansen; Hamed-Troyansky). Besleney describes the outlined goals of the Circassian movement and diaspora, while Zhemukhov ("The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism") categorizes the current composition of Circassian activism in Russia. According to their research, five major groups represent the Circassian movement: nationalists, who desire an independent state free from Russia; sovereigntists, who want the Circassians, scattered under three republics in the Russian Federation, to be united under a single political entity within the Russian Federation; centralists, who view themselves as moderates and advocate for the broader unity of all Circassians; culturalists, who are focused on the preservation and

promotion of political, cultural, and linguistic rights but are wary of political and separatist initiatives; and finally, accommodationists, who are local political elites within the North Caucasus that are aligned with the Kremlin.

The Circassian movement revamped with activists successfully finding a state sponsor in Georgia, whose recognition of the Circassian genocide on May 20, 2011 (Barry; Gukemukhov; Lomsadze; Lukyanov; Markedonov, "History as a Weapon"; Bagrationi, "Parlament Gruzii rassmotrit vopros priznaniya genotsida cherkessov"; Haindrava) has proven to be a major catalyst as Georgian officials sought to strengthen cultural and political ties with Circassians to challenge Russian hegemony in the region. The current ruling party in Tbilisi has stepped back from many of these initiatives in a bid to maintain stable relations with Moscow (Gordadze). Nevertheless, the effects of the Georgian Parliament's 2011 decision are still evident, most notably in Ukraine's recognition of the Circassian genocide in January of 2025 (Dzutsati, "Ukrainian Lawmaker Publishes Proposal to Recognize Circassian 'Genocide'"; Ekberova; Bardouka; Goble). The current Ukrainian government has mirrored the policies and strategies of Tbilisi in the last decade by taking an interest in the plight of the Circassians, seeking to strengthen ties with other separatist movements of the North Caucasus by recognizing their right to self-determination (Fabbro, *Pro zayavu Verkhovnoyi Rady*; Krasno; *Pro vyznannya prava inhus'koho narodu*). For both Georgia and Ukraine, recognizing the Circassian genocide and supporting Circassian causes serve to weaken Russia's image on both the political battlefield and historical memory.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War became the catalyst for Georgia recognizing the Circassian genocide and seeking a Pan-Caucasus alliance to challenge Russia's regional dominance (Zhemukhov, "Russia and Georgia"; Khashig). After the defeat of 2008, Georgian officials realize that they could not take the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force, which required a major recalculation of Tbilisi's strategy. Georgia was effectively forced to stand alone in its 2008 war with Russia, stunting Tbilisi's bid for EU and NATO membership (King, "The Five-Day War"). In this context,

Tbilisi reevaluated its relationship with the Circassian diaspora (Zhemukhov, "Russia and Georgia"; Khashig).

This paper is divided into three parts. The first chapter will cover the historical background for Georgia's relations with the Circassian movement leading to the buildup after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which led to the Georgian Parliament's recognition of the Circassian genocide, as well as various other efforts Georgia adopted to strengthen ties with Circassian activists. The second chapter will briefly address the current political situation in Georgia in which officials have mostly sought to abandon these policies, before focusing on the impacts of Tbilisi's past decisions in Ukraine. Kyiv has recognized the Circassian genocide and sought to fuel and support other separatist causes in the North Caucasus. As part of this strategy, Ukraine has also supported other North Caucasus groups, such as the Chechens and the Ingush, in their right to "self-determination" (Pro zayavu Verkhovnoyi Rady; Pro vyznannya prava inhus'koho narodu). Kyiv has also held conferences of its own to gain greater international traction. Moreover, Pan-Caucasus initiatives still have produced an enduring legacy in Georgia. In the third and final chapter, the paper will analyze and compare both documents for the Georgian and Ukrainian recognitions of the Circassian genocide, to give readers a better understanding of the text and to provide the appropriate historical and political background. This exercise will give the reader a better understanding and appreciation for Georgia and Ukraine's peddling of Circassian causes, and how the language of genocide serves as a powerful political and ideological tool to combat Russia and challenge its regional dominance. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings and impact of both Georgia and Ukraine's recognition of the Circassian genocide and examine how the recognition of genocide has both emboldened the Circassian movement and has led to greater political and cultural collaboration between Circassians and state actors in the post-Soviet sphere, as part of a greater project to challenge Russian hegemony in the region.

### **Chapter 1: Georgia's Recognition of the Circassian Genocide**

On May 21, 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia delivered a speech to the Georgian Parliament titled "Address to the Circassian (Adyghe)," strategically on the day that commemorates victims of the Circassian genocide. The Georgian president emphasized the mutual respect between Georgians and Circassians, the "chivalrous nature" of the Circassian people, both nations' "genetic kinship," and the warm and brotherly feelings between both people, to the degree that Georgians "will honour the memory of Circassians who died for the freedom of their homeland" (Aliyev 32-33). Instead of a Caucasus union with Russia at the head in a post-Soviet order which preserved hegemony, Gamsakhurdia sought an alternative arrangement, which he believed Tbilisi had the unique role to fill. He believed in greater cooperation among the people of the Caucasus and saw Georgia as critical for the region's stability (Aliyev 34). Although of differing ideological persuasions than the man he both overthrew and succeeded, the rhetoric and policies toward the North Caucasus of Georgia's second president, Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-2003), in many ways resembled those of his rival and predecessor. Shevardnadze viewed the settlement of the Abkhazian conflict as critical for the stability of the North Caucasus. While noting that North Caucasian fighters fought against Tbilisi on behalf of Abkhazia, Shevardnadze did not blame the people or authorities of the region for this (Aliyev 48-49).

Georgia's third president, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), like his predecessors, sought to expand networks between Georgia and the North Caucasus. In a 2012 speech to an international conference of Caucasologists, in which he contrasted Georgia's modern statehood and development in contrast to the condescendingly paternal iterations of past Russian colonialism, Saakashvili expressed beliefs in a Pan-Caucasian unity that is both free and democratic, and noted how Georgia was the first country to recognize the Circassian genocide (Aliyev 61). The Georgian president in turn sought to contrast his country's policies with Russia's while also demanding parity in the two nations' imperatives. In an address to the UN in September of 2013, he

accused Putin of seeking to prevent smaller, former colonized states to become more independent and to integrate within Europe, while also mentioning the Circassians as an example of past Russian atrocities and oppression. Furthermore, regarding the history of Sochi, Saakashvili expressed concerns about the propriety and wisdom of Russia holding the Olympic Games there (Stepanov 2021). Through these examples, the Georgian president was not only seeking to challenge Russian dominance and meddling in the Caucasus, but to also present a picture of a culturally united and harmonious region, one in which the Russian Federation plays little or no part. Through these messages, the Circassians clearly form an integral component of his political aims.

### **1.1 2010 Conference, Jamestown Foundation**

The Circassian genocide, despite its vast scale and long-lasting consequences, has remained relatively unknown, largely due to Circassians lacking a nation-state of their own. The Circassian tragedy was absent from Tsarist Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet historiography, while the diaspora also lacked a strong voice in the Middle East. Russia continues to deny the genocide, complicating recognition efforts, especially as the relatively small and stateless Circassian population remains a low priority for Western powers.

In March of 2010, Ilia State University in Tbilisi collaborated with the Washington DC-based Jamestown Foundation to organize a conference discussing the Circassian Genocide, which featured prominent Circassian activists who petitioned the Georgian Parliament to recognize the genocide. In response, Russian officials, who had previously maintained silence on the issue of genocide, accused Tbilisi of seeking to stoke North Caucasian separatism. As a result, both sides organized a series of conferences. The 2010 Tbilisi conference, called "Hidden Peoples, Unceasing Crimes: Circassians and the People of the North Caucasus between the Past and the Future" featured a request to not only recognize the Circassian genocide, but the genocides of the Chechens and the Ingush (Dzutsev, "Priznaniye Gruziiyey genotsida cherkesov"). Another conference was later held in November 2010 to discuss the "Circassian question" and the

legacy of Russian rule in the region. Participants also discussed potentially boycotting the Sochi Olympic games, and from this conference rose an appeal to the Georgian Parliament to recognize the Circassian genocide (Stepanov).

These conferences functioned as educational tools to raise awareness and later, after 2011 and 2025, the Georgian and Ukrainian parliaments respectively highlighted the importance of educating and raising awareness about the Circassian genocide in the international community. It is important to note, however, that North Caucasus officials did not participate in any of these conferences – they were attended only by scholars, artists, activists, NGOs, and representatives of diaspora. This fact highlights the difference between Circassian civic activism and the official discourse which government representatives from the Circassian republics promote.

The Georgian Parliament also received requests about recognition of the Circassian genocide from Circassian organizations in Israel and Germany. According to the signer of the appeal and member of the Coordinated Council of Circassian Social Organizations of the Russian Federation, Abubekir Murzakanov, the decision to acknowledge the genocide would improve relations between the Circassians and Georgians, who already have a long history of friendship and cultural connection (Kavkazskiy Uzel, “Gagoshidze”). The level of preparation and gradual progression for the recognition of the genocide was unmistakable. Russian political scientist Sergey Markedonov (Cherkesskiy vopros i formirovaniye novogo status-kvo na Kavkaze) argued that “it is impossible to say, that the decision of May 20 was spontaneous and unprepared.”

## **1.2 Recognition of Genocide**

Even the timing of the decision to recognize the genocide was clearly symbolic and coordinated, occurring on May 20, 2011, the day before Circassians commemorate and mourn those who perished during Russia final, brutal push to conquer their land in 1864. On May 20, 2011, ninety Georgian lawmakers unanimously voted to recognize the Circassian Genocide, with no nays (Civil

Georgia). The contemporary development of international recognition of the Circassian genocide began with the resolution of the Georgian Parliament. This decision inspired the international Circassian movement to promote the recognition of the genocide in many countries, including those with large Circassian populations (Russia, Turkey, Jordan, Syria), as well as in former Soviet Union states (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine). To date, however, most of the international community has responded to these efforts with caution, with the notable exception of Ukraine, which will be analyzed in greater detail later in this article. On the one hand, many states are unwilling to risk the benefits of good relations with Russia; on the other, there is little to gain from recognizing the grievances of a relatively small ethnic minority group without statehood (Catic; Grebennikov).

According to Lomsadze, the recognition of the Circassian genocide serves to promote the narrative that the Russians are inherently foreign intruders to the Caucasus region, as well as to accomplish revenge for Russia's support of Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists in 2008. Other political figures saw the decision as reasserting a Pan-Caucasus unity. For instance, lawmaker Giorgi Tortladze argued that "We must morally support the Caucasian people, the Circassians became victims of political games in the North Caucasus" (Kukudzhanova, "Komitety parlamenta Gruzii prinyali rezolyutsii 'genotsida cherkesov'").

The appeals for a Pan-Caucasus unity inevitably also carried the more bellicose stances of opposition or antagonism toward the Russian Federation, the occupying power. Giorgi Gabashvili, the Chairman of the Committee on Education, Science and Culture, stated that it is important for Circassians, other Caucasian peoples, and the Russians to all have an actual understanding of history, not some Soviet version (Kukudzhanova, "Komitety parlamenta Gruzii prinyali rezolyutsii 'genotsida cherkesov'"). Nevertheless, lawmaker Giorgi Gabashvili stressed that the vote was not to be regarded as punitive measures, and that the Russian people should not share the guilt of their leaders over the last century and a half (Civil Georgia). In any case, through the vote, Tbilisi hoped to both repair its damaged relationship with other Caucasus people groups

considering ethnic conflict, while also weakening its great enemy, Russia, according to analyst Mamuka Areshidze (Lomsadze).

### **1.3 Reactions of Georgians**

The unanimity of the Parliament's decision, however, fails to indicate the degree of apprehension among the political faction that has long feared provoking Russia, especially after the catastrophe of 2008, a political impulse which effectively rules Tbilisi now. Some officials questioned the wisdom of recognizing the Circassian genocide, fearing that it might further damage an already fragile relationship with Russia (Radio Free Europe). By recognizing the Circassian genocide, other groups such as Armenians, Meskhetian Turks, and Pontic Greeks, might all demand recognition of past genocides, all of which would either cost the Georgians politically or directly implicate them in past atrocities (Khashig). MP Dzhondi Bagaturia, while emotionally sympathetic to the cause of the Circassians, argued against the resolution, by pointing to the hypocrisy it demonstrated to Armenians, whose own genocide Tbilisi has yet to officially recognize (Civil Georgia). In fact, in the middle of April of 2010, although ultimately to no avail, an Armenian delegation sent requests to both Mikheil Saakashvili and to the Georgian Parliament to recognize the Armenian genocide (*Kavkazskiy Uzel*, V Gruzii deputaty dobivayut'sya rassmotreniya v parlamente voprosa o genotside cherkesov v Rossii").

### **1.4 Pro-Circassians Conferences in Georgia**

The recognition of the Circassian genocide served in a long string of policies in which Georgian officials, rather than direct confrontation with Russia, sought to use conferences that strengthened the Georgian position in the information war, and which fostered greater contact and collaboration with not only Circassians, but other people of the North Caucasus as well. In 2012, the coastal town of Anaklia had a monument in honor of the memory of victims of the Circassian genocide with a sculptor from Karbadino-Balkaria, Khusen Kochesokov (Stepanov). In Anaklia, archival documents were opened about the Circassian genocide, and a memorial was established to commemorate the victims of

the genocide. The ceremony, held in a city on the Black Coast near the border with Abkhazia, had both Circassian activists and different officials from the republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia. Tamara Barsik, the director of Communications for the Circassian Cultural Institute and representative of the International Circassian Council, was also present and noted that the day commemorates what her people lost, and today they remember what they had lost and hope to regain what was once theirs. Ibragim Yagan, a representative of the Circassian National Movement, Iyad Youghar, the chairman of the International Circassian Council, the head of the Chairman of the Committee of Diaspora Affairs and the Caucasus Parliament, Nuzgar Tsiklauri, and Georgian State Minister of Diaspora Affairs Mirza Davitaia, all addressed the gathering. The monument, cast in bronze, was then unveiled. The event continued the next day with the conference "The results of the recognition of the Circassian genocide", which was a joint product of the Jamestown Foundation, Ilia State University, the Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi, and the State Ministry of Diaspora Affairs. The program will also feature books about the genocide, as well as highlight Circassian culture, clothing, and sports (Bagrationi, "Parlament Gruzii rassmotrit vopros priznaniya genotsida cherkesov").

### **1.5 Circassian Cultural Center**

Another project of this increasing rapprochement was the opening of the Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi. Mikheil Saakashvili created The Center of Circassian Culture on October 12, 2011, as part of a larger effort to strengthen ties with North Caucasian officials. On June 25, 2012, the Georgian Parliament National Library held a ceremony opening an exhibition for Circassian culture, with the presentation of the book "The Circassian Genocide" by Merab Chukhua, the director for the Circassian Cultural Center. Merab Chukhua in turn hoped that Russia will finally acknowledge the crimes it committed in the Caucasus, in a way to rectify the past (Bagrationi, "V Gruzii nachalis' meropriyatiya pamyati zhertv Kavkazskoy voyny").

The exhibition featured the work of the ethnic Circassian artists Zhanti Bash and Zaur Shogenov, and the hallway was

decorated with Circassian flags, and visitors could look at art from Circassian artist Teuchezh Kat, in what was a collaboration between the “Caucasus Fund” and Georgian artists (Bagrationi, “V Gruzii nachalis’ meropriyatiya pamyati zhertv Kavkazskoy voyny”). Such efforts were not without fruit. Ruslan Kesh, the leader of the Circassian Council’s branch in Kabardino-Balkaria, stressed the cultural and political ties between Georgia, Abkhazia, and Circassia (Regnum). This effort served to acknowledge both the indissoluble brotherhood between Circassians and Abkhazians as well as the growing bond between Circassians and Georgians. Circassian activists such as Kesh were able to visit Georgia and impact the parliamentary vote thanks to Georgia’s earlier revoking of visas for Russian citizens from North Caucasus republics (Civil Georgia; Stepanov).

### **1.6 Sochi Olympics Boycott**

While its origins in fact preceded the fateful day of May 20, 2011, Georgia’s opposition to the Sochi Olympics, while ultimately futile, gained new momentum from genocide recognition, and signified a merging of interests and cooperation for both Tbilisi and the Circassian movement. On November 22, 2010, a conference was held in Tbilisi to discuss potentially boycotting the Olympic Games, the same conference which would prove to be so influential for the recognition of the Circassian genocide. This was the second forum the Jamestown Foundation instigated in Tbilisi that year, after a conference in March on the history and suppression of the North Caucasus peoples. The conference had a diverse range of participants, including Circassian activists from different Western countries, Turkey, and Israel, as well as scientists from Turkey, the US, and Europe. Among them was the French philosopher Andre Glucksmann, famous for his criticisms of Russia, who supported the boycott initiative (Kavkazskiy Uzel, “V Gruzii konferentsiya po ‘cherkesskomu voprosu’ potrebovala boykota zimney Olimpiady-2014 v Sochi”).

Ruslan Kesh and Tamara Barsik reminded attendees that 2014 is not only when the Olympic Games will be held, but also will serve as the 150-year anniversary of Russian troops slaughtering the last

remnants of Circassian resistance at the Battle of Krasnaya Polyana, a battle which marked Russia's decisive triumph in its long and brutal war against the Circassians, and has become a symbol of national loss and tragedy for Circassians (Kavkazskiy Uzel, "V Gruzii konferentsiya po 'cherkesskomu voprosu' potrebovala boykota zimney Olimpiady-2014 v Sochi").

Moreover, concerns about the Sochi Games also addressed practical and environmental issues, as well as the usual political grievances. A conference in Tbilisi on June 12, 2012, called "The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games and the Georgian-Circassian Ecological Cultural Space" discussed the ecological problems that arise from the preparation for the 2014 Sochi Games, as well as repatriation for Circassians. The Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi and the International Circassian Council in the US organized the event, which featured many members of the Circassian Diaspora, officials from the North Caucasus republics, and lawyers, political scientists, lawyers, and historians from the US, Turkey, Poland, and Canada. For the opening ceremony, Nuzgar Tsiklauri, Ibragim Yagan, Iyad Youghar, Aleksandr Kvitashvili, the president of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, and Witold Rodkiewicz, a Professor at Warsaw University, also made speeches. The event also showed a documentary disapproving of the Olympic Games called (Sochi 2014—for the Olympics?) The film was the product of Shota Malashkhia, the chairman of the Committee for the Restoration of the Territorial Integrity of Georgia (Bagrationi, "V Tbilisi uchastniki Mezhdunarodnogo nauchnogo simpoziuma obsuzhdayut problemy gruzino-cherkesskogo ekologicheskogo prostranstva"). While ultimately of no great political consequence, such forms of informational wars did worry Moscow analyst Alexey Malashenko to the point of raising concerns about potential acts of terrorism, and Russian political scientist Mikhail Alexandrov also accused Tbilisi of considering utilizing terrorism (Zhemukhov, "Russia and Georgia").

Circassian NGOs also evolved into a formidable force during the Sochi Olympics boycott. They protested holding the games on the site of graves for victims of the genocide. They also regarded Sochi, which was the last capital of Circassians (1861-1864), as

unsuitable for holding games. As a result, Moscow has targeted and arrested members of the movement, many of whom were human rights activists (Dzutsev, ““Circassian Activists in Russia Become a Serious Force”).

### **1.7 Georgian-Abkhazian Relations**

Nevertheless, despite all these initiatives with Caucasus peoples securely beyond the Russian border, Tbilisi displayed less interest in rapprochement with the separatist territory of Abkhazia. Ironically, Abkhazia had initially proven to be a cause of contention between Georgian and Circassian interests. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian President Boris Yeltsin wanted to maintain good relations with Eduard Shevardnadze. When Georgia was embroiled in sectarian conflict with Abkhazian separatists in 1992, the Russian president sent troops to maintain order in Kabardino-Balkaria to prevent local Circassians from joining the fight against Georgia with their Abkhazian kin. While hardly the only North Caucasus group to join the war against Georgia, the Circassians played an instrumental part. In fact, Sultan Sosnaliev, who led the Abkhazian military, was born in Nalchik, a Kabardian city (Zhemukhov, “Russia and Georgia”).

Around 2,500 Circassians volunteers would fight in Abkhazia (Markedonov, “History as a Weapon”). In response, Eduard Shevardnadze sent a letter to the authorities of Kabardino-Balkaria, asking them to recall “volunteers” who had joined the Abkhazian side (Aliyev40).

As a result, Georgia’s recognition of the Circassian Genocide put the Abkhazians in a difficult position, as they are connected in culture to the Circassians, but they are also dependent on the Russians for their independence from Georgia (Zhemukhov, “Russia and Georgia”). To that effect, Markedonov (“Cherkesskiy vopros i formirovaniye novogo status-kvo na Kavkaze”) views the genocide debate as merely a political calculation, arguing that the Georgian authorities have only considered Circassian movements that align with their own goals, and that Tbilisi was not interested in Circassian rights prior to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. In a

similar vein, Inal Khashig argues that recognizing the Circassian genocide has nothing to do with past Russian atrocities so much as present political leverage. Khashig believes that Georgia knows that it cannot take on the military power of Russia, so its only option to regain the separatist republics is to stoke separatist sentiments among North Caucasian peoples to either weaken or distract Russia, as well as divide the Abkhazians from their Circassian allies. Tbilisi, riding on the support gaining through recognizing the Circassian Genocide, hopes to maintain Circassians' favors by leading a boycott of Russia's Olympic Games in Sochi, which will also force the Abkhazians to choose between their Circassian kin and their Russian protectors. To that effect, the recognition of the Circassian genocide conspicuously omitted the Abkhazians, who in many ways suffered a similar fate. Given that Georgians moved into depopulated Abkhazian regions, recognizing the Abkhazian Genocide would likely require Tbilisi to make restitutions in similarity to Russia.

In any case, despite their cultural ties and past political alliances, the natural partnership of the Circassians and the Abkhazians is not without some cracks. On September 29, 2013, Abkhazian president Aleksandr Ankvab gave a speech commemorating Abkhazian independence, during which he praised many ethnic groups which helped the Abkhazians, but failed to mention the Circassians, angering many Circassian activists (Dzutsati, "Disappointed in Moscow"). Ibragim Yagan has criticized Abkhazians for not cooperating with Georgia and failing to see that Tbilisi's support is conducive for the Northwest Caucasus peoples (Haindrava). Ruslan Kesh argued that the Abkhazians have used the Circassians for their own interests while delivering very little in return. Unlike the Circassians, the Abkhaz supported the Sochi Olympics, which they thought would boost their ties with Russia (Dzutsati, "Disappointed in Moscow").

Yagan fought against Tbilisi in the Georgian-Abkhaz War (1992-1993), but he claimed he did so with the view that the Abkhazian state would give the Circassians independence and freedom, as well as a representative on the world stage. Now, he sees Abkhazia as merely a Russian puppet and turned to Georgia to be a symbol

for a free, autonomous Caucasus (Dzutsati, “Activist Says Abkhaz Are Not Genuine Allies of Circassians”). Just three years earlier, Yagan’s stance had been quite different, as he was unable to attend the eventful 2010 conference which would later lead to the genocide recognition, which he was hoping would have been in Russia. He argued at the time that he cannot visit Georgia until Tbilisi recognizes Abkhazia as a sovereign state (Kavkazskiy Uzel, “V parlamente Gruzii postupila pros’ba o priznanii genotsida cherkesskogo Naroda v Rossiyskoy imperii”). Yagan ascribes this shift of positions to the fact that Georgian officials told him they recognized the Circassian genocide in part to atone for the fact that Georgians collaborated with the Russians in their bid to take over the Caucasus (Dzutsati, “Activist Says Abkhaz Are Not Genuine Allies of Circassians”).

## **Chapter 2: The Georgian Legacy and Ukraine’s Recognition of the Circassian Genocide**

The Pan-Caucasus initiatives within Georgia were greatly limited by the triumph of the Georgian Dream Party in 2012, which has retained power to this day. Georgian Dream, in contravention of its predecessor, has attempted to avoid any provocation with Russia, and has conducted a policy of non-confrontation which has distanced itself from Western powers as well as North Caucasus groups (Aliyev 62-63; Silaev & Sushentsov 65-86). Russia had tried to jam the waves of First Caucasus Informational Channel, a pro-Georgia, Russian-language satellite-TV channel, as well as to pressure companies to not broadcast it, and Georgian Dream complied by cutting off the funding for the channel soon after winning the October 2012 elections. The current ruling establishment has remained hostile to North Caucasus separatist groups, which it sees as threatening its delicate relationship with Russia (Gordadze). Some news agencies have reported that Moscow pressured Georgian president Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2013 to withdraw recognition of the Circassian genocide. The deputy minister of diasporas for Saakashvili’s regime allegedly warned the Circassian diaspora to pressure Ivanishvili’s government to not

consider withdrawing support for the genocide (Dzutsati, "Activist Says Abkhaz Are Not Genuine Allies of Circassians").

Nevertheless, despite Georgian Dream's rejection of its predecessor's policies, those early efforts have still made their presence felt in the developing politics of the region. Recognition of the Circassian genocide has sown fruit in Ukraine, which has adopted the mantle of a potential advocate for the Circassians and a promoter of Pan-Caucasus separatism to challenge Russia. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukrainian officials have been forced to reevaluate their deterrence policy, which has included questions of opening new fronts, forcing Russian to divert its resources. The fractious North Caucasus, the home of numerous stateless people groups, has promised Ukraine a new set of allies in the struggle with Russia. The diasporic web of the Circassians, as well as their productivity with online content, has produced a set of stateless actors who share many of the similar goals, hopes, and aspirations of Ukraine, promising further efforts of collaboration.

The recognition of the Circassian genocide was proposed in the Ukrainian Parliament in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea, as a measure which would also include establishing a commission to issue reports of Russia's brutal conquest of the Caucasus region (Dzutsati, "Ukrainian Lawmaker Publishes Proposal to Recognize Circassian 'Genocide'"). Delegates of the Circassian National Movement formally filed an appeal to recognize the Circassian genocide to the Verkhovna Rada on June 6, 2024 (Ukrainian World Congress), and on January 9, 2025, Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada, in a vote of 232 ayes, and zero abstentions or nays, approved a resolution recognizing the Circassian Genocide, which shall pass to President Zelensky to sign. In addition to recognizing the victims of the genocide, the Ukrainian bill expressed support for the Circassian people, respect for the memory of the dead, and urged other countries to recognize Russia's conquest of Circassia in the nineteenth century as constituting a genocide. Ukraine's resolution believes that Russian needs to be held accountable for its past crimes, that the Circassians need to be repatriated, and that Kyiv itself needs to

develop educational and research programs about the genocide (Bardouka).

Ukrainian lawmakers claim that the resolution's objective is "to support Russian captive people who were oppressed in their efforts to honor their language, traditions, and history, as well as to protect their identity, and right to self-determination" (Ukrainian World Congress). Ukraine has also made other motions to support other North Caucasian activist groups against Russia. For instance, in October of 2022, the Ukrainian government claimed that Chechnya is being occupied by Russia and similarly viewed the Russian conquest of Chechnya as also constituting a genocide (Bardouka; Ekberova; Fabbro; Mel'nikova). In February of 2024, Ukraine also expressed support for the Ingush people's right to self-determination (Bardouka; Krasno; Mchedlishvili). Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion has inspired North Caucasus groups hoping to create their own nation states independent of Russia (Gordadze). By supporting Circassian nationalism, Ukraine hopes to stir up and exploit the ethnic divisions of the multiethnic Russian state menacing its border. The North Caucasians, especially the Circassians, are some of the few Russians citizens who are reluctant to support Russian incursion into Ukraine (Dzutsati, "Ukrainian Lawmaker Publishes Proposal to Recognize Circassian 'Genocide'"). Dzutsati ("Ukrainian Lawmaker Publishes Proposal to Recognize Circassian 'Genocide'") believes that Ukraine is uniquely prepared to help the Circassians, as it is a large country and has "substantial experience" about working with and countering Moscow, potentially offsetting the Circassian diaspora's lack of a strong ally since the defeat of Mikheil Saakashvili.

### **2.1 Ukraine's Use of Conferences**

Moreover, like Georgia, Ukraine utilized conferences to gain momentum for recognizing the Circassian genocide. On May 21, 2024, the Holodomor Museum in Kyiv held an event to commemorate the Circassian Genocide. The day strategically corresponded to the Battle of Krasnaya Polyana in 1864, in which the Russians decisively crushed the Circassian resistance. Andrii

Ivanets, the main researcher at the museum and moderator of the event, discussed the cultural diffusion between Circassians and Ukrainians, and mentioned that the surname of the Cossack Hetman Ivan Mazepa was possibly of Circassian origin: "Ukrainians have long and strong ties with the Circassians: we can see this in the similarity of architecture, lifestyle and even individual words and geographical names" (Holodomor Museum), although he did not provide any academic reference to support this claim.<sup>1</sup> Ibragim Yagan argued that the freedom of Caucasian peoples from Russia can only benefit Ukraine's security. Yaroslav Yurchyshyn, the People's Deputy of Ukraine, compared Russia's actions in the current war in Ukraine to its past conquest of the Caucasus, asserting that the inability of the world to hold Russia accountable for its past enables its depredations in the present (Holodomor Museum). Ukraine has less of a complicated legacy in the region than Georgia for reasons of geography and thus is better prepared to condemn Russian actions in the Caucasus without directly implicating itself. In any case, Ukrainian figures present at the event clearly sought to connect their own ongoing war with Russia to Circassia of the past, seeking to maintain a powerful narrative of mutually oppressed people seeking to desperately resist a greater malevolent power.

Ukraine's recent reception of the mantle for Circassian and North Caucasus causes is markedly differently than the early Georgian efforts in that it is much more forward to condemn Russian present and past actions. In a similar vein, while Georgia mostly sought to operate on its own behalf to foster better relations with the Caucasus, Ukraine has been less clandestine in its encouragement of North Caucasus separatism, and it has also demanded Western and global attention and aid to Ukrainian and North Caucasian efforts to recognize past or present Russian atrocities, which is another marked departure from the Georgian legacy. According to Yurchyshyn, Ukrainian parliamentarians are meeting with American and Baltic state officials, as it is important

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<sup>1</sup> Ukrainian-Circassian historical connections are also reflected in other terminology, including Ukrainian toponyms and the surname "Cherkas" (Zhemukhov, "The Story of Circassian Tobacco").

that Ukraine does not make a unilateral decision, but that other countries follow in recognizing the Circassian genocide (Holodomor Museum).

To that effect, Volodymyr Zelensky has also contributed to this larger effort by depicting himself as an ally to the various peoples of the North Caucasus living under Russian rule. In September of 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky urged different ethnic minorities in Russia to resist recruitment in the war against Ukraine (Reuters). Zelensky, addressing the ethnic minorities of Russia, especially those of the North Caucasus and Siberia, stressed that people such as the Circassians, Chechens, Daghestanis, Ingush, and Ossetians must not die for “Russia’s vile and shameful war.” Zelensky called on the nations of Russia to resist, that he knows they want to live instead of dying for an immoral cause, and that they are tired of all the lies they have been told (The Insider).

Following the Verkhovna Rada’s decision, on March 28, 2025, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers issued an executive order appealing to foreign governments and international organizations to raise awareness of the Circassian genocide, “as well as other crimes committed by the Russian Empire,” through educational and research initiatives. (Pro zvernennya). As a result, Ukraine is now offering the Circassians and other North Caucasus groups the opportunity to gain state agency through outside forces and influences, in which the legacy of Georgia’s recognition of the Circassian genocide continues, offering the Circassian diaspora more opportunities to promote their goals and gain international attention.

## **2.2 Continued Ties between Georgians and the Chechens**

One of the notable examples of the continued legacies of Pan-Caucasus cooperation that endures to a degree today is Tbilisi’s relationship with Chechens. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chechens and Georgians, with a shared border and a Chechen minority still in Georgia proper, were inherently connected to the same political events. Even as late as 2023, as Georgian Dream continues to scale back such efforts that threaten to provoke Russia, the idealism of Georgian and Chechen cooperation

remains. Tsira Biramidze, the Director of the Institute of Caucasian Studies at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, gave a speech for the centennial of the Itum-Kale district, during which she focused on the historical connections and kinship between Chechens and Georgians. Undoubtedly in an attempt to demonstrate Georgia as a more liberal country which seeks to preserve and respect indigenous languages, as compared to Russia and its historical suppression of North Caucasus political initiatives and cultural development, she also stressed how Chechen and other Vainakh languages are taught at her university, and she mentioned her recent publications about the Chechen language and Kist dialect (Nunayeva).

### **2.3 Circassians Advocating for Release of Saakashvili**

An even clearer piece of evidence for the enduring influence of the Georgian Pan-Caucasus strategy exemplified with the recognition of the Circassian genocide is the continued support of Circassians for Saakashvili after he has been imprisoned by his enemies. Circassian activists urged Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili to pardon the former Georgian president. The request made sure to not appear combative or questioning of the Georgian legal system while also insisting that the former Georgian leader deserves forgiveness and a release from prison. By recognizing the genocide, the activists claim that the former Georgian president gave the Circassians “a stimulus” to remember their own history and to better understand their legal objectives, in effect enabling them to appeal to international systems to gain justice: “This was a big gift from the Georgian people—hope for the future, and the possibility to evolve the paradigm of international laws”, which the activists insist that the former Georgian leader was the first to open to the path forward for the Circassians (Stepanov). Besides recognizing the genocide, Circassian activists were also appreciative that the former Georgian president enabled Russian citizens of the North Caucasus to visit Georgia without visas. The activists also hope to translate their appeal in English to reach the Circassian diaspora and gain more signatures, before they present the document to Zurbishvili. Kasei Kik, the leader of the Circassian

Congress organization, stated that the former Georgian leader is being treated horribly, and that he personally respects the man immensely for recognizing the Circassian genocide (Stepanov). Kasei Kik believes that the Georgian people need to know the positive role that Saakashvili has played for the peoples of the Caucasus by recognizing the Circassian genocide (Kmuzov). Ibragim Yagan also felt obligated to sign the letter out of his “deep respect” for the former Georgian leader, and he believes that many signed it (Stepanov 2021). He stressed that the former Georgian president was the only leader in the post-Soviet space who attempted to establish normal relations with North Caucasian peoples (Kmuzov). Moreover, the Circassian activist Shamsudin Neguch did not believe that signing the appeal would do anything for releasing the former president, but he still did it to demonstrate his immense respect for Georgia and its people (Stepanov). While ultimately unsuccessful, these efforts indicate that Saakashvili’s 2011 decision to recognize the genocide has earned him the enduring and committed support of the Circassian diaspora even as his political fortunes ebb.

### **Chapter 3: Textual and Comparative Analysis of the Georgian and Ukrainian Resolution Recognizing the Circassian Genocide**

The following table identifies several key terms that are notable for both the Georgian and Ukrainian resolutions recognizing the Circassian Genocide, to demonstrate how much the Ukrainian document has copied from the Georgian original, as well as contained many new innovations. Both documents clearly carry a clear political impetus and context unique to both host countries at the time of the resolutions’ passing.

Table 1. *Textual Analysis and Terminology Comparison of Georgian and Ukrainian Resolutions Recognizing Circassian Genocide*

	Textual Analysis and Terminology	Georgia 2011	Ukraine 2025
1	Use of term “genocide” - a strategic goal of Circassian movement	YES	YES
2	Use of term “colonial policy”	YES	YES
3	Use of term Russo-Caucasian war, 1763-1864	YES	YES
4	Appeal to figure of 90 percent of Circassians killed and deported	YES	YES
5	Mention Kabardino-Balkaria Republic 1992 Recognition of Circassian genocide	YES	YES
6	Use of the term mass extermination	YES	YES
7	Use of the term artificial famine	YES	YES
8	Use of the term epidemics	YES	YES
9	Use of the term “state sponsored terrorism”	NO	YES
10	Express condolences to Circassia	NO	YES
11	Use of the term refugees	YES	NO
12	Calls on foreign states and international organizations to recognize genocide	NO	YES
13	Condemn the current Russian regime's attempts falsify history	NO	YES
14	Coinciding the resolution with May 21 commemoration of the Circassia genocide	YES	NO
15	Unanimous voting	YES	YES
16	Call for repatriation of the Circassians, a strategic goal of Circassian movement	NO	YES
17	Reference to earlier Parliamentary decisions on the subject, e.g. in support of support of the right of self-determination of Russian ethnic minority people - a strategic goal of Circassian movement	NO	YES
18	Omitting reference to Abkhazia	YES	YES

Both statements use the term “genocide” in their document, serving a strategic goal of Circassian activists, who want the international community to recognize the Russian conquest of

their land as constituting a genocide. Both documents share the use of “artificial famines” in reference to the Russian Empire’s policy of starving Circassians and destroying agriculture to weaken the resistance. They both use the term “massive extermination of the Circassian (Adyghe) people” and accuse the Russian Empire of deliberately weaponizing epidemics against the Circassians. They both mention the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic’s 1992 Recognition of the Circassian Genocide, likely to demonstrate that their actions are not without precedent, and that they are in fact acting in accordance with the wishes of the Circassian people. Neither the Georgian nor the Ukrainian document mentions Abkhazians, even though they suffered in much the same manner as their Circassian kin (Rusetis; Pro vyznannya henotsydu). The terms “Circassian” and “Adyghe” in the documents primarily refer to the Northwestern Caucasus and Kabarda (Richmond). As part of a settlement policy which both resolutions mention in their recognition of the genocide, the Russian Empire moved other ethnic groups into gutted Circassian and Abkhazian territories, including Georgians. By not mentioning this, the Georgian lawmakers can demand that Russia enact some form of repatriation of Circassians while ignoring their country’s own complicated legacy with Abkhazians. Additionally, mentioning repatriation in the legislative document was inconsistent with Georgia’s cautious policy toward the Meskhetian Turks, who had been subjected to forced deportation from Georgia during WWII and are allowed to resettle in the country, but without the right to return to the regions from which they were expelled (Khashig, Zhemukhov, “Recognition Without Independence: Abkhazia’s International Context”).

Despite all these similarities, the Ukrainian resolution does possess several marked differences from its Georgian counterpart, being much more thorough, detailed, and clearly critical of Russia. The Ukrainian document more clearly attempts to connect the Russian Federation to the Russian Empire. For example, the Ukrainian document refers to the Russian Empire’s actions as “state-sponsored terrorism.” Kyiv also expresses condolences to the Circassian people, in a section that has no counterpart in the

Georgian resolution. Similarly, the Ukrainian resolution condemns the current Russian government's attempts to "falsify" history. In contrast, the Georgian government seems less determined to explicitly condemn the current authorities in the Kremlin. Moreover, the Ukrainian document also appeals to an older proclamation of the Rada declaring its support for the right of self-determination of ethnic minorities in the Russian Empire. Not only does this signify the historical and political continuity of Kyiv's current decision, but it also represents the goals of Circassian activists who want sovereignty or independence.

Nevertheless, the Georgian document, while less emotionally charged, does still adapt its resolution to fit its political context. For example, in addition to recognizing the Circassian genocide, the other major statement of document appeals to UN precedents to classify the Circassian deportees of the Russo-Circassian War as "refugees." The reason for this somewhat vague and unexpected clause lies in the historical context of Tbilisi's decision. Prior to 2008, the Georgians regarded the Circassians as potential allies of the separatist Abkhazians, and thus worthy of suspicion, as opposed to a useful tool to weaken Russian hegemony in the region. The catastrophic defeat against Russia in 2008 essentially solidified the autonomy of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. To that effect, the trauma of the unmitigated defeat, while not explicitly mentioned, is unescapable from the document. The reference to Circassian refugees comes in the context of the refugee crises that occurred in the formation of the modern Georgian state. Both Abkhazia in 1992 and South Ossetia in 2008 forced the large Georgian populations in their territories from their homes, creating a refugee crisis. Thus, the decision of 2011 would not only not have occurred without the events of 2008, but the resolution's goal is to both refer to and to find a means to avenge the 2008 losses.

Despite its generally less inflammatory nature in comparison to the Ukrainian version, the Georgian document still preserves much symbolism. It passed in Parliament on May 20, which was clearly intentional, given that the Circassians commemorate the losses of their people, because of the Russian conquest, every year

on May 21. Ukraine's lack of a symbolic date for its own Rada's vote is notable, given that Ukraine has been willing to employ the symbolism of dates beforehand. For instance, in 2024, in recognition of the Ingush people's right to self-determination, the Ukrainian lawmakers sought to make the date align with the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet authorities' massive deportation of Chechens and Ingush into Central Asia (Pro vyznannya prava inhus'koho narodu, V godovshchinu).

Interestingly, both Parliament's votes were unanimous in passing the resolution to recognize the Circassian genocide. Nevertheless, there were Georgian analysts and politicians who expressed concern about the initiative, while Ukraine, albeit a much more recent event, has not reflected this potential discontent simmering under the surface. Perhaps because it is not as historically connected to Circassia as Georgia for geographic, and, to a certain extent, cultural reasons, the Ukrainian government views its proclamation in more international terms. For instance, the Ukrainian resolution calls on the Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada and the Ukrainian government to disseminate the resolution and to urge other countries to recognize the Circassian genocide. Nothing of this nature exists in the comparatively insular Georgian document. The Ukrainian document mentions setting up educational and research initiatives in support of greater awareness and study of the Circassian genocide. While Georgian authorities did implement certain initiatives, such as the creation of the Circassian Cultural Center in Tbilisi, which sought to raise greater awareness of the genocide, support research, promote Circassian culture, and to create a space of Circassian-Georgian interaction and collaboration, the Georgian document does not mention such initiatives. These policies were consistent with the era of Saakashvili's second term, which sought to foster better relations between Georgian and North Caucasus nations, to weaken Russian dominance in the region.

### **Conclusion**

Since the inception of its independence, Georgia's political impetus has been to seek to keep territories with large

concentrations of the North Caucasus within its borders, while also fueling greater relationships with people groups in the Russian Federation, to serve as a buffer against its powerful Russian neighbor. At the same time of this impetus, the Circassian movement, with the rise of the internet and different social reconfigurations, has gradually gained more connection between the diaspora and Russian-based Circassians, enabling them to gain more platforms to advocate their goals (Hansen).

Tbilisi after the 2008 Russo-Georgia War, with loss of its separatist territories and its lack of support from the European Union and the United States, shifted its foreign policy to fostering greater connections with the peoples of the North Caucasus. Supporting Circassians would place the Abkhazians in a delicate position, forced to pick between their enemies and their old friends. Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide in 2011 was not only the fulfilment of greater collaboration between Circassian activists and Georgian officials but inaugurated sustained contact and cooperation with North Caucasus groups to weaken Russian influence.

While many of these enactments were later disbanded under the Georgian Dream Party, Tbilisi's Pan-Caucasus projects and use of Circassians as a bludgeon to weaken Russia in the cultural and information war continues. Of greater importance, it continues to animate the Circassians and other peoples of the North Caucasus. For one, Circassian activists are still grateful for Saakashvili making his state a promoter of their political causes, to the point of advocating for his release. Even more significantly, the Verkhovna Rada's decision of January 9, 2025, signifies that not only is Ukraine willing to take up the mantle of an outsider actor seeking to use North Caucasus separatism and nationalism to weaken the Russian Federation in the name of humanitarianism, but that the 2011 recognition of the Circassian genocide continues to bear fruit.

Thanks to the efforts of Kyiv and Tbilisi in 2011 and 2025, as well as the Circassian movement, the issue of recognizing the Circassian genocide has gained greater prominence—both in the politics of historical memory and in the context of contemporary geopolitics and social dynamics. The Kremlin is increasingly

struggling to ignore the sustained efforts of Circassian activists and communities, or to effectively deny them subjectivity and agency. As a result, Circassians are no longer a mere passive instrument to broader geopolitical forces, but active participants shaping their own narrative. The future of the Circassian movement and of the North Caucasus are both predictably unpredictable, volatile, and ever shifting, but the politics and legacy of genocide recognition is a chapter in this complex story which endures, to the point that the Russian Federation can only ignore it at its own peril.

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