

Mountain of Tongues

Can a nationalist movement from the internet save the world's most scattered people?

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WHAT THE ANCIENTS KNEW about the fortress of mountains between the Black and Caspian Seas was that it was home to many peoples and impossible to reach. Herodotus heard from the Persians that “many and all manner of nations dwell in the Caucasus,” most of whom he claimed lived on wild shrubs. Five centuries later, the geographer Strabo attempted to catalogue some of these curious tribes, among them a mounted army of women warriors called the Amazons, and Pliny the Elder noted that the Romans had needed 130 interpreters to speak the *linguae francae* in Dioscurias, the city on the Black Sea coast to which upland clans descended to do business.

But the first person to penetrate the Caucasus and report back in reliable detail on its bewildering diversity was a tenth-century Arab historian and geographer named Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Hussain al-Mas’udi. He also coined its most enduring nickname: *Jabal al-Asun*, or the Mountain of Tongues.

In the Caucasus, al-Mas’udi found “seventy-two nations, and every nation has its own king and language which differs from the others.” The inhabitants of these discrete tide pools of humanity followed no major world religion, wrote no histories, kowtowed to no great power, and were often unknown even to their neighbors

on account of the difficulty of communication, which is impeded by the height and roughness of the mountains, by marshes and forests, by the waters which flow down from the summits, and by the immense rocks and stones.

This observation—that high-friction terrain isolates and thereby fosters cultural

difference—has been echoed by anthropologists in our own era. Mountains are to human as coral reefs are to aquatic life, providing the ideal conditions for diversity to flourish. Their inhabitants are hard to reach, much less assimilate into the kingdoms and states below; as a result, they are better able to preserve their habits, beliefs, and languages against the smothering monotones of the lowlands.

One of the groups al-Mas’udi met was the Circassians, a loose collection of clans who today called themselves Adyghe, and who are among the oldest and largest indigenous peoples of the northwest Caucasus. They were herders who worshipped trees, raided caravans, and welcomed guests with the florid protocols of the old Persian world. Al-Mas’udi wrote that their men and women were the cleanest and handsomest among their neighbors, and that they were weakened only by disunity. “If they were united, neither the [neighboring] Alans nor any other nation would have power over them.”

The indigenous peoples of the Caucasus have been steadily disappearing since the enclosure

of the empire began more than 250 years ago, as one after another tribe found itself outnumbered and outgunned by a newly unified Russia. In the mid-1800s, after centuries of uneasy relations with local kingdoms, Russia's imperial army managed, through its inexhaustible ranks of conscripted Cossacks, to sweep the Caucasus from sea to sea, whereupon the "seventy-two nations" described by al-Mas'udi were subdued.

Some tribes, like the Ubykh, were dispersed so thoroughly that today their language—a trove of rare linguistic gems—is functionally extinct. Others, like the Chechens, lived among their occupiers and today persist on their ancestral lands, where they have waged guerrilla campaigns of secession underwritten by militant Islam.

The Circassians were scattered most thoroughly and brutally of all. Between 1861 and 1864—the final years of a century-long war of attrition—the Russian army raided and burned their auls, massacred entire villages, and exiled the survivors as part of a targeted ethnic cleansing that one historian has described, on the occasion of its 150th anniversary, as "one of the least remembered genocides in world history."

The Russian empire declared victory over the last of the Circassian tribes on May 21, 1864, hosting a military parade on a bloodstained battlefield near Sochi. Most of the survivors of what has come to be known as the Circassian genocide became some of the earliest cases of modern statelessness; today, the Circassians are the most scattered people on Earth. Out of a contemporary population of about 7 million, some 90 percent live in diaspora: the largest contingent in Turkey, followed by communities in Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, the Balkans, Germany, and Paterson, New Jersey.

The story of Circassia remains all but unknown in the English-speaking world, the result of generations of suppression in the Soviet Union and the process of assimilation elsewhere. But after 150 years in obscurity, Circassians are reemerging as an ethnic and political force. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Circassians began to gather in towns around the world every May 21 to mourn their continued exile and reaffirm their survival. The tradition spread quickly

with the help of the internet, where young Circassians began to find one another while also rediscovering a history long repressed.

Among diaspora communities, the Day of Mourning is typically a cultural celebration, with music, food, and dancing. But the day has taken on political overtones in strongholds of Circassian life like Istanbul and, increasingly, Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, a small Russian republic in the heart of the ancestral Circassian homeland. In recent years, Nalchik has become host to a growing post-Soviet return-migration movement, one that began in exile inside the transnational frontier zones of chat rooms and Facebook groups, but which is now coming home. As 2018's Day of Mourning approached, activists predicted the march through Nalchik would be the largest in its history. It was to be a call to return.

The details were otherwise scant. Young nationalists are not typically allowed to run riot in repressive autocracies like Putin's Russia. Authorities have forbidden any commemoration of the Circassian genocide from taking place in state strongholds like Moscow, and they have arrested activists who demonstrate in tourist centers like Sochi. Border guards are known to deport foreign-born activists, and local groups tend to keep low profiles.

I wasn't surprised, then, when my application for a journalist visa was rejected three times. I went anyway. The dangers of falling in with a group of nationalists while on a tourist visa, or running afoul of the country's elaborate state intelligence network, struck me as acceptably remote. Besides, there were more enigmatic dangers to worry about—at least according to the preeminent scholar of the languages of the Caucasus, a hyperpolyglot professor in Ontario named John Colarusso. For decades, he has been an expert on the Caucasus and their irresistible pull, which has seduced spies and linguists as well as writers such as Lermontov and Tolstoy, who was said to be escaping to the Caucasus when he died of pneumonia at a train station at Astapovo. "There's a phrase in Russian, you know," Colarusso told me. "*Kavkazskiy plennik*. It means 'prisoner of the Caucasus.' Once you're in, you'll never escape."

ON MAY 20, the eve of the Circassian Day of Mourning, I flew from Moscow to Nalchik on the daily Aeroflot run, passing like a shadow over unfordable rivers and narrow corniches. We landed inside the mountains, where I'd been instructed to wait in the small airport parking lot for a man with the nom de plume Schamis Hatko. The lot was muggy and hot, and there were nearly as many taxi drivers as there were passengers. Mount Elbrus, the volcano that is called the highest peak in Europe, stood in the distance, blotted with sunlight and snow. I watched the plane take off again. The taxi drivers went home.

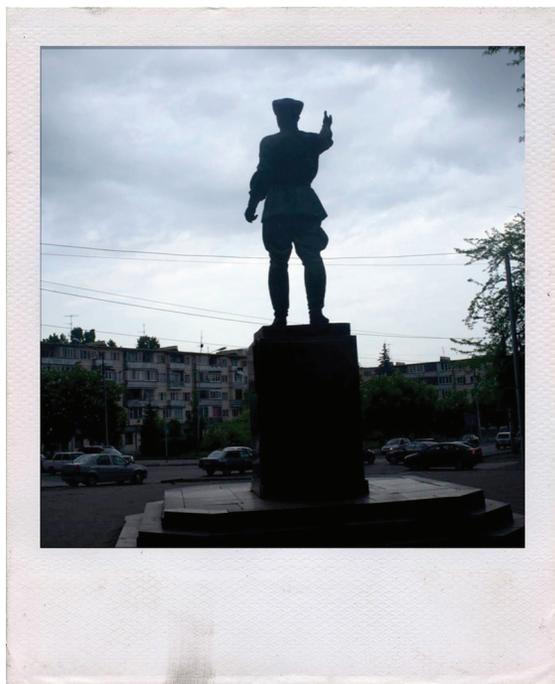
Schamis showed up an hour late, bounding from his car with one hand grasping for mine while answering his phone with the other. "Sorry," he said. "I have a lot of problems today."

One of his problems was a busload of fifty-five Turkish-diaspora Circassians who were detained at the Russia–Georgia border. For the last four years, Schamis has helped to organize an annual pilgrimage of heritage tourists from Turkey, who are joined in Nalchik by other Circassians from Europe and America. Every year, the bus runs into trouble. As we spoke, border guards were taking the men away one by one for private interrogations. Schamis didn't know whether they would be allowed into the country. Two years ago, the bus was made to drive all the way back to Ankara with its dozens of passengers, and last year, when the trip had been so popular they'd needed two buses, only the drivers and their vehicles were turned around, leaving the passengers stranded at the crossing. Schamis had had to arrange for two Russian buses to collect them. Such mercurial tactics succeed in making Circassians unsure of their status in their homeland, but it hasn't dissuaded them from coming.

Schamis strategized over the phone with a contact on the bus, a pilgrim from Izmir who happened to be his mother. "She'll update me," he said when he hung up. "She's a patriot too."

Schamis was born into exile in a small village in southern Turkey, where he developed a sophisticated appreciation for national identity. As a boy, he could walk into Syria as you might stroll into a neighbor's garden. It never

occurred to him that there was anything unusual about the fact that his family spoke Turkish to the outside world, in accordance with a law dating back to Atatürk, and Circassian only at home. His college education was stalled by the 1980 military coup, which shut down most of the country's civic institutions for several years. When martial law ended and the universities reopened, he performed his first political act, helping to organize a demonstration in support of the first Palestinian intifada. Because he knew he would be arrested, he told his mother to hide his leftist books. He spent the next four years in prison, thinking, he told me, "about praxis and philosophy." After a general amnesty, he studied in Darmstadt, then found himself working for the next two decades at the opera house in Frankfurt, occasionally taking leaves of absence to embed inside emancipatory movements the world over. As I got to know him, he would off-handedly mention stints with Basque separatists, Sinn Féin, Māori educators, the Zapatistas, and *il manifesto*, as well as one or two groups he suggested I not put in print. "I thought a lot about other national movements," he told me. "I



traveled, I saw, I learned. I began to understand the mistakes Circassians were making.”

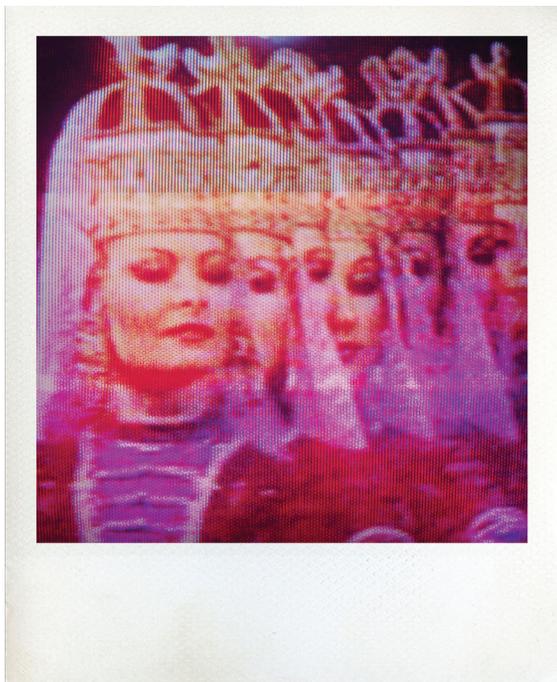
The biggest mistake, he believed, was attempting to preserve Circassian life in diaspora without a motherland to which they could someday return. “This was the most important difference,” he said. “The Basque patriots? They tried to build their country. The Irish? They wanted their own country. The Māori? The same. But all our Circassian associations in diaspora were busy with culture, with folklore, dancing, and so on. For them, Circassia was finished. It was Atlantis.”

In 2009, together with a handful of online admirers, Schamis founded the Patriots of Circassia. They met in person two years later in Istanbul, where they helped to organize the largest May 21 demonstration the city had ever seen. Photos of the event record a sea of green flags and determined faces. The following year, they turned their attention to the Caucasus. “We built a new politics in diaspora,” Schamis said. “Then we started talking about building a country again.”

Schamis spoke like someone who understood

that his personal life might at any moment align with the wages of history. He even looked the part of political prophet, with silver hair, a jaw like a carriage clamp, and one blue and one green eye. Although he described himself as a nationalist, the concrete goals of the Patriots of Circassia sounded to me like what you might hear from any indigenous or civil-rights movement: the right for all Circassians to return to the Caucasus, minority representation within the Russian Federation, and Circassian-language instruction in local schools.

We drove to the center of town for an evening ceremony. All around us, steep pine-covered hills projected a pure idea of space and solemn clarity. Set into one of the hills was a large brick restaurant shaped like a man’s head, arm, and hand that gripped a torch of brick-red flame, visible for miles around. This was Sosruquo, a trickster warrior and the most famous hero in Circassian folklore, who stole fire from the gods to give to man. The ancient Greeks recast him as Prometheus, one of several mythological figures whose earliest known predecessors—including prefigurations of Odin, Moses, Odysseus,



Circe, and Indra, the hero of the Rig Veda—appear in the body of Circassian myth known as the Nart Sagas.

I told Schamis I was surprised to see such an open symbol of Circassian beliefs in a country that has gone to extraordinary lengths to suppress its indigenous cultures in the Caucasus. Schamis said that I had to understand that Nalchik was unique: It both was, and was not, Russia. “A majority of people here are Circassian,” he said. “You see the signs everywhere. The national consciousness is strong.” Not only do three Circassian clans (Adyghe, Cherkess, and Kabardinian) constitute titular nationalities in three federal republics of Russia, but here, in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, there were even more Circassians than there were ethnic Russians.

Yet events in Nalchik do not pass entirely outside Moscow’s notice. In 2017, hundreds of armed military guards turned up to line the route of the Day of Mourning march, and in some years the crowds have reportedly been blocked from their planned route or forced to disperse. Elsewhere in Russia, authorities are far stricter. Gatherings are canceled or forbidden by local fiat, and local activists are strategically detained at police stations to prevent

them from meeting foreign emissaries of Circassian groups. Outspoken leaders have been hospitalized by gangs of men wielding baseball bats, or forced into exile, and several have even been gunned down under murky circumstances, most recently in 2010, when both the leader of a Circassian youth movement and the adviser to the president of the Karachay–Cherkessian Republic were shot dead in two separate but equally bizarre incidents.

But the single event that may have done more than anything else to spark the international Circassian reawakening was the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, whose skiing and snowboarding events were held on the very parade grounds where the Russian army declared victory in 1864. Circassians organized protests in Sochi that precipitated dozens of arrests and police deported the leaders of several Turkey-based diaspora groups. At least one activist told reporters he was tortured while in custody. Meanwhile, the opening ceremonies went on as planned, with no mention of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus.

Despite these indignities, the Patriots weren’t looking for trouble, Schamis said. They believed in nonviolence. The most important



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thing was to show up and be counted. “If our main demand is to return to our homeland,” he said, “then on this special day we must come back and demand it.”

AT A PARK IN THE MIDDLE of the city, we joined a procession of men in *astrakhan* hats and spotless wool *cherkesskas*. Their chests were adorned with rows of canisters for gunpowder and lead shot, but no one was armed unless you counted the ritual knives that almost every man wore strapped to his belt. Women in long-sleeved dresses were deep-frying bread and stirring a black cauldron of *kalmyk* tea. On the drive over, we had picked up a fellow Patriot, an amateur boxer named Erdoğan who’d flown in from Hannover, Germany. Erdoğan draped his arm around my shoulder and waxed sentimental about the respect and intimacy he encountered every time he came to Nalchik. You could feel the presence of the elaborate Circassian code of behavior—called *xabze*—in the air, he said. “You can sense it.”

“Back to the roots!” Schamis crowed, and raised his fist.

In the park was a long plaza where a few hundred people had gathered. At one end of the square, steps ascended to a monument erected in 2015 to honor those killed or exiled during the 101-year Russian-Circassian War. The monument is memorably bizarre: a stylized bronze tree whose even rows of branches bend upward like insect arms. Schamis explained that the tree was covering its eyes as it wept for the dead. He said it was known colloquially as the Tree of Life, a sacred concept for many Caucasus tribes. At the foot of the monument, I met a heavy-metal guitarist who insisted it was called the Genocide Tree.

“It’s not the official name,” someone nearby

said. “The government wouldn’t stand for it.”

“That’s true,” the guitarist said, “but everyone calls it the Genocide Tree.” One of the local elders, a man in a purple suit and inky-black *astrakhan*, warned us to watch what we were saying. He gestured at the hundreds of people gathered before the monument.

“Twenty percent of them are FSB,” he whispered, referring to the Federal Security Service, which had succeeded the Soviet-era KGB as Russia’s secret police. Surveillance was still part of the national *donnée*.

The ceremony began. Musicians played lamentations on accordion between prerecorded polyphonic dirges that redlined the PA system. A woman recited a poem about the forced migration to Turkey, and a young boy played the most famous Circassian lament, “The Way to Istanbul,” on a horsetail violin. Erdoğan came over to me holding one of the commemorative green ribbons I’d seen being handed out, and solemnly pinned it to the front of my parka. Although it felt a little deceptive—like I was going undercover—I didn’t remove it.

After the concert, Schamis’s phone rang. “Ah, the bus is arriving,” he said. We walked over to where a white bus had just pulled up at the edge of the park. We got into Schamis’s car and followed it out of the center of the city, into the woods, and over a rushing tributary of the Urvan River to a Soviet-era sanatorium whose marbled entryway smelled strongly of coal heating.

The pilgrims had arrived. Travelers fell out of the bus and into the lobby, stretching their legs and searching for passports. They had been on the road for thirty-six hours, eight of which had been spent at the border. Janberd, an oral surgeon from Istanbul, later recounted his interrogation by the Russian guards. “They knew my name,” he said. “They knew I was a leader in the

Circassian movement in Turkey. They wanted to know whether I liked Russia. My interrogator said, ‘If you like the Russian Federation so much, would you say the phrase “Russia Forever”?’ I said that of course I would say ‘Russia Forever,’ but that it would be incomplete. He asked me, ‘What is the complete saying?’ I replied, ‘People of Russia Forever. My people is one of your people.’ And he smiled and said he understood me. You see? We know their games and we know how to play them. Just like they’ve stuck us in this dusty hotel on the edge of town. You think that’s an accident?”

Janberd wasn’t put off by games or interrogations. He’d been visiting the Caucasus since the area first opened to foreigners in the early nineties, when he’d come as part of a youth dance troupe. No one had known about the genocide then, he told me, not even his own distant relatives in his ancestral village. They’d all been brainwashed by the Soviets into believing the Circassians had left voluntarily. He hadn’t been afraid to tell people the truth then, nor was he worried about being detained or deported now. “They can kill me for all I care,” he said. He only hoped that if they did kill him, they would bury his body on the north side of the mountains, in Russia, so that his two sons could visit his grave in their homeland. His fear was that he might die on the wrong side of the border and find himself buried in Georgia instead.

THERE HAS NEVER been a nation of Circassia. Yet neither is Circassian nationalism a new idea. It seems to have originated in the nineteenth century, toward the end of the Russian-Circassian War. Before that, there was no unifying form to Circassian society, with some small clans practicing a kind of egalitarian folk democracy while most large ones adopted a feudal structure with a ruling class, citizens, and slaves. After the eighteenth-century conversion of many tribes to a syncretic form of Sunni Islam, Circassians became the particular obsession of Russian writers and leisure travelers from Europe, for whom they represented the meeting of East and West, combining all the features of barbarism and civilization while also serving as a blank space onto which race theorists could

project their fantasies about “wild,” “pale,” and “beautiful” Circassian women. (These fantasies evolved, so to speak, into the scientifically meaningless Caucasian racial category we know today.) From its inception, the notion of a single, homogeneous Circassia was partly the invention of outsiders.

Some of this attention was political. In the mid-1700s, Catherine the Great decided that the Black Sea coast ought to belong to her adopted country as a bulwark against the Ottomans. Both empires considered the peoples between them to be primitive hordes, and the Circassians, who numbered as many as 2 million, to be the largest horde of them all. Among the Russians, the most common appellation for them was *khishchiniki*—thief or plunderer.

Catherine approved a fort at Mozdók, which became the army’s southernmost reach, followed by several other outposts, including Nalchik, which was founded as a military base. By the 1820s, most members of the largest Circassian tribe, the Kabardians, had been killed or forced deeper into the mountains, but it took another forty years to defeat them all. In 1839, a coastal blockade stopped nearly all foreign trade, causing a famine and giving one Russian admiral the idea to destroy the tribes’ crops and cattle in order to deliberately starve them to death. Within a year, field reports were describing the successful *ochishchenie* (cleansing) of Circassian villages, possibly the first use of the term in its most modern of contexts. Some of the Russians’ methods were grotesque, as when the heads of decapitated horsemen were displayed on pikes outside army camps, then boiled and sent to Berlin for ethnographic study. “Mankind has rarely experienced such disasters and to such extremes,” one Russian officer wrote, “but only horror could have an effect on the hostile mountaineers and drive them from the impenetrable mountain thickets.”

In the late 1830s, one avid British intercessor named David Urquhart designed a Circassian flag and declared that he had created a unified nation: “Then it was that an involuntary oracle burst forth from my lips. ‘You are no longer tribes but a people; you are Circassians, and this is Circassia.’”

He hadn't, and it wasn't. But in 1860, toward the end of the war, the major clans did manage to set aside their differences to form a short-lived *khase*, or parliament, based in Sochi, in order to petition Tsar Alexander I to negotiate a peace treaty.

It was the first time the Circassian tribes had acted as a single political unit in recorded history. They were ignored. Russia's military commanders believed Circassians would always be "half-loyal highlanders," so while other tribes were assimilated or forced to migrate internally, Circassian refugees were marched to the Black Sea and packed onto skippers bound for the Ottoman Empire. Many of the boats foundered en route; survivors were beset by disease, starvation, and the Anatolian winter. Although scholarly estimates range widely, as many as 1.5 million Circassians died in the final years of the war.

Other attempts to unify the Caucasus followed. After the 1917 February Revolution, a congress of intellectuals gathered in Vladikavkaz to found the short-lived Republic of the North Caucasian Mountaineers. But the Bolsheviks disbanded it, and soon after, the leaders of the new Soviet Union divided Circassian territory into three administrative units based on the clusters of tribes and ethnic groups that remained there. The center of Circassian life moved to Turkey, where diaspora groups began to appear in the 1950s. Soviet leaders meanwhile permitted Circassians to speak their own language and maintain some folkloric aspects of their identity, but rejected appeals for the return of diasporic Circassians and suppressed all facts related to the genocide and exile, a policy that persists among most mainstream Russian historians today. With the exception of an ambivalent comment by then president Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation has never acknowledged that any conflict ever took place. When, a few years ago, a Circassian committee petitioned the Duma to recognize the Circassian genocide, they received a curt statement blaming Joseph Stalin, who was born in 1878, for their persecution.

THE FALL OF THE Soviet Union expanded the frontiers of the possible for the disenfranchised

peoples of the Caucasus. The Georgia–Abkhazia Conflict and the First Chechen War suggested one violent option for achieving a nation: secession. Nationalist movements fractured the region on either side of the mountains in the 1990s and 2000s, resulting in two disputed territories within Georgia—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and a popular if incomplete understanding of the Caucasus as a place masochistically predisposed to fraternal bloodshed.

But post-Soviet nationalism could also take peaceful forms. In the 1990s, individual regions within Russia enjoyed (at least initially) broad authority to govern themselves through local laws and regional constitutions. The administrative regions of the northwest Caucasus became three of the Russian Federation's new republics, territories dedicated to non-Russian ethnic groups. Almost immediately, Circassians could apply for permanent residency and even citizenship in Kabardino-Balkaria with minimal burden of proof. Statistics from this period aren't public, but one researcher I spoke with uncovered a document stating that in 1993, around three thousand diasporic Circassians returned to the city of Nalchik alone.

This freedom of movement didn't last. The Russian government began to restrict migration in the 1990s. With the implementation of a new citizenship law in 2003, it became next to impossible for Circassians to become citizens. When Circassians move voluntarily to Nalchik, it is often through unusual means, such as by securing a passport in Abkhazia, or by enrolling in Kabardino-Balkarian State University, which cannily describes itself on its English-language website as "the best university for international students in Russian Federation [sic]."

There is also another, far larger agora for young Circassian minds: the internet. Strategies for direct action and community events are hashed out across continents on blogs and Facebook. Circassian Instagram is filled with nationalist memes and historical photos, as well as photoshopped passports boasting Urquhart's resurrected Circassian flag, a visual manifestation of the ultimate, impossible dream: statehood.

"The internet was developed for Circassian people," one of Schamis's protégés, a Caucasus



native named Martin, told me. “We were divided and sent to fifty different countries. The internet has helped us very much. It was founded to unite us.” Martin’s own group of young activists, named Xabze, spreads its propaganda to tens of thousands of Instagram followers, where videos of traditional dancing are juxtaposed with news items, memes, and stock photos of warriors on horseback. One academic suggests that these popular accounts, many of which are based outside Russia, produce virtual representations of the old country—*xekwzch* in Circassian—in order to “recreate the coherence lost by dispersion and fragmentation.”

They are following a mold established in part by Schamis himself. The first post-Soviet generation was just coming of age when he began to put his ideas into writing. He published his early articles on Circassian identity and return-migration for a Canadian website, signing them with his Circassian name rather than the Turkish one his parents had been legally required to give him at birth. In these early articles, writing in the lucid, ironic style for which he has become known, he argued that only by returning to the *xekwzch* could Circassians preserve their language and culture. If Circassian life was to survive, it would have to come home. His writing attracted the first members of the Patriots of Circassia. “The way he writes about these subjects,” Erdoğan told me, “he is very subtle, never aggressive, but puts it just so, without force.”

Zeynel Abidin Besleney, a scholar of the Circassian diaspora, writes that the new return-migration movement is distinguished from earlier forms of Circassian nationalism by its birthplace in virtual space, bringing activists from different countries and even continents into contact via Facebook, Skype, and Twitter—and, later, in the physical world. Schamis’s genius was to capitalize on this international reach, reconciling diaspora and homeland activism for the first time and making the “global Circassian nation-building process” his group’s *raison d’être*. According to Besleney, this makes the Patriots “the ultimate example of cyber-activism turning into a fully fledged political movement.”

THE SANATORIUM was a campus of tennis courts and low concrete buildings set into the side of a hill, surrounded by deep emerald forest. The rooms were musty and threadbare but still had traces of their former elegance. Ornate blankets were fistulated with cigarette burns. The pilgrims bunked three or four to a room.

The morning of the march, we got up early and dressed in grays and blacks. I was sharing a bathroom with Mesut and Marat, two friends who’d traveled from Stuttgart. They were Turkish-born Circassians who had moved to Germany decades ago; both were now EU citizens. Marat’s wife had allowed him to fly to Russia only if Mesut accompanied him and kept him out of trouble, a responsibility Mesut accepted solemnly, just as he now solemnly promised to look out for my safety, too. Before leaving, he urged me to follow them to the sanatorium office building, where an indifferent manager fished our passports and immigration cards from an overflowing wooden box. “We’ll keep our documents in case something happens,” he said.

We boarded the bus and drove to the city train station, where the march would begin. A thousand people were already fanning themselves in the shade beneath the station’s pediment, which was adorned with a hammer and sickle. Police officers and armed soldiers were scattered among the crowd. It was a different sort of assembly than last night’s, more subdued. No one shouted or sang. There was no joking. The storefronts lining the route of the march were all shuttered, as though in advance of a storm. We positioned ourselves at the side of the main road. Mesut hoped to travel to his ancestral village after the march, and he was eager to avoid unwanted attention. “If anyone asks,” he said, “we’ll tell them we’re not a confederation.”

The march began with the distant clattering of hooves on asphalt. A force of Kabardian horses came riding past, 154 of them, one for each year since the end of the war, and atop each horse sat an unsmiling rider in martial dress. The crowd came to life.

Mesut and I filed in behind the horses and were swept up in a swell of people unfurling banners and flags. A row of women in gold-embroidered *fashas* marched in lockstep,

holding up signs bearing the names of the twelve major Circassian tribes. There were so many green flags in the air, it was hard to think of another color. Mesut asked me to take his picture in front of a long banner listing the names of hundreds of soldiers who had distinguished themselves in the Russian-Circassian War.

In this manner we went marching through the city from which death was delivered to the upland tribes. It has been a century and a half since Circassians have enjoyed political autonomy in Russia, but in the middle of the street, walking in step with at least two thousand of them, it was hard not to feel their victory as

been thinking: “I’m surprised they haven’t been arrested yet.” We marveled at the thousands of people marching to celebrate a minority cause thick with micronationalist implications while the police simply watched. “I had no idea it was possible,” he said.

At the end of the march, we found ourselves back at the Tree of Life. A representative of the International Circassian Association, or ICA, climbed the steps and began his annual commemorative speech. He began it in Russian—the language of the oppressor—so Martin, the young activist, started a chant in Circassian to drown him out. His friends joined in. The crowd

Some linguists believe that half of the languages in the world will disappear by the year 2100. Whose will be saved? Why theirs? What will be the fate of Circassian, part of a small and elect family of languages exclusive to the Caucasus? Does it matter if such a language dies?

something inevitable. A young man in a red cape was sounding calls on a horn the size and shape of an elephant’s tusk. All around us stood green hills and mountains, and it was easy to imagine the refuge they would have offered Circassian villagers fleeing the soldiers in Nalchik—or else preparing to attack them. It was also easy to see how intractable the “problem” of the Circassians must have appeared to the urban Russians who closely followed news of the war. “The Circassians hate us,” Alexander Pushkin wrote in 1829. “We have forced them out of their free and spacious pasturelands; their auls are in ruins, whole tribes have been annihilated. As time goes on, they move deeper into the mountains, and direct their raids from there. What can one do with such people?”

We marched between the republic parliament building and its sturdy bronze statue of Lenin, then beneath a billboard on which Putin sat behind his desk looking huge and mildly concerned. Mesut said what I had just

threw up their fists and shouted so that nothing could be heard. The representative cut his speech short and stepped down.

“The same thing happened last year,” Martin told me later. “They try to speak in Russian and we shout them down.” The Duma has passed several laws intended to promote Russian-language education at the expense of indigenous languages. For a Circassian leader to speak Russian on May 21 was, in Martin’s opinion, unacceptable. At the same time, he knew the representative hadn’t been given a choice. The ICA had once promoted repatriation and cooperation with diaspora organizations, but in recent years, under pressure from Russian authorities, the group has receded into the cultural sphere. Everyone at the rally was playing their roles, Martin said: the Russian authorities, the activists, and the cultural groups navigating the space between. But today the activists had won. Martin was glowing.

“No other nation in Russia has the courage to



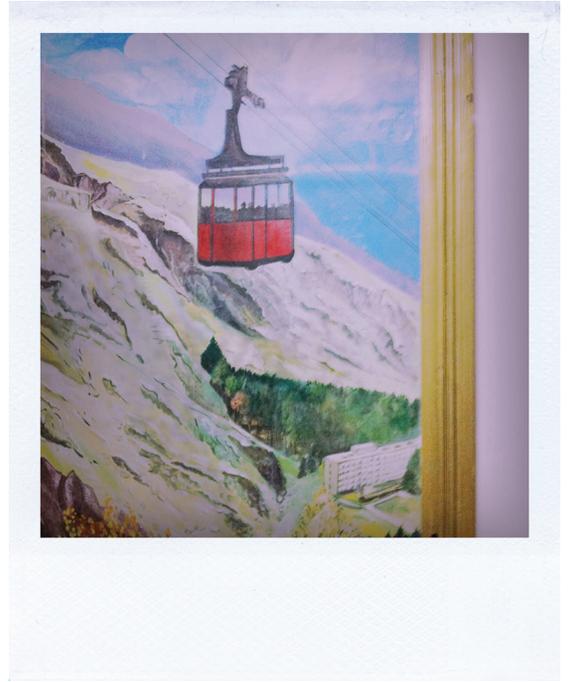
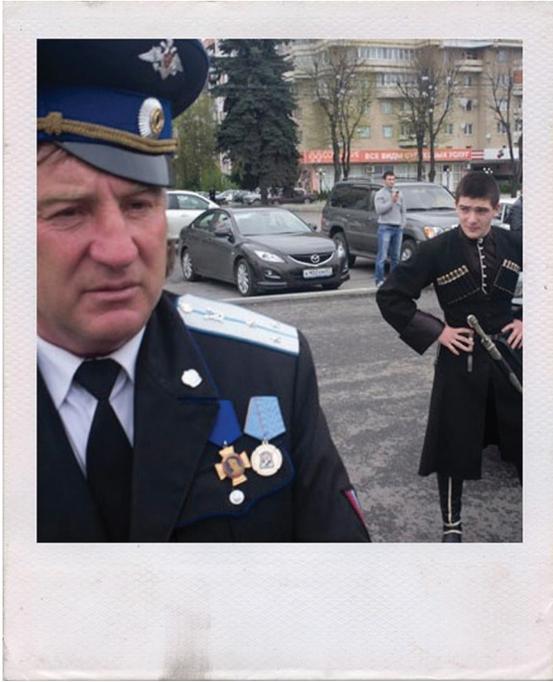
go to the streets like we do. No one else would dare march without flying the Russian flag. But you can't see a single Russian flag here. Every year the authorities send someone into the march to fly a Russian flag, and every year we take it."

THE DAY AFTER THE MARCH, I joined the pilgrims on the bus for a few days of village and mountain sightseeing before their long drive back to Ankara. The trip was organized by the ICA and took a strictly apolitical approach to intercultural exchange. At each stop, a group of villagers in ornate dress greeted us as we disembarked. A pair of smiling girls proffered a large wooden bowl of *makhsima*—a fermented milk drink that Erdoğan promised would make me strong—and the local *tamada* bestowed good blessings on our journey. Everyone gathered for a group picture. Then we drove on. The scene repeated itself with only atmospheric variations: a crystalline lake; a mountain ridge; a dance party deep in the countryside, at a vodka-stocked pavilion surrounded by an artificial moat.

There was one other ubiquity. Everywhere we stopped, a police car appeared, often just as the bus was parking. The officers would sit inside the car—not always the same car nor the same officers—and watch us. Janberd, the oral surgeon, pointed it out every time, not wanting me to miss an example of the Russian government's true behavior toward Circassians.

One day, we went to Terek, a village near the spot where Catherine the Great's fort at Mozdók was founded in 1763, signaling the beginning of the Russian-Circassian War. We were ushered from a small museum of handicrafts and Soviet heroes into an auditorium for an hour of lip-synched performance. For lunch, the local *khase* prepared a lavish spread in a mirrored pink banquet hall dripping with chandeliers. All the local worthies sat at the head table; Schamis was sitting at the back of the hall with the other tourists and troublemakers. Later, he identified one of the men at the front as a member of the secret police. "He's Circassian, he's a good guy, but come on—we all know."

I was seated between Schamis and a young



man from the bus with dark, thinning hair. His name was Muhammad and, like a few other of the more devout tourists, he was fasting for Ramadan. “In Turkey, we’re losing our language,” he volunteered when I introduced myself. “This is the worst effect of living in exile.”

Muhammad had discovered the trip online, searching for organizations that would allow him to visit his homeland. His parents had helped him apply for a passport. He’d been worried about traveling abroad as a Muslim—would there be a mosque? Halal food?—but the trip had so exceeded his expectations that his plan now was to move to Nalchik permanently. “Of course, I made this decision after three days,” he said thoughtfully. “So who knows.”

At the march, Mesut had told me that Schamis’s vision of large-scale repatriation was a pipe dream. “It’ll never happen,” he said. “If a few people come back here, it’s okay. But if many come, it won’t work. The Russians won’t allow it.” In his view, heritage tourism was the next best thing, a chance to enact a kind of imaginary return. For Muhammad, however,

and for at least a few heritage tourists to Nalchik each year, the possibility of return had become real.

The second day on the bus, Janberd invited me to sit next to him. He wanted to complain. “Every problem can be solved,” he said. “But Russia doesn’t want a solution.” Circassian groups in Russia claimed to want members of the diaspora to return. But for professionals like him, it was impossible, both because of bureaucratic hurdles and because he would be forced to learn to practice dentistry in Russian. “They want Circassia without Circassians,” he said.

Janberd had a habit of squinting when he talked, as though the world’s stupidity had given him a permanent migraine. Years of involvement with Circassian groups in Istanbul made him allergic to political pandering but also cynical about the efforts of rabble-rousers like Schamis. He felt our time was being wasted on the bus tour. Rather than visit with communities in the mountains, we were looking at lakes and villas like a bunch of tourists. We had just pulled up to another villa, surrounded by seas

of wildflowers in full bloom. The leader of the local khase greeted us outside and performed a prayer over an in-ground pool.

“They’re enacting a piece of theater here,” Janberd whispered to me. “They don’t want us to get in contact with the people in villages and cities. Their eyes are on us all the time.” As we returned to the bus, Janberd tapped my shoulder and nodded toward our police escort.

On the road again, some of the other passengers called Janberd over to their seats to talk. When he came back, he was shaking his head. “You’re a suspect now, I’m afraid,” he said. “They’re telling me you’re with the Russian service. They’re warning me.”

“I see,” I said.

or autonomous political units, while probably unknowable, is much smaller. Specifically, there are about seven thousand spoken languages currently in use—language being one of the classic unifiers of nationalist movements—and only around two hundred autonomous states. In other words, not all nationalisms can be simultaneously satisfied. The achievement of a few nations means the frustration of many more. Considering those odds, and considering the well-understood pitfalls of nationalist movements—the tendency for successful ones to transform into precisely the sort of brutal and paranoid oppressors their founders fought against—it’s easy to think of all such movements as ill-conceived or at least ill-fated. Return

For small groups with seemingly hopeless causes, just as for large groups with delusional persecution complexes, nationalism is the language of cultural preservation. There may be a dangerous fiction of purity at its heart, but that heart is surrounded by a living body of collective desire.

“Well, I don’t care if you’re a Russian agent! I would say the same thing to them that I’m saying to you. I have nothing to hide.” We settled into silence. I reflected on the bizarre dialectic of suspicion and conspiratorial disclosure to which I’d been exposed during my time in Nalchik. It was the mania that colors all relationships under authoritarianism, whose methods of control are inconsistent and unpredictable precisely in order to produce responsive outbursts of trust and mistrust in its victims. I found myself squinting in Janberdian weariness. The bus drove on toward another scenic overview.

After a while, Janberd turned to me. He gave a shy grin.

“You’re not FSB, eh?”

THE PHILOSOPHER Ernest Gellner observed that there exists a very large number of potential nations on Earth. At the same time, Gellner writes, the number of potential independent

movements, in particular, whether nationalist or not, have a dismal record of success. Yet the alternative—a kind of heritage culture maintained in diaspora—would probably mean the steady assimilation of Circassians into their host countries, as is happening in Turkey and elsewhere. Traditions moulder; language fades.

Whatever the chances of success for a Circassian nation within the Russian Federation—something along the lines of what the Tatars have achieved, or even the Navajo Nation in the United States—theirs is a struggle for survival. Some linguists believe that half of the languages in the world will disappear by the year 2100. Whose will be saved? Why theirs? What will be the fate of Circassian, part of a small and elect family of languages exclusive to the Caucasus? Does it matter if such a language dies? What about the Circassian social code, the xabze, passed down orally for generations?

Russia’s recent laws reducing support for

indigenous-language study in schools are just part of the bureaucratic completion of the conquest of the Caucasus, which in turn belongs to a larger erasure of disempowered peoples all over the world. For small groups with seemingly hopeless causes, just as for large groups with delusional persecution complexes, nationalism is the language of cultural preservation. There may be a dangerous fiction of purity at its heart, but that heart is surrounded by a living body of collective desire.

“Who knows what will happen?” Schamis liked to say about the future. After all, no one could have predicted the collapse of the Soviet Union, either. We were sitting at a café table with Erdoğan and a few of the other Patriots. They all agreed with Schamis. Once the bus went back to Turkey, he would write his next article, and his point would be the same: Diasporas will never build a democracy. “The future is here,” he said. “Either in the Russian Federation, or, in the case that the Russian Federation is no more, in a Circassian Republic. But in order for there someday to be a Circassian Republic, we must be *here*.”

We took a walk through the park, past the Tree of Life and down to one of the city’s artificial lake-fronts. We passed groups of boys and girls who were in especially good moods because it was graduation day for the city’s high schools. They were all wearing white beauty-pageant ribbons across their chests, each adorned with the name of the student’s school in pink Cyrillic letters.

We passed a replica of an ancient tower from which Circassian guards once kept watch for Cossacks in the foothills. In a lot beneath the tower, Schamis pointed to a police car. I thought he meant to show me another glimpse of state surveillance in the heart of Circassia. Had the police followed us here? After a moment I saw the object of his attention: a green ribbon dangling from the rearview mirror.

The officer saw us pointing and walked over. His hand rested on an old leather holster so varnished with wear it could only have been a family heirloom. He and Schamis talked for a while, then shook hands. As we walked away, I asked what had happened.

“I explained my story,” Schamis said. “How

I was born in Turkey and lived in Germany for many years before coming back to my homeland.”

“And?”

“He was happy. He said, ‘It’s good you came back.’”

“He was Circassian?”

“Of course,” Schamis said. “We have Circassians in parliament, in the military, and in the police force, too. This man has been an officer here for many years. He is with us. Do you know what he told me?” Schamis waited for me to shake my head. “‘More must return,’ he said. ‘More and more.’”

At a lakeside restaurant looking out at the hills, we found a table by the water. Farther out, the mountains darkened. A low storm front was moving toward us, steadily obscuring the peaks like a curtain falling across a stage. We finished eating and it started to rain. On one of the distant prominences, Sosruquo’s brick head hung low in the sky like the prow of a ship of good tidings.

IT’S ONE THING to come to Nalchik, another to stay. One of the returnees Schamis introduced me to during my visit was a twenty-four-year-old civil-engineering student from Kayseri who had moved to Nalchik on an Abkhazian passport. “I decided to come when I was in high school,” Gülşah told me. “I knew I was Circassian.” Her parents still lived in Turkey but had supported her move. In her free time, she said, she responded to Facebook messages from strangers—mostly young women from Syria and Jordan—asking her whether they should migrate, and what they might expect to find. “I tell them not to set their expectations too high,” she said. “For the women, it’s not Europe. You don’t have the same rights.”

Still, she didn’t regret the move. “If you decide to come here, come because it is your homeland. Come to preserve your mother tongue.” Months later, when I asked Schamis how Gülşah was doing, he said she had graduated and taken an engineering job in Siberia.

Schamis’s own future was uncertain. He had managed to move to Russia in 2017 by registering as a mature student at the university



in Nalchik. But last September, after my visit, he learned that his residency permit had been annulled. He was facing deportation. Although he had filed a lawsuit against the government, his friends weren't hopeful. The news came amid a general crackdown on Circassian activism following a spate of ethnic clashes and protests involving Circassian communities in the neighboring Republic of Adygeya.

"Following the events in late September, hundreds of activists were rounded up and detained, and some of them arrested, now facing jail time," Zeynel Abidin Besleney, the scholar of Circassian diaspora, wrote to me, adding that he thought Schamis would probably be deported. "It seems that Moscow is moving in to change things in Kabardino-Balkaria and Circassian activists are going to bear the brunt of that."

Whenever I reached out to Schamis, he claimed to be unconcerned. Drawing on his bottomless fund of optimism, he assured me he didn't need any help. "I want and will do everything to stay in Nalchik," he wrote. "I want to live here and maybe even start a family."

Schamis's lawsuit dragged on into winter. The vagaries of residency and citizenship in Russia became the focus of his Facebook updates. He asked me to note that his group was changing its name from the Patriots of Circassia to the Movement of Circassia, perhaps to distance themselves from any militaristic connotation. Besleney told me that Schamis hoped to turn his case into "a symbol of nonviolent democratic struggle for Circassian rights in Russia." When the court in Kabardino-Balkaria ruled against him, he appealed. The last time we spoke, he was preparing to present his case before the Supreme Court in Moscow.

I thought back to my own departure from the Caucasus. Schamis had offered to drive me back to the airport in Nalchik. Erdoğan came to see me off, as did another of Schamis's protégés, Oktay, who had visited Nalchik two years earlier on Schamis's bus tour and had decided to move to Russia to study.

We'd taken a wrong turn in town, and by the time we parked, I was late. We piled out of the scuffed Mercedes and ran across the parking lot toward the terminal to say our goodbyes.

It was a mistake. Two military guards with automatic weapons saw us running and shouted for us to stop. They asked for our passports and immigration cards and began clucking as they paged through them. They told Erdoğan and me to follow them through a construction site and security fence into a trailer, then into a small, wood-paneled office. Oktay came along to translate. Schamis wisely made himself scarce.

The guards sat us down and began calmly berating us. I was worried they had discovered my rejected journalism-visa applications, but that didn't seem to be the case. The exact infraction remained a mystery to me, either because of the guards' vagueness or the limits of double simultaneous interpretation: Oktay was translating from Russian into Turkish for Erdoğan, who was translating into German for me, and by the end of this game of telephone the meaning of what was being said, if there was any meaning to begin with, was lost.

Oktay and Erdoğan pled my case, explaining that I had a plane to catch in an hour, and said they would happily answer for whatever procedural sins I had committed. Couldn't they see I was an American who spoke no Russian anyway? With a performance of reluctant deliberation, the border guards agreed. One of them stood to escort me to the terminal.

I felt sheepishly powerful, and a little ashamed, to be saying goodbye like that. The Circassians sat patiently detained while I was hoisted out of yet another scrape by my American passport, that Teflon legal selfhood purchased by the most powerful nation in the history of the world. I tried to convince Erdoğan to let me stay and help—not that I could be of any help—or at least hang around to make sure he'd eventually be freed. He wouldn't hear of it.

"Don't worry," he kept saying, smiling and waving me off. "I'll be fine. It's normal." ■

This story was produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center.