

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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Prospective LDS Outreach among non-Slavic Peoples in the Northern Caucasus

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Overview

The LDS Church entered the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and established an official missionary presence in the early 1990s. By end of the twentieth century the Church had established eight missions throughout much of Russia and had a presence in every city with at least one million people. Notwithstanding the mobilization of mission resources to open many areas to proselytism in the 1990s, there has been virtually no LDS outreach in Northern Caucasus. Consisting of six republics (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and North Ossetia-Alania) and one territory or kraj (Stavropol), the Northern Caucasus is a federal district or okrug of Russia where nearly 10 million reside. The Northern Caucasus are among Russia's most ethnically diverse regions where there are 13 native peoples that have populations over 100,000 (Azeri, Adyghe, Avar, Balkar, Chechen, Dargwa, Ingush, Kabadian, Kumyk, Lak, Lezgi, Ossetian, and Tabassaran) and approximately two dozen additional native peoples that have populations less than 100,000. Today all 13 of the most populous non-Slavic peoples in the Northern Caucasus use the Cyrillic script to write their respective languages and all but one (Ossetians) are predominantly Muslim. As of mid-2012, official LDS missionary activity has never occurred among any non-Slavic ethnolinguistic groups native to the Northern Caucasus; LDS missionary activity has appeared to occur only among Russians in one city (Stavropol) located in the Stavropol Kraj. None of the six Northern Caucasus republics have ever had an LDS congregation operate or received a Latter-day Saint gospel witness.

This case study provides background information on each of the 13 indigenous people that have populations over 100,000 in the Northern Caucasus. Opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for establishing an LDS presence and beginning missionary activity in the region are explored. The growth of other missionary-focused Christian groups is briefly outlined.

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Peoples

Adyghe (Circassian)

Population in Russia: 128,000 (2002)

A North Caucasian ethnic group, the Adyghe are also known as Circassians and traditionally resided in rural areas of the present-day Republic of Adygea and nearby administrative divisions of Russia. Originally their territorial homeland stretched along the Black Sea between the Sea of Azov and Georgia and inland to Chechnya.[1] In 1864, Russia invaded the Adyghe homelands as part of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus resulting in half the population resettling in the Ottoman Empire thereafter. Other countries with sizable Adyghe populations today include Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Macedonia, Syria, and Turkey. Today Adyghe populations in Russia are concentrated within the Republic of Adygea immediately south of Krasnodar and northeast of Maykop.

The Adyghe were traditionally known as horse breeders and once had a highly stratified society prior to Russian rule.[2] Language was once stratified and included special languages or talking codes for particular classes of society such as a hunting language for nobility and a women's language.[3] The Adyghe language is similar to Kabardian; both of which are classified as Circassian languages.[4] Most the population is Muslim.

Avar

Population in Russia: 814,473 (2002)

A Northeast Caucasian people, the Avar populate rural and mountainous central interior areas of Dagestan along the borders of Georgia and Chechnya in an area historically called Avaria. Most Avars were polytheistic until the arrival of Georgian Orthodox Christianity in the fifth century. Islam penetrated the Avar homeland in the twelfth century resulting in most converting to Sunni Islam within the next 100 years. In the mid eighteenth century, the Avars and other mountain peoples repelled the Persians. The Avars were the primary force that prevented the Russians from swiftly conquering the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. The Russians permitted some self-autonomy following the defeat of the Avar until the 1940s. In recent years, the Avar have numbered among the most religious Muslim peoples in the North Caucasus.[5]

Avar is an East Caucasian language spoken by 744,000 in Russia and 44,000 in Azerbaijan. Several subdialects are spoken.[6] Many speak Russian as a second language. Avar are traditionally Muslim.

Azeri

Population in Russia: 622,000 (2002)

The Azeri are a Turkic people that traditionally populated the eastern Caucasus in a region called Albania (not to confuse with the present-day nation of Albania in Southeastern Europe). The Azeri anciently adhered to Zoroastrianism until Caucasian Albania became a Christian state for much of the first millennium AD.[7] Islam penetrated the Caucasus resulting in most Azeri becoming Muslim. Imperial Russia and Persia fought a series of wars resulting in the division of the Azeri homeland between Russia and Persia in the nineteenth century that continues until present day between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.

Today Azeris in Russia inhabit extreme southern coastal areas of Dagestan in the vicinity of the city of Derbent. Azeris speak the northern dialect of Azerbaijani. In 2002, North Azerbaijani speakers numbered 622,000 in Russia. There are no ethnic differences between Azeris in Russia and Iran; the distinction is solely based on traditional written script (Cyrillic in Russia and Perso-Arabic or Latin in Iran).[8] Azeris are traditionally Muslim but there are small numbers of Baha'is, Zoroastrians, and Christians. Many Azeri Muslims consider themselves culturally Muslim and do not actively practice.

Balkar

Population in Russia: 108,000 (2002)

The Balkar are a Turkic people that traditionally reside in the mountainous southern portion of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkar along the Georgian border. Their numbers have been historically small; there were fewer than 10,000 Balkar throughout the nineteenth century.[9] There is little known about the origin of the Balkar and their history prior to the seventeenth century. Balkar joined other North Caucasian peoples in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to fend off the Crimean Gireys and later Imperial Russia until becoming conquered by Russia and becoming Russian citizens in 1827. Since integration with Russia, the Balkar have had little involvement in various conflicts within the Caucasus and with other nations. Following the organization of the Soviet Union, the Balkar became their own administrative division. In 1944, many Balkar were resettled to Siberia and Kazakhstan but later returned in 1957.[10] The Balkar number among the most recently converted North Caucasian peoples to Islam; prior to this time most appeared to follow paganism. Pagan beliefs and rituals surface in some Balkar practices regarding agriculture and weather.[11] Virtually all Balkar are bilingual in Balkar and Russian.[12]

Chechen

Population in Russia: 1,330,000 (2002)

Chechens are a Northeast Caucasian people that reside in the Republic of Chechnya. Like most North Caucasian peoples, the Chechens have experienced a turbulent history for centuries resisting Russian occupation and persecution. In 1944, the Soviet Union removed the Chechen people from their homeland for resettlement in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Chechens were not permitted to relocate back to Chechnya until 1957. Nationalism and desire to become an independent state gained momentum for the next several decades. In 1991, Chechens formed a government and declared Chechnya an independent country like many other Soviet Republics at the time. During the next few years, many non-Chechens left Chechnya due to fears of persecution. Russian authorities refused to acknowledge Chechen independence resulting in a major military conflict between Chechen rebels and Russian forces. The First Chechen War occurred between 1994 and 1996 and resulted in the destruction of much of Chechnya. The Khasavyurt Accord ended the first war and delayed prospects for officially recognized independence for five years. In 2004, a group of Chechen and Ingush militants seized hundreds of school children in Belsan, North Ossetia killed over 300 in one of the most destructive terrorist attacks worldwide.[13] Tensions remain high between Chechens and Russians, although political instability has subsided in recent years. In 2010, Chechens constituted over 95% of the population in Chechnya compared to only 66% in 1989.[14] Virtually all Chechens are Muslim.

Dargwa (Dargin)

Population in Russia: 510,000 (2002)

The Dargwa are a Northeast Caucasian people located in south central Dagestan between the Dagestani capital Makhachkala and the Azerbaijani border. The Dargwa have resided in present-day Dagestan for millennia. The region once pertained to Caucasian Albania and was frequently overrun by more powerful empires and civilizations such as the Persians, the Ottoman Turks, and Mongols. In the early nineteenth century, Russia annexed Dagestan and the Dargwa frequently headed rebellions and uprisings protesting Russian colonialism. Dargwa participated in the Russian Revolution in the early twentieth century.[15] Many Dargwa converted to Islam in the fourteenth century and the influence of Islam on society reached its peak in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when Dargwa nationalism stood at its zenith.[16] Many do not read and write in Dargwa on a daily basis. 68% of the Dargwa population is fluent in Russian.[17]

Ingush

Population in Russia: 413,000 (2002)

The Ingush are a Northeast Caucasian people that primarily reside in Ingushetia; a small republic sandwiched between Chechnya and North Ossetia-Alania. The Ingush share many cultural similarities with Chechens but speak two separate languages that are not mutually comprehensible. Ingush and Chechens are collectively known as the Vainakh. Like many Northeast Caucasian peoples, the Ingush originally practiced animism and worshipped various nature gods that was supplanted by Christianity in the latter-half of the first millennia AD. Chechens introduced Islam to the Ingush in the early nineteenth century in a somewhat politically motivated move to ward off invading Russian forces. [18] In 1944, the Soviet Union displaced Ingush and Chechens to Central Asia and did not permit their return until 1956. In 1991, the Ingush were sympathetic to Chechens declaring independence from Russia but did not opt for the independence of Ingushetia and rather advocated to become an autonomous republic.[19] Today most Ingush are devoutly Muslim.

Kabardian

Population in Russia: 520,000 (2002)

The Kabardian are a North Caucasian people that are a subgroup of Circassians that populate the northern half of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkarija. The Kabardians were among the most organized Caucasian peoples and maintained a structural political organization resembling a nation state prior to Russian conquest.[20] Like the Adyghe, many Kabardians - possibly half the population - fled their homelands in the latter half of the nineteenth century due to invading Russian forces and resettled in the Ottoman Empire. Today, there are sizable Kabardian populations in Germany, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey. There may be as many as one million Kabardians in Turkey today.[21] Kabardians have been predominantly Muslim for several centuries. The Kabardian language shares many similarities with other Circassian languages.

Kumyk

Population in Russia: 422,000 (2002)

The Kumyk are a Turkic ethnic group that inhabit central Dagestan in the coastal foothills. Kumyks number among the earliest indigenous peoples in Dagestan that remain at present day. Indigenous religion predominated until the arrival of Christianity several years after its advent. Islam spread throughout the Kumyk homeland resulting in most becoming Muslim by the twelfth century.[22] In 1822, the Russian general Alesky Petrovich Yermolov conquered the Kumyk homeland during the Caucasus War as Imperial Russia expanded and strengthened its borders in the Caucasus.[23] Kumyks are homogenously Muslim.

Lak

Population in Russia: 157,000 (2002)

The Lak are a Northeast Caucasian people scattered in south central Dagestan that are closely related to the Dargwa. Legend indicates that the Lak were the first Dagestani people to convert to Islam in the eight century. However, Christianity and pagan practices endured for many more centuries as the Lak did not appear to become predominantly Muslim until the twelfth or thirteenth century. The Lak participated in several campaigns to limit or total break away from Russian rule that primarily occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[24] Today the Lak are homogenously Muslim.

Lezgi

Population in Russia: 411,535 (2002)

The Lezgi are a Northeast Caucasian people that reside along the southern Dagestan-Azerbaijan border. Approximately half of Lezgi worldwide reside in neighboring Azerbaijan. Due to consistent contact with the neighboring Turkic Azeris, the Lezgi share the most cultural similarities with Turkic peoples among the Northeast Caucasian peoples of Dagestan. Shahs based in present-day Azerbaijan controlled the Lezgi homelands until the area came under Russian rule in the nineteenth century. Lezgis participated in resistance campaigns against Imperial Russia.[25] The Lezgi historically comprised various villages that did not consider themselves the same ethnicity. Rather, the Lezgi ethnicity emerged following the Russian Revolution in the early twentieth century. The Soviets actively supported the separate distinction of Lezgi to help suppress the cultural ties to Turkic Azeris. Due to this effort and the larger population of various tribes labeled as Lezgi surpassing the size of most other nearby Northeast Caucasian peoples, the Lezgi became one of the most influential people groups as the Lezgi language became a commonly spoken second language among smaller groups like Aghuls, Tabarassans, and Rutuls. Nearly the entire population is Muslim and most villages have a mosque.[26] Village law continues to play an important role in society. The Lezgi language includes three mutually intelligible dialects.[27]

Ossetian

Population in Russia: 515,000 (2002)

Ossetians are an Iranian people that populate North Ossetia in Russia and South Ossetia in Georgia. They are the only predominantly Christian ethnic group in the North Caucasus. Ossetians descend from the Alans; an ancient people who originally populated the plains north of the Caucasus but were driven southward into the mountains during the thirteenth century as a result of the Mongol invasions. Ossetians continued to migrate southward into present-day Georgia and did not return to settle present-day North Ossetia until Russia conquered the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. In the 1920s, the Soviets designated two administrative regions (North Ossetia and South Ossetia). By 1936, North Ossetia had become an autonomous republic. In 1990, South Ossetia declared independence from Georgia due to ethnic and political tensions with the Georgian majority resulting in greater instability and conflict in the region. In 2008, Georgian military officials attempted to regain control of South Ossetia which culminated in a war with Russia that resulted in Russia recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Today Ossetians in both North Ossetia and South Ossetia share a strong ethnic tie and possess Russian passports.

Tabassaran

Population in Russia: 131,785 (2002)

The Tabassaran are a traditionally Muslim Northeast Caucasian ethnic group that reside in extreme south central Dagestan west of the city of Derbent. The history, culture, and religion of the Tabassaran share many similaries with other Dagestani peoples. The population is homogenously Muslim. The Tabassaran language is reputedly one of the most difficult Dagestani languages to learn for non-natives due to its complex grammar.

Opportunities

Densely populated urban areas present some of the greatest opportunities for LDS missionary activity as these locations are generally more accessible than smaller cities or rural areas and few mission outreach centers are required to adequately reach the population. In 2010, there were 13 cities in the region that supported populations over 100,000 (Makhachkala, Stavropol, Vladikavkaz, Grozny, Nalchik, Pyatigorsk, Khasavyurt, Cherkessk, Kislovodsk, Derbent, Nevinnomyssk, Yessentuki, and Kaspiysk). Ingushetia is the only administrative division in the Northern Caucasus without a city inhabited by more than 100,000. Assigning missionaries and opening a congregation in cities populated by over 100,000 would maximize outreach with comparatively few resources and would establish the Church in all but one republic in the region.

Makhachkala will be crucial toward establishing a penetrating LDS presence in the Northern Caucasus due to its large population, ethnic diversity, and geographic location. In mid-2012, Makhachkala ranked as the most populous city in Russia without a ward or branch with nearly 600,000 inhabitants. The sheer size of the population of Makhachkala in itself deserves serious consideration by mission and area leaders for establishing an LDS presence, let alone a base for outreach operations in the Northern Caucasus. Makhachkala also exhibits a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity. In 2002, prominent ethnicities included Avar (26.5%), Lak (14.6%), Kumyk (13.9%), Dargwa (13.7%), Lezgin (13.6%), Russian (9.1%), Tabassaran (2.2%), Azeri (1.4%), and Rutul (1.2%) whereas other ethnicities constituted 3.8% of the city population.[28] Extending outreach to Makhachkala alone would provide at least minimal exposure to seven of the 13 major non-Slavic ethnic groups in the Northern Caucasus. The six other major non-Slavic peoples in the Northern Caucasus could be reached by establishing mission outreach centers in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria (where Kabardians and Balkars constituted 47.3% and 11.4% of the city population, respectively, in 2002);[29] Maykop, Republic of Adygea (where Adyghe comprised 16.7% of the city population in 2002);[30] Grozny, Chechnya (where Chechens and Ingush constituted 95.7% of the population, respectively, in 2002);[31] and Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia-Alania (where Ossetians contituted 59.5% of the population in 2002).[32]

Ossentians are the ethnic group in the Northern Caucasus that appear the most favorable for prospective LDS outreach due to the predominance of Orthodox Christianity, stronger ties with Russia compared to most peoples in the North Caucasus, and that the third most populous city in the region - Vladikavkaz - is populated primarily by Ossetians (59.5% in 2002).[33] Traditional

LDS teaching approaches are better suited for Christians rather than Muslims and could be applied to Ossetians with some modification to the religious background of Orthodox Christians. The assignment of Russian or other Slavic missionaries to North Ossetia-Alania may be greeted with a more positive response than among other peoples in the Northern Caucasus due to more positive political relations with Russia.

The Church has a large body of Russian translations of church materials and all LDS scriptures. Many non-Slavic peoples in the Northern Caucasus speak and read Russian fluently. The Church can initially utilize Russian translations of church materials and scriptures in proselytism efforts before translations of materials in other indigenous languages become available.

Some North Caucasian peoples have significant populations outside of Russia. The large Adyghe and Kabardian diapsora offer nearly worldwide opportunities for the Church to reach this ethnic group although many locations have small numbers. Adyghe and Kabardian peoples in Europe may present the most promising prospects for commencing ethnicity-specific proselytism and begin the translation of a few basic proselytism materials into these languages. The Adyghe also exhibit some of the weakest ethno-religious ties to Islam among North Caucasian peoples largely due to the relatively recent conversion of many Adyghe to Islam in the sixteenth century from the influence of Crimean Tatars.[34] The Adyghe are currently one of the most accessible ethnicities for the Church considering an LDS congregation operates in Krasnodar that is within close proximity to the Republic of Adygea. The capital of the Republic of Adygea (Maykop) numbers among the most populous unreached cities in the North Caucasus by the Church and presents good opportunities for outreach among Adyghe and Russians.

The opportunity to perform missionary outreach among Azeri communities in Russia is a rarity. Heavy proselytism restrictions and lower levels of religious freedom persist in Azerbaijan and Iran where the majority of Azeris reside. The Azeri rank among the most populous unreached ethnic groups by the Church with an estimated 22 to 35 million people worldwide.[35] Russian Azeris appear to exhibit weaker ties to Islam than their counterparts in Azerbaijan and Iran. The establishment of even a small Azeri Latter-day Saint community in Dagestan could present invaluable opportunities for reaching Azeris in Azerbaijan and Iran if the status of religious freedom improves.

Challenges

The Church has established a branch in only one city within the entire federal district of the Northern Caucasus that is not within close proximity of any sizable numbers of non-Slavic peoples. Due to distance from established mission outreach centers, many republics in the Northern Caucasus are remote and difficult to access by mission and area leadership. At present prospects appear dim for the Church to expand outreach into additional cities anywhere in Russia. The focus has shifted from opening new locations to building up "centers of strength" and helping districts in select cities to become stakes. The lack of Eastern European Latter-day Saints serving full-time missions renders all of Russia's seven missions unable to properly function without large numbers of North Americans to make of the difference. Growth patterns in other Eastern European nations with stakes such as Ukraine and Hungary suggest that the Church may not begin to look toward expanding outreach to additional locations in Russia until more member districts become stakes. The Church faces the monumental challenge of not only establishing a presence in even one republic of the Northern Caucasus but also to reach rural areas where many non-Slavic peoples continue to reside.

Political instability, kidnappings, and ethnic conflict in the North Caucasus poses safety concern particularly for foreign missionaries. These conditions pose major security concerns and deter establishing an official LDS presence through the assignment of missionaries. The Church may help reduce some of these safety concerns through only assigning Eastern European missionaries to the most populous cities in the North Caucasus. Political instability and terrorism in the North Caucasus has propagated negative societal attitudes in Russia of traditionally Muslim peoples[36] which may create challenges for ethnic Russian Latter-day Saints to demonstrate willingness and enthusiasm to help head missionary activity.

The resurgence of Islamic identity among many traditionally Muslim peoples in the Northern Caucasus following the dissolution of the Soviet Union poses a major barrier to prospective LDS outreach. There are no proselytism materials utilized by LDS missionaries that are tailored to the religious background of Muslims. Receptivity appears low to mediocre among many peoples in the Northern Caucasus. The Church may gain only a handful of converts after years of consistent proselytism activity among a single ethnic group due to the strength and resilience of Islamic identity and resistance to past centuries of Christian proselytism. The Church has globally experienced slower and more limited church growth among predominantly Muslim peoples due to the intimate intertwining of religion, culture, government, and family that prohibits conversion to non-Islamic faiths and legal restrictions in most Muslim-majority nations that prohibit Christian proselytism. However, the Soviet legacy in the region and repression of religious expression for nearly a century may provide greater opportunities for LDS growth among these Muslims peoples than in countries where there has been a consistently strong Islamic identity and fusion with government and civil institutions for centuries or since the advent is Islam in the seventh century.

Ossetians may number among the more favorable peoples to initial reach due to traditional adherence to Christianity but nonetheless present many challenges for an LDS Church establishment. Other Christian groups report low receptivity. Evangelicals report that less than two percent are evangelical and that there has been no active church planting within the past couple years.[37]

The complexity of religion, ethnic identity, language, and culture is extreme in the Northern Caucasus and requires mission leaders who are skilled in cross-cultural proselytism, ethnographical awareness, and geopolitical issues in the region. The

effective and coordinated opening of mission outreach centers among the various North Caucasian peoples may rank as one of the most daunting tasks for any mission president to face among realistic opportunities to expand outreach in the world at present. Close consultation with regional church, geographers, anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists will be required to maximize the efficiency in potential missionary activity in the region. Due to the lack of any LDS presence among the most populous North Caucasian peoples at present, the prospects of reaching ethnic groups with fewer than 100,000 people appears remote and unlikely for many years or decades following any initial outreach in the region.

The level of religious freedom in Russia is low compared to other Eastern European nations. Consequently many religious freedoms in the Caucasus are not sufficiently upheld to allow proselytizing Christian faiths to operate without persecution, harassment, and intimidation from society and law enforcement. Societal and local governmental abuse of religious freedom remain serious challenges for the Church to operate without proselytism restrictions in many areas of Russia. Like many other United States-based proselytizing Christian denominations, the LDS Church is negatively portrayed by religious-themed government organizations.

There are no translations of LDS materials into any indigenous non-Slavic languages in the Northern Caucasus. The Church can utilize Russian language materials in the meantime, but the translation of materials into ethnic languages will be required to instill greater community and permanency of the Church in many of these peoples. There are few if any Latter-day Saints who speak these languages to serve as translators at present. Considering the long delays for approving and completing language translation projects, the Church may not translate materials into these languages for a decade or more following an official church establishment.

Comparative Growth

Many major proselytizing Christian groups with a worldwide presence report missionary activity among most if not all the peoples in the Northern Caucasus that have populations over 100,000. However virtually all nontraditional Christian denominations report an extremely small presence among non-Slavic peoples that was first established in the early 2000s. Many of these groups have translated the New Testament and proselytism literature into local languages. Jehovah's Witnesses report translations of basic church materials in all 13 indigenous languages of the Northern Caucasus spoken by 100,000 or more speakers but no translations of indigenous languages spoken by less than 100,000.[38] Seventh Day Adventists report printed publications in five indigenous languages to the Northern Caucasus (Avar, Azerbaijani, Balkar, Kabardian, and Ossetian). Witnesses and Adventists appear to operate only a handful of congregations among each major ethnic group if there are any official congregations organized at all. Baptists appear among the most successful proselytizing groups.[39]

Future Prospects

There is little indication that the Church will open any locations in the Northern Caucasus to proselytism in the near future as mission resources remain stretched due to visa regulations for North American missionaries that require foreign missionaries to leave the country every 90 days, few Eastern European members serving missions, and very few additional cities opened for missionary activity over the past several years. Political instability and conflict also pose safety concerns in mobilizing a full-time missionary force in this volatile region. However, delays in establishing an LDS presence may result in missed opportunities to proselyte these populations when they are the most receptive or if the status of religious freedom in these republics deteriorates to the point of barring Christian proselytism. Due to its large population and economic importance in the region, Makhachkala may be the first city with an LDS presence established if nonlocal Latter-day Saints relocate for employment purposes and form an LDS congregation.

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