

Georgia's European Quest: The Challenge of the Meskhetian Turks

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The article deals with the Meskhetian Turks (Ahiska Turks), who in 1944 were deported by Stalin from the Meskheti region of Georgia to Central Asia. They have never been able to return to their ancestral land, the Meskheti area of the present-day Samtskhe-Javakheti region in Georgia. The paper analyzes Tbilisi's ambivalent policy towards Meskhetian Turks and how that relates to Georgia's European aspirations. The author argues that Tbilisi's commitment to the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks is disingenuous, and that the government has used this issue to further its European quest. Georgia's resistance to the Meskhetian Turks' resettlement stems from a number of factors, including: its Georgian-focused nation-building project, which is not welcoming towards ethnic minorities; concerns about the reaction of the majority-Armenian population in Samtskhe-Javakheti; its energy security considerations related to Javakheti's location on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline route; and its territorial integrity fears, especially in the light of its de facto loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The paper also examines the factors behind the survival of Meskhetian Turks as a distinct ethnic group despite their geographic dispersal across Eurasia and the wider world.



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Discrimination against the Meskhetian Turks as an Obstacle for Georgia's European Path

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Whatever the result of the parliamentary elections in Georgia in 2016, Georgian foreign and domestic policy in recent years has focused on greater political and economic integration into the European Union, and gaining NATO membership. This process began in the last years of Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency in the late 1990s, as relations with Moscow deteriorated, and intensified under Mikheil Saakashvili following the 2003 Rose Revolution. The political milestones in the Georgian quest for European and wider Western integration have been its admission to the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1999, the approval of the Individual Partnership Action Plan of Georgia by the North Atlantic Council of NATO in 2004, the Georgia-European Union Action Plan approved in 2006 and the Association Agreement, which the European Parliament ratified in December 2014. The political discourse has been accompanied by official emphasis on Georgia as a part of Europe, manifested by the common Christian heritage, and allegedly common cultural and ethical values. This European identity, says official Tbilisi, was interrupted by almost 200 years of Russian/Soviet rule.¹

But the reality is that Georgia faces enormous challenges at present. Its de facto loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have resulted in large numbers of displaced Georgians; economic situation is dire, corruption is endemic, official unemployment (not to mention its much larger actual unemployment) is substantial, labor migration and brain drain continue on a massive scale, and the country is involved in pan-European criminal networks.² Another potential obstacle is the condition in the Council of Europe membership agreement that specifically requires Georgia to ensure resettlement of the people widely known as Meskhetian Turks (alternatively Ahiska Turks) in their historic homeland in western Georgia, in the Meskhети part of present-day Samtskhe-

1 Badridze, G. (2012) Presentation by Giorgi Badridze, Georgia's Ambassador to the UK and Ireland. The round-table 'Georgia's Parliamentary Elections of 2012.' Centre for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies, The University of Birmingham, 29 November, Birmingham, UK.

2 Shelley, L., Scott, E.R. and A.Latta (eds.) (2007) *Organised Crime and Corruption in Georgia*, London: Routledge, pp.1,7.

Javakheti region, situated between Adjara and Javakheti.³

Although there is controversy around the ethnic origins of the Meskhetian Turks,⁴ there is no doubt that up to 150,000 of them were deported in 1944 by Stalin and Beria to Central Asia from their homeland in Georgia, probably because they were seen as a potentially threatening Turkish ‘fifth column’. Prior to deportation, between 1928 and 1937, Meskhetian Turks were subjected to forcible ‘Georgianization’, involving the official change of their nationality and surnames. After their deportation they were subjected to a discriminatory settlement regime, which denied them basic citizenship rights until 1956. Even when under Khrushchev, other deported Caucasian peoples such as the Chechens, Ingush, Balkars and Karachay were repatriated, the Meskhetian Turks were prohibited from returning to their homeland because of the objections of the Georgian authorities.⁵ Despite this, in the 1960s some of the deportees tried to resettle in Georgia but were once again pushed out by Tbilisi, forcing them to disperse across the Russian North Caucasus and Azerbaijan. In 1989, a pogrom against Meskhetian Turks by an Uzbek mob in the Fergana region resulted in the deaths of 52 Meshketians.⁶ In the aftermath of the pogrom, the Gorbachev government resettled tens of thousands of Meshketian Turks who had been forced to flee Uzbekistan in Azerbaijan, as well as Krasnodar, Stavropol, Belgorod, Voronezh, Smolensk, Volgograd, and other regions of Russia. In

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3 Sumbadze, N.(2007) ‘Back Home Again: the Repatriation and Integration of Meskhetian Muslims in Georgia,’ in Trier, T. and A. Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*. London: Transactions Publishers, p.288.

4 The ethnic identity of Meskhetian Turks, who speak an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish language, is ambiguous. Until the Meskheti region became part of Soviet Georgia in 1921 they seem to have had little ethnic consciousness and were in fact made up of Turks and Turkic speaking Karapapakhs (also known as Terekeme). At different times and according to particular orientations they have been known amongst others, as Turks, Tatars and Azeri, sometimes called Muslim Georgians, Muslim Meskhetians, while the large majority of them call themselves Ahiska or Meskhetian Turks, or simply Turks. The regular use of the term ‘Meskhetian Turks’ in relation to the Turkic speaking population began after its deportation in 1944 by Stalin to Central Asia. Following their deportation and especially after the pogrom in 1989 in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan Meshketian Turks are now scattered throughout Eurasia and, since 2004, the United States. Aydingun, A. (2011) ‘Creating, Recreating and Rerecreating Ethnic Identity: Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Soviet and post-Soviet Contexts,’ *Central Asian Survey*, vol.21 (2), p.187; Overland, I. (2007) ‘International Organisations, Regional Politics and the Meskkhetian Turks’, in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*. London: Transactions Publishers, p.533.

5 Akkiewa, S. (2010) ‘K Voprosu o Poyavlenii Turok-Meskhetintsev v KBR i Nekotorykh Problemakh ikh Etnicheskogo Razvitiya,’ *Sbornik Nauchnykh Statei Instituta Sotsial’nykh Issledovaniy*, Nazran: IGU, 2010, pp.167-9; Cornell 2001: 182).

6 Chikadze, E. (2007) *Uzbekistan*, in Trier, T., and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.119.

1989-90, Azerbaijan alone accepted several tens of thousands of Meskhetian refugees.⁷ Gorbachev's commitment to return the Meskhetian Turks to Georgia was nullified by the break-up of

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the Soviet Union two years later, since Tbilisi once again refused to accept them. As a result, Meskhetian Turks found themselves scattered across several of the former Soviet Union republics – Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Some made it to Turkey, where they were allowed to stay and informally welcomed by the Turkish state, though many still do not have citizenship, and there remain obstacles to their full integration into Turkish society. In Azerbaijan too, the Meskhetian Turks have been welcomed and have integrated well. This stands in stark contrast to their treatment in parts of the Russian Federation, especially Krasnodar *krai*, where the authorities have denied them citizenship and access to basic services such as medical care, education and pensions. They have often suffered ill-treatment, both at the hands of the police and their Russian neighbors. Because of this discrimination, between 10,000 and 20,000 Meskhetian Turks were granted political asylum in the United States in January 2004. Only a few dozen families – less than 600 people altogether – have succeeded in permanently returning to Georgia, and only a tiny minority has been able to return to Samtskhe-Javakheti.⁸

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It was only when Georgia joined the CoE in 1999 that it agreed to resolve the issue of the deported Meskhetian Turks, under pressure from its European partners. According to the 1999 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) between EU and Georgia, their future relationship is conditional on Georgia's respect for democratic principles, the rule of law and human rights, including respect for the rights of minorities.⁹ However, it took eight years - until 2007 - for Georgia's Parliament to pass a repatriation decree

7 Kavkaz-Uzel (2008) *Russia Urges the OSCE to Put Pressure on Georgia to Solve the Meskhetian Turks' Problem*, 8 October. Available at: www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/142649/. (Accessed 5 August 2015).

8 Overland, I. (2007) 'International Organisations, Regional Politics and the Meskhetian Turks,' in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.533.

9 Tarkhan-Mouravi, G. (2007) 'Legal and Political Aspects of the Issue of Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks),' in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p. 493.

and even then the legislation produced no change in the actual situation of the Meskhetian Turks. The decree contains a very vague definition of ‘repatriates’ without specifying their rights and the state’s obligations towards them. In summer 2011, under renewed European pressure, Georgia began the formal process of issuing repatriate status to Meskhetian Turks. However, the process has been hampered by legal, economic and psychological barriers. It has been extremely difficult for aspirants to buy or build houses, or to find jobs in Georgia without first obtaining Georgian citizenship, or at least registration. The process can take several years, while applicants are required to stay in Georgia without proper legal status, employment and basic means for living. It seems clear that Georgia is dragging its feet in the hope that the problem will simply disappear with the passing of time. It deals with the issue on a purely tactical basis, in proportion to the need to present the appearance of its commitment to ‘European values’ - in other words the perception that, contrary to Russia’s alleged imperialism and intolerance, it genuinely aspires to be a fully democratic, pluralistic and liberal society.

Why Has Georgia Been so Implacable in Its Resistance to the Resettlement of the Meskhetian Turks?

There are number of reasons for Georgia’s resistance on this front. First of all, the issue should be considered from the point of view of the possibility of ethnic conflict. A crucial fault line has been the threat of local disturbance, given that the land once inhabited by the Meskhetian Turks has been taken over by Armenians and Georgians, who are now opposed to the resettlement initiative. It is worth noting that many Armenians, currently the majority population in Samtskhe-Javakheti, are particularly against of resettlement of Meskhetian Turks and sharing the region with them. They also perceive the Meskhetian Turks as an existential threat, based on their association with the Turks who they claim committed the so-called ‘Armenian genocide’ of 1915.¹⁰

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Another factor is the energy security issue relating to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which was opened in 2005, and

¹⁰ Tarkhan-Mouravi, G. (2007) ‘Legal and Political Aspects of the Issue of Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks),’ in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.524.

runs through the Javakheti region on its way to the south-east Mediterranean coast of Turkey and then exports oil on to Italy and other Western European countries. The pipeline, managed and owned by BP (former British Petroleum), ten other major Western oil companies and SOCAR (Azerbaijan), is regarded by official Tbilisi and Baku as an important counter-balance to traditional Russian domination in the region. Therefore the government in Tbilisi has had no desire to allow a resettlement project that could destabilize this strategic area.

Yet another factor is official Tbilisi's nervousness about the potential creation of a compact settlement of Turkic people on its border with Turkey, which historically dominated this region.¹¹ But in addition to these issues, there are much more deeply rooted historical and political reasons why successive governments in Georgia have failed to take measures to resolve the resettlement problem.

Georgians inhabit a country located in a geopolitically strategic region where, for centuries, the interests of three major powers have collided. In spite of its lengthy statehood tradition of Georgia (from the 13th century onwards), it was unable to maintain its political independence, falling under the rule of its larger, more powerful geographical neighbors – Ottoman Turkey, Safavid state and then the Russian/Soviet empires. Georgia's non-violent acceptance of Russian annexation in 1813 was determined by their common Orthodox Christianity, but above all driven by the fear of its Muslim neighbors, especially Turkey. This fear of the Islamic and Turkish 'other' was an important factor in the formation of the Georgian nation, centered on the Georgian language (Kartuli) and Orthodox Christianity, adopted in 331 A.D.

Thus, Georgia became a Kartuli-centred mini-empire exercising various degrees of discrimination towards the population in other parts of the country. The legacy of this history today is evident in post-Soviet Georgian nationalism, not to say chauvinism, with its still-prevalent reliance on the primordialist doctrine that the ethnic Georgian nation forms the basis of the Georgian state. The implied corollary of this, of course, is that all other ethnic groups

¹¹ In 1853-54, 1917, 1914-18 and 1939-45 the status of the Meskhetian region was claimed by both the Turkish and Russian sides. Aydingun, A. (2011) 'Creating, Recreating and Rerecreating Ethnic Identity: Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Soviet and post-Soviet Contexts,' *Central Asian Survey*, vol.21 (2), p.187.

are immigrants – in effect ‘guests’ who may or may not take advantage of ‘Georgian’ hospitality. Soviet nationalities policy, according to which the titular majority expected the state to promote the titular nation, only reinforced this approach, and gave it its modern form. In this context, the Meskhetian Turks, like other non-Georgian minorities, could easily be seen as representing a fifth column, ‘ungrateful guests’ who have become an enemy within. The alternative is to absorb them into a wider Georgian identity, which official Tbilisi does when it presents Meskhetian Turks as Islamized ethnic Georgians (by calling them either Sunni Georgians or simply Meskhetians).¹²

The ideological interpretation of Georgian history is linked to a crucial political fact, which is that in spite of Georgian pride in its long tradition of statehood it has historically been a weak and vulnerable state, and never more so than today. Its current situation is evidently the result of the near-collapse of its economy, two civil wars, military defeat, territorial fragmentation and the ensuing displacement of a quarter of a million Georgians from the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The intense nationalism - based on the view of history outlined above - that provided the momentum in the early years of post-Soviet independence has become increasingly threatened and embattled, as the frailty of the Georgian state has become correspondingly more evident. State weakness has manifested itself in the government’s inability to create or implement policy or to impose its will in a variety of ways. This includes managing Georgia’s complex ethnic diversity politics. Georgia’s Constitution, adopted in 1995, guarantees the equality of its citizens regardless of race, skin colour, language, gender, religion, political and other beliefs, national, ethnic or social origin, property, title or place of residence.

Georgia is also a signatory of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as a member of the Council of Europe, both of which oblige the state to protect the rights of minorities. Nevertheless, successive Georgian governments have been reactive rather than proactive in pursuing a coherent policy on minor-

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Nevertheless, successive Georgian governments have been reactive rather than proactive in pursuing a coherent policy on minority rights consonant with international obligations and Georgia’s push for incorporation into Europe.

¹² Kavkaz-Uzel (2013) A Demonstration against the Use of the Term “Meskhetian Turks” Took Place in Georgia, 16 June. Available at: www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/225759/ (Accessed: 5 August 2015).

ity rights consonant with international obligations and Georgia's push for incorporation into Europe. This has been primarily due to state reluctance to confront Georgian society's nationalism and the pervasive suspicion of and intolerance towards the country's minorities, reflected in much of the media coverage of ethnic and minority issues and politicians' encouragement of popular ethnic myths and stereotypes. In this political and ideological climate, there has been little motivation to go beyond rhetorical assertions of equality designed to placate international partners, rather than real legislative and political action.¹³

The fourth reason is the Meshketian Turk diaspora. Against the general backdrop of weak minority representation in Georgian politics, the situation of the Meshketian Turks has, unfortunately for them, not been significantly improved through their own efforts. There is a paradox here in that what has undoubtedly been their strength as a people has also been a weakness at the political level. As a result of the numerous and varied migratory experiences they have been subjected to, Meshketian Turks no longer constitute a homogeneous community, divided as they are geographically and by such factors as generation, social position, the urban/rural divide, education and gender. Nevertheless, their history of discrimination and persecution since their original deportation has engendered a range of survival skills. This set of skills continues to exercise a very strong binding force among their communities, however scattered. These include the preservation of their language and religion, their continuing devotion to their customs and traditions, and perhaps most importantly, the centrality in their culture of close-knit family ties and kinship networks.

Associated with this extraordinary continuity and solidity of their sense of identity is the ongoing determination of most Meshketian Turks - contrary to official Georgian assertions - to reclaim their original homeland. Recent research on a wide range of Meshketian Turk communities in diaspora reveals that the majority regard their current homes as merely temporary, however well-established they might be. But there is a political downside to the close-knit nature of Meshketian Turk communities, their characteristic focus on the private life of family and kin,

13 Broers, L.(2008) 'Filling the Void: Ethnic Politics and Nationalities Policy in Post-Conflict Georgia,' *Nationalities Papers*, vol.36 (2), p. 281.

and with their tendency towards social isolation. These very strengths have served to weaken their capacity to create an effective public, organizational profile in their quest for repatriation. Given this emphasis on family and kinship relationships, and without a territorial base and a well-funded Western-based diaspora to pursue their cause, the various Meshketian Turk organizations - including the major one, The *Vatan* ('Homeland') International Society of Meskhetian Turks - are generally weak, lacking strategically minded elites, mass membership, substantial funding and sustained campaigning activity.¹⁴ Following the death in 2003 of its charismatic leader Yusuf Sarvarov, *Vatan* has been in disarray and given up most of its gains in negotiations with official Tbilisi:

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Conclusion

What, then, are the prospects for the repatriation of the Meshketian Turks and, in tandem, for Georgia's European aspirations? Given Tbilisi's intransigence and the absence of effective Meshketian Turk activism, the most likely way forward will come from international pressure, most importantly the institutions associated with the Council of Europe. When it acceded to the CoE in 1999, Georgia committed to adopt a legal framework for repatriation and integration of Meshketian Turks within two years (i.e. by April 2001); to begin the actual process within three years; and to complete it by 2011.

The lack of substantial progress in Georgia's fulfillment of its commitments has not been due to the absence of official attention within the CoE. In particular, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) has published a number of reports in recent years on the issue of Meshketian Turks in both Georgia and the Russian Federation. Though its fourth monitoring cycle report on Georgia, published in 2010, notes that the Georgian Parliament passed the relevant law on repatriation in July 2007, it points to the 'technical difficulties' that obstruct the process of applying for return and citizenship, as well as the continuing hostility of "some segments of the Georgian population,

¹⁴ Overland, I. (2007) 'International Organisations, Regional Politics and the Meskhetian Turks,' in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.533.

especially among some members of the Armenian population living in the region from which the deported persons originated.”¹⁵

Though cautiously diplomatic in its language, the ECRI follow-up report, adopted in June 2013, makes it clear that the need for a ‘comprehensive strategy’ in favor of repatriation and reintegration has not been implemented, since “the authorities have not taken all necessary measures to solve the different problems raised during the repatriation process.”¹⁶ Of course, even if the Georgian authorities were to invest considerably more energy in their efforts to influence public opinion and generate more tolerant and enlightened attitudes to ethnic diversity, there is no guarantee that this would have significant impact, at least in the short to medium term.

Even with continuing pressure from such international bodies, larger strategic political considerations may still prevail in Georgia’s favor. Though Georgia’s relations with Russia under President Margvelashvili have somewhat improved in comparison to the Saakashvili period – perhaps under the influence of the influential billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili – the political momentum has continued in favor of EU and NATO membership. If Washington and Brussels remain set on their policies of NATO expansion and encirclement of Russia, it may well be that the decision is taken to bring Georgia into the Western fold, regardless of any reservations among international bodies about Tbilisi’s commitment to minority rights in general, or the Meshketian Turks in particular. Georgia, in that case, could continue to impede return and reintegration through its bureaucratic procedures, while maintaining the rhetoric of its commitment to Meshketian Turk repatriation.

On the other side of the coin, it may be that despite the large number of Meshketian Turks who articulate their desire for repatriation, the actual number of people who would actually choose to do so is quite small, especially given the bureaucratic difficulties and the public hostility. Apart from other possible factors, such as education and employment, there is a major generational factor here. The people who remember the deportation and its immedi-

15 Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin, ‘Introduction,’ in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meshketian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.25.

16 Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin, ‘Introduction,’ in Trier, T. and A.Khanzhin (eds.) *The Meshketian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement*, London: Transactions Publishers, p.6.

ate aftermath are now elderly, and younger people, even if they are emotionally committed to the idea of return to the homeland, may take a more pragmatic view of the associated costs and benefits. Whatever are Georgia's actions, or lack thereof, the dream of Meshketian Turk repatriation may remain unrealized for the vast majority, at least in the near future. However, if Georgia persists with its European quest it needs to take practical rather than symbolic steps towards the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia. These steps should involve concerted efforts towards the development of a culture of tolerance towards them, as well as to other ethnic non-Georgians. In the long run, this will benefit Georgia's social and cultural cohesion and advance its European aspirations.