

**SKILLED LABOR MIGRATION AND BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT: THE CASE OF
MESKHETIAN TURKS*****Mehebbet FEYZULLAH** **Assoc. Prof. Mete Kaan NAMAL (Ph.D.)** **Assoc. Prof. Mustafa KOÇANCI (Ph.D.)** **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the structural and psychosocial barriers hindering the effective labor market integration of skilled migrants, focusing specifically on the case of Meskhetian Turks in Turkey. Grounded in theories of migrant integration, social exclusion, and professional deskilling, the research adopts a qualitative multiple case study approach, analyzing in-depth interviews with 21 skilled Meskhetian migrants residing in Antalya and Bursa. The findings indicate that despite their high levels of education and professional experience, participants encounter systemic obstacles, including non-recognition of foreign credentials, prolonged citizenship and work permit procedures, and workplace discrimination. These challenges contribute to the erosion of professional identity, prolonged unemployment, and significant psychological distress. The study highlights the urgent need for policy reforms to streamline credential recognition, expedite legal integration, and foster inclusive labor market practices to fully leverage the potential of skilled migrant labor.

Keywords: Skilled Labor Migration, Migrant Employment, Meskhetian Turks, Labor Market Integration.

Jel Codes: J6, J7, J8.

**1. SKILLED MIGRANT LABOR: NEW DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES IN GLOBAL
MOBILITY**

Having established the historical context of Meskhetian Turks' displacement, it is critical to examine the broader dynamics of skilled migration that frame their experiences. In today's global economy, skilled migrant labor is increasingly significant in international labor markets (Castles &

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Miller, 2009; Massey et al., 1993). The mobility of skilled individuals fosters technological innovation, economic growth, and cultural diversity (Kerr & Kerr, 2011; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). However, this mobility also brings complex challenges. Skilled migrants face various obstacles in their destination countries, which hinder the full utilization of their potential (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014; Bloemraad, 2006). Therefore, understanding the dynamics and challenges of skilled migrant labor is crucial for both sending and receiving countries.

The international migration of highly skilled workers has emerged as a critical aspect of global workforce mobility since the 1980s, becoming a focal point in population migration studies (Jiang, 2021). This phenomenon represents an increasingly large component of global migration streams, with estimates suggesting approximately 1.5 million professionals from developing countries working in industrial nations alone (Tonkūnaitė, 2006). These movements occur through various channels, including permanent settlement to major immigrant-receiving countries, temporary migration within and outside multinational corporations, refugee flows, and family reunion arrangements.

According to the International Organization for Migration, highly qualified professionals constitute about 22% of all labor migrants globally, with developed countries hosting an even larger percentage than the world average (Rubinskaya, 2018). Transnational corporations have become particularly significant actors in facilitating the migration of these skilled professionals. The economic significance of international skilled migration continues to grow, making it an important factor in the dynamic development of the global economy.

Many nations are increasingly directing their migration policies toward attracting highly qualified professionals. This trend is not limited to developed countries but also extends to emerging economies such as China, Brazil, and Argentina (Rubinskaya, 2018). Looking forward, experts anticipate a substantial increase in the annual immigration flow of highly skilled workers compared to other types of migration. Projections suggest that the migration of highly qualified workers to the EU-28 could increase by 134% under the most probable scenario of unilaterality and economic convergence, potentially reaching three times the 2009-2018 average by 2030 (Oliynyk et al., 2021). Beyond addressing skills shortages, migration of highly skilled professionals contributes positively to host countries through the transfer of human resources, skills, and cultural traits. Immigrants frequently bring valuable entrepreneurial attitudes, strong work ethics, and important connections with other cultures and markets to their destination countries (Tonkūnaitė, 2006).

Subsequent to 2020, numerous studies have examined novel policies and visa programs implemented by countries to attract and retain a qualified labor force. Notably, heightened global competition for talent has been observed, particularly within the health, information technology, and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Shifts in the dynamics of skilled labor migration and brain drain, the strategies adopted by countries during economic recovery, and

newly developed migration programs for digital nomads have also emerged as significant areas of research (Bai et al., 2020).

The 2020 study by Fitzsimmons et al. demonstrated that characteristics such as race, native language, and gender influence both the salary levels and access to supervisory positions for immigrants. This effect is also reported to be moderated by the international orientation of employing firms. The impact of demographic factors on the international workforce varies according to the level of institutional internationalization (Hajro et al., 2021). It has been observed that diversity is more positively received in companies with a stronger international focus, and immigrants' access to career opportunities is relatively more equitable in these settings. Nevertheless, it is understood that discrimination based on demographic factors is not entirely eliminated even within the internationally qualified workforce; rather, it manifests in different forms.

Skilled migrants typically possess high levels of education, expertise, and professional experience. They often work in fields such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), healthcare, finance, and information technology (Hunt & Gauthier-Loiselle, 2010; Vertovec, 2007). These individuals contribute significantly to the economies of their host countries by enhancing innovation and competitiveness (Abbas et al., 2024; Borjas, 2014; Peri, 2012; Maskus, 2023). Additionally, they enrich cultural diversity and contribute to societal development (Alba & Nee, 2003; Spencer, 2011).

However, the challenges faced by skilled migrants cannot be overlooked. Issues such as diploma equivalency, language barriers, cultural adaptation, discrimination, and difficulties in labor market integration are among the most significant obstacles (Esses & Gardner, 2009; Pager & Shepherd, 2008). The lack of recognition for foreign diplomas and professional qualifications makes it difficult for skilled migrants to continue their careers (OECD, 2019; Commander, Gorodnichenko, & Lee, 2008). Language barriers create communication problems in both professional and social settings, while cultural adaptation can be a time-consuming and challenging process (Koser, 2016; Ruhs, 2013).

Discrimination is one of the most significant challenges faced by skilled migrants. They often encounter discrimination in job applications, promotions, and wage disparities, which demotivates them and prevents them from fully utilizing their potential (Dustmann, Fabbri, & Preston, 2005; Chiswick, Lee, & Miller, 2005). Additionally, difficulties in labor market integration prolong the job search process, leading to economic hardships (Constant, Kahanec, & Zimmermann, 2009; Zimmermann, 2005). Therefore, addressing the challenges faced by skilled migrants requires cooperation between sending and receiving countries.

To empirically investigate these challenges faced by Meskhetian Turks, this study adopts a qualitative multiple case study approach. Grounded in theories of migrant integration skilled migrant labor is critical for the future of the global economy. Therefore, addressing the challenges faced by

skilled migrants is essential for both their well-being and the sustainability of the global economy (Martin, 2004; Hatton & Williamson, 2005). This study aims to shed light on the dynamics and challenges of skilled migrant labor by examining the difficulties faced by skilled Meskhetian Turks in the Turkish labor market.

Meskhetian Turks, who were exiled during the Soviet era, have acquired education and professional experience in various countries. Despite their potential, Meskhetian Turks in Turkey face challenges such as diploma equivalency, language barriers, and cultural adaptation, which hinder their full integration into the Turkish economy and society.

This study employs qualitative research methods, conducting face-to-face interviews with 21 Meskhetian Turks living in Antalya and Bursa to deeply examine the challenges they face in the labor market. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo 12 Pro software.

This study provides important findings on the status of skilled migrant labor in Turkey, offering valuable insights for policymakers, civil society organizations, and researchers. Improving the integration processes of skilled migrants is crucial for both their well-being and Turkey's economic and social development. Skilled migrant labor is an indispensable element for the future of the global economy and societies. Therefore, developing policies that enable skilled migrants to fully utilize their potential will benefit both migrants and host countries (Bryk, 2022). This study aims to contribute to this goal and emphasizes the need for further research and policy recommendations on skilled migrant labor.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research was designed using a holistic multiple case study approach, a qualitative research method that allows for an in-depth examination of multiple cases to identify similarities and differences (Yin, 2018). The study was conducted to understand the challenges Meskhetian Turks face in integrating into the Turkish labor market and to identify the causes of these challenges.

The sample consisted of 21 Meskhetian Turks living in Antalya and Bursa, Turkey, who can be considered skilled labor. Participants completed their undergraduate education in different countries and had professional experience. Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling methods were used to select participants (Patton, 2015). These methods ensured that information-rich participants were selected based on their professional qualifications, experiences of difficulties in integrating into the Turkish labor market, and willingness to share their experiences. Regarding the attainment of data saturation, the primary criterion was the absence of novel data or the emergence of new themes that would contribute to the existing thematic framework in subsequent interviews. Notably, the interviews conducted with the 19th and 20th participants revealed an intensification of recurring patterns, and data saturation was deemed to have been achieved at this juncture. Consequently, it was determined that the data obtained after 21 interviews adequately addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview form that included demographic information and open-ended questions about participants' experiences in the labor market, the challenges they faced, and their suggestions for solutions. Interviews were conducted in locations preferred by the participants, recorded with audio devices, and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The interviews were conducted between July 2021 and December 2021, and participants were encouraged to express their views openly and comfortably.

In the data analysis process, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis method was followed. Accordingly, the following steps were implemented sequentially: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) identification of potential themes, (4) review of themes, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the report. The collected data were analyzed using NVivo 12 Pro software and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis aims to identify common themes in the data and interpret them systematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the analysis, interview transcripts were coded, and similar codes were grouped to form themes. Themes were organized to reflect participants' experiences and challenges, and direct quotes from participants were included to enrich the findings.

Ethical principles were followed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose and methods of the study, and their written consent was obtained. Participants' identities were kept confidential, and data were used solely for research purposes. The study was approved by the Akdeniz University Social Sciences Institute Ethics Committee on 01/07/2021 (Decision No: 232).

Several measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Interview questions were designed to be clear and understandable, allowing participants to reflect deeply on their experiences. During data analysis, consistency was maintained between codes and themes, and the analysis process was documented in detail. Direct quotes from participants were included to enhance the verifiability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These methods supported the reliability and validity of the research.

The study's limitations include the sample being limited to Meskhetian Turks living in Antalya and Bursa, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative research means that the researcher's perspective may influence the interpretation of the findings. However, these limitations are balanced by the study's in-depth analysis. Other limitations include the relatively small sample size, the underrepresentation of certain demographic groups (e.g., long-term residents or specific occupational groups), and slight gender imbalances, which further limit the generalizability of the findings.

In order to elucidate the dynamics and challenges encountered by skilled migrant labor, with a specific focus on the difficulties faced by qualified Meskhetian Turks within the Turkish labor market, the following questions were addressed in the interviews:

1. What does "unemployment" mean for skilled migrants?
2. What are migrants' expectations from labor markets?
3. How do migrants' labor market connections vary by city?
4. What challenges do skilled migrants face in the labor market?
5. What solutions do migrants propose for the challenges they face in the labor market?
6. How do migrants describe the challenges they face, and why?

3. FINDINGS

This section presents the main findings derived from the analysis of the data collected within the scope of the study and systematically evaluates the responses to the research questions.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Profiles

Participant	Age	Gender	Profession	Marital Status	Residence Duration
A	29	Male	HVAC Engineer	Single	6 years
B	31	Male	Cardiologist	Married	2 years
C	27	Male	Dentist	Single	1 year
D	30	Female	Math Teacher	Married	5 years
E	27	Female	Geography Teacher	Single	5 years
F	53	Female	Nurse	Married	24 years
G	25	Female	Economist	Single	3 years
H	31	Male	Doctor	Single	5 years
I	27	Female	Math Teacher	Married	4 years
J	57	Female	Physical Education Teacher	Married	26 years
K	29	Female	Translator (Russian-English)	Married	2 years
L	32	Male	Doctor	Married	9 years
M	25	Female	Paramedic	Married	3 years
N	33	Female	Geography Teacher	Married	6 years
O	27	Female	Opera Singer	Single	2 years
P	35	Male	Pediatric Surgeon	Married	9 years
Q	50	Male	Businessman	Married	21 years
R	28	Male	Dentist	Single	2 years
S	25	Female	Computer Engineer	Single	4 years
T	63	Male	Language and Literature Teacher	Married	5 years
U	46	Female	Health Officer	Single	8 years

The demographic characteristics of the participants (Table 1) provide a broad perspective on the experiences of skilled migrants in Turkey. The gender distribution is relatively balanced (12 females, 9

males), allowing for the examination of gender-based differences. Approximately half of the participants are married (11), while the other half are single (10), providing a suitable basis for analyzing the impact of marital status on migrant experiences.

In terms of residence duration, most participants (10) have lived in Turkey for 1-5 years, while 6 have lived there for 6-10 years, and 5 have lived there for 11 years or more. This distribution provides important data for examining changes in migrants' integration processes over time. In terms of occupational diversity, the healthcare sector (7) and education sector (6) are the most represented groups, followed by engineering and technology (2) and other professions (6). This diversity allows for comparisons of the experiences of skilled migrants in different occupational groups. The average age of participants is 33, with the youngest being 25 and the oldest 63, providing insights into generational differences.

Applying this methodology revealed critical insights into migrants' experiences, beginning with their profound professional and psychological losses, as outlined in Theme 1."

3.1. Theme 1: Professional and Psychological Losses: Identity, Hope, and Time

Meskhethian Turks view Turkey as their homeland due to historical and cultural ties and often migrate voluntarily. This study examines how skilled Meskhethian Turks experience the inability to practice their professions after migrating to Turkey. Participants were asked, "How would you define not being able to participate in the labor market?" to understand the impact of this situation on them.

Participants expressed that being unable to practice their professions caused deep unhappiness and had significant psychological effects. Skilled migrants reported that being unable to use their professional identities not only caused emotional distress but also financial difficulties. This situation negatively affected both their professional and psychological well-being. Six sub- themes emerged from participants' experiences, and their frequency and percentage distributions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Identity, Hope, and Time

Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Unhappiness	9	42.9%
Being distant from one's profession	6	28.6%
Disappointment	4	19%
Loss of confidence	3	14.3%
Loss of time	2	9.5%
Necessity to work illegally	1	4.8%

Skilled migrants face significant challenges in maintaining their professional identities and psychological well-being in their host countries. This theme analyzes the professional and psychological losses experienced by Meskhethian Turks in Turkey through the concepts of "identity," "hope," and

"time." Participants' experiences revolve around themes such as loss of professional identity, disappointment, and loss of time. These themes provide an important framework for understanding the challenges faced by migrants and developing policy recommendations.

3.1.1. Loss of Professional Identity

Skilled migrants face significant barriers in maintaining their professional identities. Participant P, a pediatric surgeon, expressed his inability to practice in Turkey as follows: *"It's very sad because, for example, I completed my medical degree abroad, finished my specialization, and worked as a pediatric surgeon for four years. Since coming to Turkey, not being recognized as a professional is very disheartening... They make it difficult. Not being able to work as a pediatric surgeon here is very sad for us."* This statement reflects the deep impact of losing one's professional identity. Similarly, Participant B, a cardiologist, expressed the void of not being able to enter the operating room: *"Not being able to enter the operating room or smell the hospital environment is difficult for me. I will do my best to return to that."* This situation highlights how the loss of professional identity affects migrants' psychological well-being.

3.1.2. Loss of Hope and Disappointment

Migrants experience disappointment due to the gap between their pre-migration hopes and post-migration realities. Participant I described this situation as follows: *"I would call it disappointment, difficulty, and almost regret because not being able to practice your profession is really tough... I'm struggling to get my diploma recognized. Then, because I'm not a citizen, we're trying to obtain citizenship, which takes at least two years, and during this time, not being able to work is a difficult situation."* This statement reflects how migrants' hopes diminish and their expectations for the future decrease. Participant O, an opera singer, described the psychological impact of not being able to practice her profession: *"For me, it's unhappiness. When you can't do what you love, you feel a great sense of failure. It's like having your microphone or vocal cords taken away."* These words reflect the profound impact of losing hope on migrants' psychological well-being.

3.1.3. Loss of Time and Necessity to Work Illegally

When migrants cannot find opportunities to use their professional skills, they lose time and are forced to work illegally. Participant U described this situation as follows: *"After that, since we didn't have diplomas, we had to work illegally. I worked without insurance. We had to work because we had no choice."* This statement reflects the economic and psychological difficulties caused by the inability to maintain professional identities. Participant K, a translator, highlighted the time lost due to lengthy citizenship processes: *"Because I'm not working, I'm slowly losing the confidence I had before. At some point, you start to feel regret. I don't know how to describe this regret. You come here, the country is beautiful, the people are nice, but the problem is that obtaining citizenship is a long process. There's no clear process, and the duration is uncertain."* This situation highlights the negative impact of time loss

on migrants' professional and psychological well-being. While Theme 1 exposed the costs of deskilling, Theme 2 shifts focus to migrants' aspirations, revealing how their goals persist despite these challenges.

3.2. Theme 2: Post-Migration Life Goals: Professional and Social Integration Expectations

Skilled migrants have various motivations for achieving professional and social integration in their post-migration lives. This theme examines how skilled Meskhetian Turks in Turkey experience professional development, economic opportunities, active participation in the labor market, and professional respect as professional integration goals, as well as the resolution of ethnic issues, better living conditions, and increased artistic activities as social integration goals. Participants' statements reveal how these goals shape their migration decisions and post-migration life strategies.

Table 3. Professional and Social Integration Expectations

Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Professional development	9	42.9%
Better economic opportunities	6	28.6%
Active participation in the labor market	6	28.6%
Resolution of ethnic issues	3	14.3%
Better living conditions	2	9.5%
No expectations	1	4.8%
Professional respect	1	4.8%
Increased artistic activities	1	4.8%

3.2.1. Professional Integration Goals

Skilled migrants migrate to Turkey with goals such as professional development and respect. Participant A, an HVAC engineer, expressed his expectation for professional development as follows: *"Our biggest expectation was to find jobs in our field and develop ourselves, but we faced difficulties due to diploma equivalency issues."* This statement reflects the barriers migrants face in professional integration. Similarly, Participant B, a cardiologist, explained how professional respect and economic opportunities influenced his decision to migrate: *"In Kazakhstan, I worked for three years, earning 300\$ a month, performing two or three surgeries a day. Earning 300\$ was painful, and this also influenced my decision to move to Turkey."* This situation highlights how professional respect and economic opportunities shape migrants' decisions.

Participant R, a dentist, evaluated the professional opportunities in Turkey as follows: *"Here, I see that healthcare professionals are more valued. I would like to develop myself here. I also see that the income here is higher."* This statement reflects how migrants' professional integration goals are intertwined with economic and professional development expectations.

3.2.2. Social Integration Goals

Migrants have expectations for better living conditions and the resolution of ethnic issues as part of their social integration goals. Participant P, a pediatric surgeon, explained his reason for migrating to Turkey as follows: *"I moved here to raise my children under the Turkish flag."* This statement reflects how migrants' social integration goals are shaped by family and societal ties. Participant U, a health officer, expressed her goal of providing a better life for her child: *"When I came here, I left my child behind. I entered this process to provide a better life for my daughter."* This situation highlights how migrants' social integration goals are intertwined with familial and societal expectations.

Participant C, a dentist, explained how economic opportunities in Turkey support social integration goals: *"Compared to Azerbaijan, many people do their jobs not for money but because they love their profession. Salaries in Azerbaijan are low, and compared to Kazakhstan, where I studied, I've been in Turkey for a year, and the market is generally at a higher level."* This statement reflects how economic opportunities support social integration goals. These integration goals, however, are fundamentally shaped by the migration dynamics explored in Theme 3.

3.3. Theme 3: Dynamics and Connections Shaping Migration Decisions

Skilled migrants' migration decisions are shaped by various social, economic, and cultural dynamics. This theme examines the reasons why Meskhetian Turks migrate to Turkey by combining themes such as family connections, job opportunities, marriage, foreign language skills, contributing to the arts, and the beauty of the chosen city. These themes provide a comprehensive framework for understanding migrants' motivations and goals in the migration process.

Table 4. Connections Between City of Residence and Labor Market Integration

Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Family connections	11	52.4%
Job opportunities	5	23.8%
Marriage	3	14.3%
Foreign language skills	2	9.5%
Contributing to the arts	1	4.8%
Beauty of the chosen city	1	4.8%

3.3.1. Social Dynamics and Connections

Family connections are one of the most important social dynamics shaping migrants' decisions. 52.4% of participants cited family connections as a reason for migrating to Turkey. This situation reflects how migrants' social networks influence their migration decisions. For example, the density of family and acquaintance connections among Meskhetian Turks has led to continued migration to Bursa. Participant J explained this situation as follows: *"When we came from Azerbaijan to Turkey, we came to Bursa because I had an aunt there. They also said there were many job opportunities, so we chose Bursa, and it was a good choice."* Additionally, familial connections such as marriage are also important

factors shaping migration decisions. 14.3% of participants cited marriage as a reason for migrating to Turkey. Participant M explained this situation as follows: *"I got married three years ago and came here. My husband is here. I could have worked elsewhere, but my family is here, so I want to work in Bursa."* These statements reflect how social connections influence migrants' decisions.

3.3.2. Economic Dynamics and Opportunities

Economic opportunities are another important factor shaping migrants' decisions. 23.8% of participants cited the abundance of job opportunities in Turkey as a reason for migration. This situation reflects how economic motivations influence migration decisions. For example, Antalya, a tourism city, stands out as a destination for Meskhetian Turks who speak foreign languages. Participant H explained this situation as follows: *"Antalya is a city with a high number of tourists, especially during the summer. I chose Antalya because I thought there would be an increase in the hiring of healthcare professionals who speak foreign languages."* Additionally, professional skills such as foreign language proficiency are also important factors shaping migration decisions. 9.5% of participants stated that their foreign language skills facilitated access to job opportunities in Turkey. Participant P explained this situation as follows: *"When you think of Antalya, tourism comes to mind first. For example, I speak four languages. That's why we thought that if we continue working here, we could contribute to the state because we have foreign language skills."* These statements reflect how economic opportunities influence migration decisions.

3.3.3. Cultural Dynamics and Aesthetic Preferences

Cultural and aesthetic preferences are another important factor shaping migration decisions. 4.8% of participants cited contributing to the arts as a reason for migrating to Turkey. This situation reflects how cultural motivations influence migration decisions. Additionally, the beauty of the chosen city is also an important factor. 4.8% of participants cited the beauty of the city as a reason for migration. Participant L explained this situation as follows: *"For me, it doesn't matter where in Turkey I live. But Antalya is beautiful; you only live once, and I want to be by the sea all the time. Other than that, work doesn't matter."* These statements reflect how cultural and aesthetic preferences influence migration decisions. Despite these motivating factors, structural barriers in the labor market (Theme 4) systematically undermine migrants' ambitions.

3.4. Theme 4: Challenges in the Labor Market

Migrants face legal, economic, and social barriers in accessing the Turkish labor market. The most significant challenges include diploma equivalency (47.6%), citizenship issues (28.6%), and inability to obtain work permits (23.8%).

Table 5. Challenges in the Labor Market

Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Diploma equivalency issues	10	47.6%
Citizenship issues	6	28.6%
Inability to obtain work permits	5	23.8%
Problems in official procedures	3	14.3%
Social adaptation	3	14.3%
Trust issues towards Meskhetian Turks	1	4.8%
Income inequality in the workplace	1	4.8%
No perceived problems	1	4.8%
Need for social security	1	4.8%

Migrants face legal, economic, and social barriers in accessing the Turkish labor market. The most significant challenges include diploma equivalency (47.6%), citizenship issues (28.6%), and inability to obtain work permits (23.8%). Participants stated that the lack of recognition for their diplomas forced them to work in unskilled jobs, preventing them from using their professional skills. Participant B, a cardiologist, explained this situation as follows: *"There are some problems in the Turkish labor market for educated and skilled Meskhetian Turks. For those who are uneducated and unskilled, it doesn't matter. But for those who come to Turkey as doctors, teachers, or other professionals from Kazakhstan, Russia, or Uzbekistan, there are problems. Because in Turkey, you have to pass very difficult exams to work in your profession."* This statement reflects the disappointment of skilled migrants who cannot practice their professions.

Additionally, the length of work permit and citizenship processes increases periods of unemployment and leaves migrants without social security. Participant D, a math teacher, explained the difficulties in this process as follows: *"I think the biggest problem is the work permit. There are some advantages for Meskhetian Turks, but I think they are insufficient. There are still many Meskhetian Turks here who do not have citizenship or work permits. There is also the issue of diploma equivalency. When we came here, we had to get our diplomas recognized, which caused a loss of one or two years. This is a serious disadvantage."* These words clearly reflect the economic and psychological burden caused by lengthy legal processes.

Social adaptation (14.3%) and lack of societal trust (4.8%) also negatively affect Meskhetian Turks' job search processes. Participants stated that they had difficulty adapting to workplaces due to cultural differences and Turkish language issues. Participant H, a doctor, expressed his sense of belonging as follows: *"As Meskhetian Turks, we have a particular sense of belonging. We come here speaking Turkish, saying that we have returned to our homeland. After all, Turkey is our homeland. If you look at our roots, we are people who were settled along the border from Erzurum Hasan Kale. We*

have gone through major changes and preserved our identity even under the pressure of Russia and the Soviet Union. Coming here and feeling so alienated and facing so many problems creates a deep sense of disappointment." This statement reflects the psychological impact of feeling like a foreigner in one's own homeland.

Economically, income inequality in the workplace (4.8%) and the need for social security (4.8%) lower the living standards of Meskhetian Turks. Participant K, a translator, described her struggle to support her family as follows: *"At first, Meskhetian Turks face significant difficulties because they do not have work permits. They have moved here with their families and have dependents to support. They have children and elderly parents to care for. Of course, they come here with a certain amount of money, but that money runs out quickly. That's why they face difficulties in finding jobs."* These words clearly reflect the impact of economic difficulties on families.

In conclusion, the barriers Meskhetian Turks face in the labor market can be overcome by improving legal regulations and supporting social integration processes. These steps will enable individuals to use their professional skills and strengthen societal integration. Participant S summarized the difficulties in this process as follows: *"The problem everyone faces is that without citizenship, we have difficulties with work permits. Companies are not very keen on helping us obtain work permits. We cannot explain to them that we are Turks and are trying to establish ourselves here. That's why the problems start with citizenship. I believe that if they make it easier to obtain work permits, the problems will be solved."* This statement clearly shows how improvements in legal processes can contribute to solving problems. Faced with these barriers, participants proposed concrete solutions, as cataloged in Theme 5.

3.5. Theme 5: Solutions for Employment and Labor Market Access

The challenges migrants face in accessing the labor market are shaped by legal, bureaucratic, and social barriers. Participants offered various suggestions to address these challenges, focusing on facilitating employment processes, ensuring professional adaptation, and improving legal regulations.

Most participants stated that speeding up official procedures would be a critical step in solving problems. Delays in diploma equivalency and citizenship processes seriously hinder job search processes. Participant N explained this situation as follows: *"For example, we could shorten the citizenship process... There is exceptional citizenship since 2017. We apply for short-term or long-term citizenship, but the exceptional citizenship process takes a long time. It takes more than 1-1.5 years. After applying for citizenship, it takes more than a year to get an ID. Inevitably, people lose 2-2.5 years in between. During this time, they face significant difficulties in finding jobs. They work without insurance. This is our general problem in finding jobs."* This statement clearly shows how speeding up legal processes can positively affect employment processes.

Table 6. Solutions for Challenges

Sub-themes	Frequency	Percentage
Speeding up official procedures	7	33.3%
Equivalency through practical internships	3	14.3%
Changing perceptions about working life	2	9.5%
International agreements on equivalency	2	9.5%
Forming a more effective team for diploma equivalency	1	4.8%
Emphasizing the education of youth and children	1	4.8%
Adding work rights to residence permits	1	4.8%
Granting work permits as exceptions	1	4.8%
Creating a virtual environment to assist in job searches	1	4.8%
Ensuring active participation in the labor market	1	4.8%
Addressing trust issues in the workplace	1	4.8%
Increasing production areas to create employment	1	4.8%

Allowing experienced individuals to obtain equivalency through practical internships is another important solution. Participant H, a doctor, stated the following on this issue: *"Completing my field with an internship is a really logical solution... In the medical field, I can say that equivalency through internships could be a more logical method."* This suggestion offers a practical solution for individuals with professional experience to practice their professions.

Additionally, international regulations and agreements on equivalency could make these processes more effective. Participants stated that institutions should form more effective teams to address this issue. Participant O explained this situation as follows: *"If our applications to the public sector were resolved more quickly... Other correspondence with schools regarding equivalency, emails take a very long time, these should be sped up. There are people who have been waiting for ten years; I waited for a year, but there are people who have been waiting for ten years and still haven't received their equivalency."* This statement highlights how serious the delays in equivalency processes are and the need to speed them up.

Granting work rights to Meskhetian Turks as exceptions, along with residence permits, is another important solution. Participant R stated the following on this issue: *"We are Meskhetian Turks; when we apply for residence permits, our Turkish identity is already stated in our residence permits. I think it would be more appropriate to grant work permits along with residence permits."* This suggestion is a practical step towards facilitating work permit processes.

Creating a special network among Meskhetian Turks to facilitate job search processes is another proposed solution. Participant D explained this situation as follows: *"If Meskhetian Turks could create a special network among themselves, many Meskhetian Turks could find job opportunities. For example,*

associations, foundations, or websites. These social networks would be helpful in finding jobs." This suggestion shows how societal solidarity can facilitate employment processes.

In conclusion, the challenges Meskhetian Turks face in accessing the labor market can be overcome by improving legal regulations, facilitating professional adaptation processes, and strengthening societal solidarity networks. These solutions will enable individuals to use their professional skills and strengthen societal integration. Beyond policy solutions, Theme 6 captures the emotional weight of these challenges through migrants' vivid metaphors.

3.6. Theme 6: Metaphors and Similes

Table 7. Metaphors for Labor Market Challenges

Metaphors	Frequency	Percentage
Labyrinth	2	9.5%
No response	1	4.8%
A rat running in a wheel	1	4.8%
Dead end	1	4.8%
Being behind iron bars	1	4.8%
Thorny path	1	4.8%
A bird taken from its natural environment	1	4.8%
Spinning wheel	1	4.8%
Homeless child	1	4.8%
Inhuman	1	4.8%
Nightmare	1	4.8%
Unpaid laborer	1	4.8%
Clay vase	1	4.8%
Unused old car	1	4.8%
Sun without warmth	1	4.8%
Tree shedding leaves in autumn	1	4.8%
Unresolved issue	1	4.8%
Feeling of alienation	1	4.8%
Uphill road	1	4.8%
Not reaching the summit	1	4.8%

3.6.1. Labyrinths and Dead Ends: Complex and Recurring Problems

The challenges migrants face in the labor market are often described as a labyrinth or dead end. These metaphors symbolize the constant recurrence of the same problems and the difficulty in finding solutions. Participant E explained this situation as follows: *"It's a bit like a labyrinth. It seems like you're about to get out, everything is about to be resolved, but then you have to face the same problems over*

and over again." This statement reflects how individuals face constant barriers in legal and bureaucratic processes, which turn into a repetitive cycle.

Participant U described the labyrinth metaphor more concretely: *"It's like a labyrinth. You go somewhere, a day, a week, a month passes, and you're struggling with something again. You go to the consulate to get a document, the document you get is wrong, and you have to start over. It's like wandering blindly in a labyrinth. If you're lucky, you find the exit; if not, you start over. That's how it is."* These words reflect how individuals experience the complex and exhausting processes of official procedures.

3.6.2. Spinning Wheel and Running in Place: A Vicious Cycle

The metaphor of "a rat running in a wheel" represents the unsolvable and recurring problems faced by skilled migrants. This metaphor reflects how individuals make constant efforts but fail to make progress. Participant O explained this situation as follows: *"I would compare myself to a rat running in a wheel. I'm running around for a purpose, but I'm not making any progress. I can see the path ahead, but the actions I take don't lead to any progress; I feel like I'm stuck in place."* This statement symbolizes how individuals' efforts to use their professional skills and find jobs yield no results.

3.6.3. Dead End: Hopelessness and Desperation

The "dead end" metaphor represents the feelings of hopelessness and desperation experienced by migrants. This metaphor reflects how individuals feel stuck in an unsolvable situation. Participants stated that the barriers they face in the job search process make them feel like they are in a dead end. This situation arises due to the length and complexity of legal and bureaucratic processes.

When the challenges migrants face in the labor market are examined under the overarching metaphor of "Labyrinths and Dead Ends," it is clear that individuals face complex, recurring, and unsolvable processes. Metaphors such as labyrinths, rats running in wheels, and dead ends clearly reflect the emotional and psychological burden individuals experience. These metaphors show that the barriers Meskhetian Turks face in accessing the labor market are not only legal or economic but also have a deep psychological dimension.

This analysis highlights that when developing policies to address the challenges faced by Meskhetian Turks, these metaphorical expressions should be taken into account. Speeding up legal processes, reducing bureaucratic barriers, and implementing practical solutions that allow individuals to use their professional skills can facilitate an exit from this labyrinth. These metaphorical struggles intersect with broader theoretical debates about ethnicity and exclusion, which the Discussion section now addresses.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Ethnicity has emerged as a crucial factor in international skilled migration, influencing migration propensity, pathways, and outcomes. Research shows that "the propensity to migrate can be associated with particular ethnicities or social classes, "though these associations are not independent variables but rather "closely linked with economic, social and cultural processes" (Obokate et al., 2014). This ethnic dimension manifests in various ways across migration systems worldwide. Many receiving countries explicitly incorporate ethnic preferences into their immigration policies. Studies of immigration systems in East Asia, for instance, demonstrate "the special treatment of ethnic return migrants" as a common pattern (Lee, 2011).

Similarly, research comparing multiple countries found that "ethnicity and ethnic belonging play an important role in their history and self-understanding," which is "reflected also in their immigration policies and consistence of their immigration population" (Forsander et al., 2008). These ethnic considerations in policy reveal how "legal and administrative processes regulating immigration are far from being neutral, but are embedded to specific social, historical, cultural and economic context" (Forsander et al., 2008).

Ethnic connections also facilitate migration through cultural familiarity and social networks. For example, Indonesian migrant workers predominantly choose Malaysia as their destination due to "similarities in ethnicity, culture, and language" (Adhisti, 2018). Such ethnic affiliations can reduce the social and psychological costs of migration, making certain destination countries more attractive to specific ethnic groups. However, ethnicity can significantly impact labor market outcomes for migrants, often in negative ways. Recent research shows increasing interest in "the impact of ethnicity on labour migration outcomes for third-country nationals in Europe" (Brazienė et al., 2023). Studies have found that "immigrants of non-Western ethnicity are overrepresented in low-skilled and precarious jobs, whereas immigrants of Western ethnicity are more likely to have highly skilled and secure jobs" (King, 2022). This stratification reflects how "ethnicity can act as both a barrier and a resource for labour market participation and mobility, depending on how it is valued by employers and institutional actors" (Brazienė et al., 2023).

The interplay between ethnicity and inequality also shapes migration patterns. Analysis across numerous countries revealed that "high levels of horizontal inequality between different ethnic groups are associated to lower emigration while higher levels of vertical inequality within ethnic groups are associated with higher emigration" (Haas et al., 2019; Czaika, 2012). This suggests that "feelings of relative deprivation and, hence, migration aspirations, primarily emerge within, not between, social groups" However, "under certain circumstances, the fear of discrimination by majority groups can create migration aspirations among minority groups". It is worth noting that migration research itself has often reinforced ethnic categorizations. Much of the immigration literature has focused on "the more 'foreign'

migrant populations," creating "an image of the 'immigrant' as a foreign racialized 'other'" (Smith, 2002). This tendency for scholars to highlight "the more visibly different in their research" may "unwittingly reaffirm the popular racialization of the social category 'immigrant'" This observation suggests the need for more nuanced approaches to studying the relationship between ethnicity and skilled migration. Synthesizing these empirical and theoretical insights, the Conclusion presents actionable steps to transform migrants' experiences.

This study examines the main challenges Meskhetian Turks face in integrating into the Turkish labor market as skilled migrants. The findings reveal that the biggest barriers to migrants using their professional skills are diploma equivalency, uncertainties in citizenship processes, long-term unemployment, the necessity to work in non-professional jobs, and social exclusion.

For skilled migrant labor to be fully utilized, host countries' integration policies must include inclusive and efficient mechanisms. Castles and Miller (2009) state that one of the biggest barriers to migrants' labor market integration is the lack of diploma equivalency and recognition of professional qualifications. Currently, the lengthy and complex nature of this process in Turkey forces skilled migrants to work in unskilled jobs. Additionally, Ruhs (2013) emphasizes that policies regulating migrant labor play a critical role in labor market integration. Host countries should expedite diploma equivalency processes, facilitate access to language education, combat discrimination, and develop policies that support labor market integration (Lowell, 2001; Teitelbaum, 2004). Sending countries, on the other hand, should improve economic and social conditions to prevent brain drain and implement policies to reverse it (Stark, 2004; Bhagwati & Hamada, 1974).

Despite viewing Turkey as their homeland, Meskhetian Turks feel excluded and discriminated against in their host country. Esses and Gardner (2009) show that migrants' social integration is directly related to cultural adaptation mechanisms and anti-discrimination policies. In this context, implementing policies that facilitate migrants' social integration through language education, cultural adaptation programs, and professional development opportunities is crucial.

To improve skilled migrants' integration into the labor market, the following recommendations can be developed:

1. **Diploma Equivalency and Professional Adaptation Programs:** According to the OECD (2019) report, speeding up diploma equivalency processes is one of the most important factors in increasing migrants' economic contributions. This study also found that this issue has not yet been resolved. Therefore, short-term practical internship programs should be implemented to facilitate professional adaptation, and procedures related to equivalency should be strengthened to address time-related issues.
2. **Facilitating Citizenship and Work Permit Processes:** Zimmermann (2005) states that speeding up citizenship and work permit processes for migrants reduces unemployment rates and

contributes to economic development. This study suggests that expediting the citizenship process for Meskhetian Turks and automatically granting work rights with residence permits would benefit both migrants and the Turkish economy.

3. Combating Discrimination and Raising Societal Awareness: Pager and Shepherd (2008) show that discrimination in the labor market significantly hinders migrants' professional integration. This study also observed that skilled migrants working in professional jobs are negatively affected by discrimination. Therefore, policies to combat discrimination should be developed, and employers' awareness of migrant employment should be increased.

4. Social Integration Programs: Bloemraad (2006) emphasizes that migrants' social integration is related to both economic success and a sense of societal belonging. In line with Bloemraad's findings, this study suggests that cultural activities, language courses, and vocational training should be expanded to support the social integration of Meskhetian Turks.

5. Economic Support Mechanisms: Borjas (2014) argues that ensuring migrants' economic security supports societal integration and increases labor market participation rates. Based on the findings of this study, social assistance mechanisms should be expanded to ensure migrants' economic security, and fairer conditions should be provided in the labor market.

This study emphasizes the need to develop policies that enable skilled migrant labor to contribute to societal and economic development. Future research should comparatively examine the experiences of different skilled migrant communities and conduct multidimensional analyses to offer more comprehensive policy recommendations.

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