

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MESKHETIAN TURKS' DEPORTATION AND THEIR REPATRIATION PROCESS TO GEORGIA*

*Ahıska Türklerinin Sürgün Edilmesinin Ve Gürcistana Geri Dönüş
Süreçlerinin Tarihsel Arka Planı*

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Abstract

The Soviet ethnic deportations are regarded as one of the biggest cruelties of the former USSR. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the titular nationalities of the former Soviet republics that became independent were predominant in their own territories. However, the conditions on the side of minorities which were deprived of their own territories such as Meskhetian Turks got worse, and thus they have been exposed to ethnic discrimination and violence. The main focus of this article will be on the historical background of Meskhetian Turks' deportation as well as their repatriation process to Georgia.

Keywords: Meskhetian Turks, Georgia, Soviet Union, Ethnic deportation, Repatriation

Öz

Sovyet etnik tehcirleri çeřitli trajedilere yol açması sebebiyle eski SSCB'nin en büyük zulümlerinden biri olarak görölmektedir. 1991'de Sovyetler Birlięi'nin dağılmasından sonra, bağımsız hale gelen eski Sovyet cumhuriyetlerinin titüler ulusları kendi topraklarında baskın konumdadır. Bu durum Ahıska Türkleri gibi kendi topraklarından mahrum kalan azınlıkların durumunun daha da kötüleşerek etnik ayrımcılıęa ve şiddete maruz kalmasını beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu makalenin ana odak noktası Ahıska Türklerinin insani, siyasi ve toprak haklarının ihlali de dahil olmak üzere sınır dışı edilmelerinin tarihsel arka planı ve Gürcistan'a geri dönüş süreçleri olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ahıska Türkleri, Gürcistan, Sovyetler Birlięi, Etnik tehcir, Geri dönüş*

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INTRODUCTION

Meskhetian Turks are an ethnic group from the Southern Caucasus. In fact, the term "Meskhetian Turk" was a Soviet term coined to refer to the Turkish-speaking Muslims who settled in the Akhaltsikhe region of Southern Georgia. The term is derived from one of the provinces of southern Georgia called "Meskheti", which is a mountainous region located on the Georgian-Turkish border (Jones, 1993: 14). This region has been incorporated into the boundaries of different powers including the Ottoman Empire, Russian Empire, and Soviet Union throughout history. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the region became a part of the newly independent state of Georgia. Meskhetian Turks have resided in the region for a long time. Besides, they not only settled in Meskheti, but also in Adjara and Imereti that are located in western Georgia (Ray, 2000: 392). Actually, this ethnic group possesses mixed origins including Turks as well as Turkified and Islamicized Georgians. However, Meskhetian Turks are completely different from Georgians in terms of ethnicity. The striking distinction between two groups is religion. Meskhetian Turks adopted Islam, and thus they are occasionally labeled as Muslim Georgians. Nevertheless, there are particular differences between Muslim Georgians and Meskhetian Turks.

As indicated in their name, Meskhetian Turks adopt elements of Turkish culture. Most importantly, Turkish language is the identifying characteristic of this ethnic group. Even though new generations were raised in diverse cultures, they are still capable of speaking Turkish. In particular, Turkish is used in inter-group communication, mostly within families. On the other hand, Meskhetian Turks have a history of persecution, racial discrimination, and de-territorialization. They were exposed to cultural suppression under Soviet authorities in the 1930s. In that period, Meskhetian Turks were given directives to change their Turkish surnames to Georgian ones, and even some of them were compelled to take Russified versions of their first names (Khazanov, 1992: 3).

Especially, two main events in the history of Meskhetian Turks shaped their ethnic identity and resulted in their current conditions. One of them was the deportation of 1944 which caused the displacement of all Meskhetian Turks from their homeland in Georgia. Though it did not have direct influence on every Meskhetian Turks, the other event was Fergana

Massacre 1989 that mainly had an impact on those Meskhetian Turks who had been deported to Uzbekistan (Bilge, 2011: 7). In that sense, ethnic identity of Meskhetian Turks was born in the context of 1944 deportation and bolstered in the course of time owing to discriminatory policies of the Soviet Union (Aydingün, 2002: 188). During the exile, they had to unify under a national movement grounded upon their common Turkishness.

Having placed the historical background of Meskhetian Turks' deportation at the center of discussion, this article aims at illuminating the repatriation process of Meskhetian Turks by focusing on diverse actions taken by the Georgian government to address the repatriation problem.

The main question that the article strives to answer is: What is the position of Georgia towards the repatriation process of Meskhetian Turks? To answer this question, the article adopts a qualitative and narrative research methodology relied upon scholarly works including journal articles, academic reports, dissertations, and conference papers.

This article is divided into three sections. Firstly, the historical background of Meskhetian Turks' deportation will be comprehensively analyzed. Then, elaboration on the position of Georgia and the repatriation process after 1991 will be made so as to comprehend the emergence of the problem. Eventually, major obstacles to the repatriation process will be highlighted.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF DEPORTATION

During the Soviet period, diverse ethnic groups living with the boundaries of the Soviet Union faced a harsh attitude of state machinery. Because Soviet authorities were anxious about the cross-border ethnic ties of minorities, relocation of those ethnic groups from border regions turned out to be regular implementation in the course of time. In that sense, the deportation of Meskhetian Turks should be analyzed within this framework. Yet, the disastrous experience of Meskhetian Turks cannot be comprehended independently from the circumstances transforming into the course of the Cold War.

Considering the Meskhetian Turks as the fifth column of Turkey in the Soviet community, authorities in Moscow had doubts concerning the

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Meskhetian Turks' commitment to the Soviet Union. In line with this argument, Lavrentiy Beria who was the chief of the Soviet secret police organization known as People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) outspokenly indicated the mistrust towards the Meskhetian Turks. In addition, Meskhetian Turks gave rise to suspicions on the side of Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin due to their firm ties with Turkey in respect of language, religion, and their pro-Turkish posture. As a result, Beria proposed Stalin to displace the Meskhetian Turks along with Kurds and Khemsils living in the Georgian border regions on 24 July 1944. After Beria's proposal, Stalin decided to realize resettlement of those ethnic groups residing in the border regions of Georgia. For this purpose, NKVD forces were given orders to execute deportation. Unlike decisions for deportations of other ethnic groups, the decision for the deportation of Meskhetian Turks was not based on a substantial ground that can underline the underlying reason for the action, and it was solely articulated with security of the borders of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Kıprızlı, 2019: 86). In that sense, this deportation was in contradiction with the established pattern of other Soviet ethnic deportations.

Different from other deported ethnic groups, Meskhetian Turks were never accused of collaborating with Nazis (Wimbush and Wixman, 1975: 320). Until the deportation, some Meskhetian Turks had secretly escaped to Turkey, but a number of them had been caught and executed by Soviet forces. The persecution of Meskhetian Turks reached its climax with the deportation in 1944, which was conducted in accordance with a decision of the Committee of State for the sake of frontier security. In November 1944, the Soviet forces arrived in the south and southwest region of Georgia, and about 100.000 Meskhetians labeled as unreliable people were gathered into cattle trains in order to be deported. At that time, Meskhetian Turks were deceived that this temporary evacuation was urgent for their security against Turkey, and they would return to their homeland in a few weeks. Nonetheless, they have not been able to return since that event.

Meskhetian Turks were deported to diverse climatic regions and mostly relocated to Soviet Republics in Central Asia. Under compulsion, they were resettled in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. On the other hand, Soviet authorities resettled approximately 30.000 Christian Georgians from various regions of Georgia to Meskheta through using

force. Besides, they were granted the houses of the deported Meskhetian Turks. Most importantly, deportation was one of the most tragic events for Meskhetian Turks as it took place under inhuman conditions. They were compelled to leave behind their homes, businesses, virtually their entire property, and were not supplied any food or clothes in the course of the deportation process (Aydingün, 1998: 2). Moreover, properties of Meskhetian Turks were subjected to confiscation at the time of deportation, and thus they were never given compensation. As a result of these injustices, thousands of Meskhetian Turks including children and aged lost their life during and after the tough and life-threatening deportation due to starvation, cold, and diseases. Besides, a considerable number of deportees could not adapt to primitive living conditions and the harsh climate of Central Asia after the deportation. Particularly, survivors of the deportation had to face intense poverty and segregation. Especially, famine was prevalent among Meskhetian Turks, and thus they were even compelled to eat grass in order to survive (Mobebedze, 2009: 116). Local population was not hospitable to Meskhetian Turks who were regarded as adversaries. Since local authorities were not ready to shelter deportees, Meskhetian Turks resided in cattle barns and semi-destroyed houses for years.

During the deportation, Meskhetian Turks were subject to a special settlement regime that is quite discriminatory. This term referred to the places of deportation in which the life of deportees are harshly regulated by Soviet security organs. In that sense, basic civil rights of Meskhetian Turks were extensively restricted. For instance, they were forced to settle in a restricted zone without any freedom of movement. Therefore, living and working conditions of Meskhetian Turks resembled labor camps, and Meskhetian Turks were isolated from other ethnic groups. They were also obliged to notify their place of residence once a month in a special registration office. At the end of 1940s, any escape attempt was penalized with 20-years compulsory work in a labor camp. Moreover, Meskhetian Turks were forced to work in factories under severe conditions so as to contribute production during the war. For instance, many Meskhetian Turks had been relocated in the industrial area of the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan. In addition to the iron and steel industry, many of them worked in cotton and textile factories. Different from the industrial sectors, Meskhetian Turks also worked on collective cotton farms. As a result of starvation and exhaustion from overwork, the high mortality rate among Meskhetian Turks continued. Under a special regime, Meskhetian Turks were also deprived of education and publications in

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their native language. Consequently, Meskhetian Turks were further exposed to Russification policies of Soviet authorities that aimed to hamper ethnic collectivity, and thus they had to learn Russian and the national languages of Soviet Republics where they were forced to settle. Additionally, Soviet authorities in Central Asia gave directives to Meskhetian Turks with respect to adapting their original names to russified versions. For example, the son of Akhmed was replaced with Akhmedov by adding the Russian suffix "-ov". Moreover, Meskhetian Turks encountered discriminative quotas and barriers when they wanted to attend universities in the Soviet Union. Until the death of Stalin, communication of Meskhetian Turks was also restrained too. For instance, relatives who had been relocated to different camps in regions of Uzbekistan could not contact. Thus, the special settlement regime separated family members from each other and undermined the ethnic collectivity.

After the death of Stalin, living standards of Meskhetian Turks gradually improved in the 1950s. In fact, many of them became more prosperous than the majority of the local population thanks to their hard work in different sectors. In 1956-1957, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev issued a decision for rehabilitating victims of Stalin's ethnic deportations. Even though deported Caucasian peoples such as Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Karachais were rehabilitated and repatriated their homelands during the de-Stalinization campaign conducted by Khrushchev, the Meskhetian Turks along with Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans were not allowed to return their homeland. Nevertheless, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree in order to cancel the special settlement regime on 28 April 1956. Thanks to the de-Stalinization process, Meskhetian Turks were given permission to freely move within the boundaries of the Soviet Union with the exception of resettling in Georgia. In particular, objections of the Georgian authorities in the Soviet Union hindered the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks because their return could give rise to ethnic strife between them and Christian Armenians and Georgians who were resettled in their territories.

Furthermore, Meskheta was regarded as a crucial geostrategic border region for the Soviet Union against NATO, and this situation became another reason for strict opposition of the Soviet government against Meskhetian Turks' repatriation. Following this, the region of Meskheta was proclaimed as an 85 kilometers wide special border area regime that was

entirely closed to Meskhetian Turks. Because of the implementation of this special regime that covered the entire region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Meskhetian Turks could not return to their homeland. In case of Meskhetian Turks' return to Georgia, security forces either immediately deported them or kept them under detention on the border. In spite of these hurdles, Meskhetian Turks launched a peaceful campaign for their repatriation to Georgia in the 1960s. To this end, they sent petitions to Soviet authorities and organized mass protests and congresses in which they pressured Moscow to allow their repatriation, yet their efforts remained inconclusive. Despite their endeavor to resettle in Georgia, they were once again impeded by authorities in Tbilisi that compelled them to disperse across the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic and North Caucasus (Yemelyanova, 2015: 79). Approximately 30.000 Meskhetian Turks left Central Asia in order to settle in Azerbaijani territories that are closer to their homeland in Georgia. However, Meskhetian Turks were registered as Azerbaijanis when they were allowed to settle in Azerbaijan SSR. Oppression against Meskhetian Turks was maintained in Azerbaijan, and all forms of precautionary measures were taken so as to hinder the movement of Meskhetian Turks from Azerbaijan to Georgia. Later on, many Meskhetian Turks residing in Azerbaijan were regarded as a potential threat, and thus they were compelled to resettle in Kabardino-Balkaria. Even though the de-Stalinization process radically changed the attitude of the Soviet government towards ethnic groups that were deported from their homelands, Soviet authorities intentionally concealed information concerning Meskhetian Turks from 1945 to 1968 in a systematic way.

In June 1968, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree of rehabilitation that became a turning point for Meskhetian Turks during the post-deportation period. As a result of the decree, Meskhetian Turks were given full citizenship rights and their repatriation was legally guaranteed by the Soviet Presidium. Nevertheless, Georgian authorities impeded the process again through not allowing Meskhetian Turks to acquire a special residence permit that is required for entering the Meskheti region. Yet, some Meskhetian Turks were able to return to their homeland through illegal ways in 1969. Though another special decree was issued by Moscow in order to remove restrictions on the movement of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia in 1974, this decision was never put into action and always rejected by authorities in Tbilisi. After a series of unsuccessful attempts for repatriation, the majority of Meskhetian Turks remained in Soviet Republics in Central Asia until 1989. Only a small

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number of Meskhetian Turks were able to return to Georgia thanks to the efforts of influential Georgian oppositional figures and intellectuals. Apart from that, Meskhetian Turks continued to experience oppression in every place they settled. The persecution reached its climax in 1989 when a pogrom directed towards Meskhetian Turks in the Fergana Valley's Uzbek section. A group of radical Uzbeks sabotaged homes of Meskhetian Turks, vandalized their properties, and even murdered them in May 1989. As a result of the turmoil; around 100 Meskhetian Turks were murdered, hundreds of them were injured, and a huge number of houses were arsoned. This massacre was organized when Meskhetian Turks were already fully settled in the region and accomplished to start a new life there. Besides, law enforcement officers remained reckless to this bloodshed even though Meskhetian Turks requested their help. Particularly, the prevention of this upheaval was not in the interests of the authorities in Moscow. However, Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev still strived to appease the unrest through sending Soviet troops to restore control. Military units sent from the Kremlin evacuated Meskhetian Turks from Fergana Valley, and escorted them to camp nearby the Fergana Airport (Ray, 2000: 395).

According to arguments of the Meskhetian Turkish community, the Fergana incident was incited by Moscow so as to divert Uzbek nationalists' attention from the Russian population to Meskhetian Turks. Another claim on Moscow's role in Fergana events was that the Soviet government aimed to diffuse a chaos in the Transcaucasian national movements thanks to possible massive refugee influx from Central Asia to South Caucasus. Eventually, the tragic events in the Fergana Valley compelled many Meskhetian Turks to flee Uzbekistan, and thus they turned out to be refugees once again. According to estimations, more than 70.000 Meskhetian Turks had to leave Uzbekistan and move to different Soviet Socialist Republics. The thousands of Meskhetian Turks were resettled by the Gorbachev government in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and diverse regions of Central Russia, mostly in Krasnodar. Between 1989 and 1990, Azerbaijan alone accepted a huge number of Meskhetian Turks as refugees. Besides, Meskhetian Turks have been integrated into Azerbaijani society very well. On the other hand, resettlement of Meskhetian Turks to Russia was so rapid that many of them were unprepared for such relocation. In that sense, they were compelled to leave behind their properties and start all over again as refugees. Some of them left Uzbekistan without taking important

documents that gave rise to problems during their settlement in Russia, particularly in Krasnodar Kray. Due to lack of official papers, a considerable number of Meskhetian Turks were not granted citizenship by the local authorities of the Krasnodar Kray, and thus their legal status started to be identified with statelessness. As a result, they could not access basic services such as education and medical care.

In the aftermath of tragic events in Uzbekistan, only a few groups of Meskhetian Turks were able to return to Georgia, yet they were expelled from Georgian territories as a result of popular opposition to their repatriation between the years 1989 and 1991. Following this, Meskhetian Turks persisted in their demands for repatriation to Georgia, yet their efforts remained fruitless as usual. At the end, the commitment of Gorbachev to repatriate the Meskhetian Turks to Georgia was annulled by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. By 1991, Meskhetian Turks were scattered across several former Soviet Republics as a result of being deported twice.

POSITION OF GEORGIA AND REPATRIATION PROCESS AFTER 1991

Georgian official attitude towards the deported Meskhetian Turks was portrayed with lack of consistency. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union and establishment of an independent Georgian state, affirmative posture concerning the return of Meskhetian Turks was reflected in Georgian mass media. In addition, Georgian intellectuals were advocating the repatriation process. Therefore, this positive public opinion regarding repatriation of Meskhetian Turks had an impact on the resolutions adopted by the Georgian government. For instance, authorities in Tbilisi issued a resolution on requests of influential public figures concerning the repatriation of the deported Meskhetian Turks to Georgia in 1979. As a result of this resolution, many of them managed to return to Georgia until 1989. At that period, the Georgian state created favorable conditions for Meskhetian Turks' adaptation to Georgian society by providing accommodation, jobs, as well as language education. Meanwhile, authorities in Moscow took a reckless attitude towards the repatriation issue, and they strictly rejected Meskhetian Turks' return to Georgia. Consequently, resolutions by the Georgian government did not come into force.

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In the aftermath of the undesired incident at the Fergana Valley in 1989, the leaders of the Georgian national liberation movement outspokenly indicated their readiness to receive Meskhetian Turks as refugees and settle them in Georgia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Georgia adopted several objectives including integration with the West, engagement in the democratization process, and promoting the minority rights within the country. In line with these goals, the new regime in Tbilisi strived to take part in international organizations in the early years of independence. Besides, the new ruling elite of Georgia desired to bring an end to the Meskhetian Turks' unresolved repatriation issue. Nevertheless, their position towards repatriation was fundamentally changed once they became aware of the fact that deportees did not possess pro-Georgian orientation (Mobebadze, 2010: 65). Therefore, their willingness to support the repatriation process was swiftly vanished. Particularly, circumstances rapidly changed during the transition period when several political, economic, and social problems appeared in Georgia. In that context, the dissolution of the Soviet Union also brought about formidable instability along with deterioration of living standards. In that arduous period, not only Georgian society but also Meskhetian Turks had to endure several hardships. In particular, many repatriates could not reside in Georgian territories due to political and economic instability and popular opposition against the repatriation process. Moreover, a series of tragic events such as ethnic strife in Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused by increasing ethno-religious Georgian nationalism, gradual economic deterioration, coup d'état, and establishment of the interim Georgian government gave rise to intense disturbances in the country. These developments forced Georgian authorities to focus on local problems instead of repatriation issues. Consequently, Tbilisi could not seriously deal with the demands of Meskhetian Turks, and thus the repatriation process was suspended.

In fact, Georgian authorities were concerned that the resettlement of Meskhetian Turks would be a new source of ethnic strife. Particularly; in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region from where Meskhetian Turks were deported, there was a considerable Armenian population and they showed their resentment towards the repatriation process. Besides, authorities in Tbilisi thought that the Georgian state could not provide accommodation to Meskhetian Turks due to the overwhelming influx of refugees from the conflict zones. Therefore, the new ruling elite of

Georgia could not deal with Meskhetian Turks and bolstered already existing anti-Meskhetian campaigns within the country, which significantly contributed to the oppositional movement against the repatriation process. As a result, many repatriates who were expecting the adoption of a resolution that could enable large-scale repatriation were expelled from Georgia in 1992. In fact, Georgia was unwilling to focus on the repatriation problem and put the blame on the Russian Federation as a successor state of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Russian authorities rejected any responsibility for Meskhetian Turks' repatriation by criticizing Georgian officials.

After Eduard Shevardnadze came to power, the legal status of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia experienced a gradual improvement. In that sense, some constructive steps were taken in respect to the repatriation issue. For instance, a state commission was established to deal with the repatriation process. In 1994, Shevardnadze regime took initiative to reach an agreement with the Kremlin on the question of repatriation, and thus the project concerning the restoration of the rights of deportees and their descendants was presented to Moscow. Yet, this project was never put into practice. Therefore, there was a trivial progress on addressing the repatriation issue and nothing serious was done to realize resettlement of Meskhetian Turks in their homelands during Shevardnadze's tenure. As a result; since the Meskhetian Turks could not find the lawful authority to deal with their repatriation issue, different organizations of Meskhetian Turks were established so as to bring the repatriation problem on the international agenda, which could pressure authorities in Tbilisi to take initiative (Keskin, 2019: 32).

Concerning organizational aspects, Meskhetian Turks have been separated into two different groups, namely International Vatan Society, meaning "homeland" in Turkish, and Khshna, meaning "salvation" in Georgian. Members of Vatan Society identify themselves as Turkic-speaking Turkish Muslims from Meskheti. Thus, they associate themselves with the Meskheti region rather than the entire Georgia itself. The leadership of Vatan Society persistently demands an immediate repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to their homeland in Samtskhe-Javakheti. On the contrary, members of Khshna are pro-Georgian, and they describe themselves as Muslim Georgians. In that sense, the leadership of Khshna demands a quick re-integration of Meskhetians into Georgian society. For members of this organization; Georgia is regarded as their homeland, so they are not strictly obsessed with the Meskheti

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region compared to members of Vatan Society (Akhaltaksi, 1996: 304). In spite of both organizations' efforts, public awareness in Georgia regarding the repatriation process of Meskhetian Turks has remained very poor. Consequently, there has been a general tendency among Georgian society to adopt an opposing attitude to the possible repatriation of Meskhetian Turks.

When it comes to coverage of repatriation issues in the international agenda after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was virtually no international attention until 1996 because the international community was busy with the Yugoslav Wars in the Balkans and several violent conflicts in post-Soviet space. In May 1996, CIS Conference on problems of refugees, involuntarily displaced persons, and returnees in the countries of the CIS was organized. In that conference, the repatriation issue of Meskhetian Turks was officially recognized by the international community. Besides, CIS Conference of 1996 was the first step of International Vatan Society's involvement in international platforms in order to propagate their demands on repatriation. In the aftermath of this conference, the issue of Meskhetian Turks' repatriation attracted remarkable attention from both international organizations and non-governmental organizations. In particular, reports of the International Organization for Migration, Human Rights Watch, and Federal Union of European Nationalities contributed to attracting international attention (Pentikäinen and Trier, 2004: 31). In September 1998, the International Vatan Society took part in a Hague Meeting organized by UNHCR, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, and Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute. The delegates from Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Russian Federation also participated in this meeting. Emphasis on the rehabilitation and repatriation of Meskhetian Turks within the framework of human rights was a crucial outcome of the meeting.

In March 1999, another meeting was organized in Vienna by the same organizations. In addition to former delegations, the representatives of the Council of Europe, the United States, Ukraine, and Turkey participated in this meeting. In that meeting, the usual problems on the side of Meskhetian Turks were discussed. In April 1999, Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe brought about a possibility for generating durable solutions to the repatriation problem. In particular, involvement of the Council of Europe at the Vienna consultations concerning problems of Meskhetian Turks was important for monitoring and urging Georgia to

meet conditions necessary for its membership. As a condition to be a member of the Council of Europe, Georgia made a number of commitments including creation of legislative framework enabling repatriation and integration of Meskhetian Turks into Georgian society within two years after its entry to the Council of Europe and granting right to obtain Georgian citizenship to Meskhetian Turks (Mobebadze, 2009: 123). In that sense, Georgia has agreed to establish a twelve year framework for repatriation of Meskhetian Turks under strong pressures from its European partners. According to that framework, a law on repatriation was supposed to be in effect by 2001 and the process of repatriation had to be completed by 2011. Despite the commitments of Georgia, the law on repatriation was never enacted during the rule of Shevardnadze. Especially, the draft law developed by the Georgian Repatriation Service was rejected without any plausible reason by the Shevardnadze regime in early 2001. At that time, efforts of the Georgian government for the repatriation process remained symbolic, and they only served for the purpose of satisfying expectations of the international community. It was only after takeover of the power by Mikheil Saakashvili with his strong commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration that the repatriation issue again gained prominence in the political agenda of Tbilisi. However; after the Rose Revolution in 2003, there was still no prepared legal framework for the repatriation process of Meskhetian Turks even though some positive developments occurred under Saakashvili's presidency. Similar to former governments, the Saakashvili regime had concerns about popular opposition towards Meskhetian Turks' repatriation. In the meantime, Meskhetian Turks continued to experience discrimination, especially in Russia. In turn, the United States government granted political asylum to around 20.000 Meskhetian Turks in January 2004. Following this, Meskhetian Turks from post-Soviet Russia were granted refugee status in 2005, which became their third resettlement (Pirtskhalava and Surmanidze, 2015: 100). Eventually, the Parliament of Georgia promulgated the "Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from Georgian SSR by the Former Soviet Union in the 1940's of the 20th Century" in 11 July 2007. Evidently, international pressures on Tbilisi to comply with conditions stipulated by the Council of Europe induced the adoption of the law. From the theoretical perspective, the law was dealing with the issue of repatriation of deported people and their descendants including Meskhetian Turks and other smaller groups from Georgia in the 1940s. However, the law provided an ambiguous definition of repatriates without elaborating on

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their rights. In that sense, Tbilisi was stalling the repatriation process with the adoption of such a vague law (Trier, 2007: 2).

According to provisions of the law, Meskhetian Turks must submit their application for receiving the status of repatriation by 1 January 2010. Even though many Meskhetian Turks strived to apply for repatriation, the obstacles in both the application process and the implementation of the repatriation law complicated the process. In particular, expenses related to submission of application for repatriation and legal barriers for attaining the status of repatriate complicated the efforts of Meskhetian Turks. Moreover, the indifferent attitude of authorities in Tbilisi towards the repatriation process demonstrated their reluctance on Meskhetian Turks' resettlement on Georgian territories (Papuashvili, 2013: 57). In the end, implementation of the law on repatriation was postponed as a result of the outbreak of the August War between Georgia and Russia in 2008. Three years after the war; in March 2011, Georgian government established an interagency governmental council for the repatriation process for the purpose of preventing the outbreak of possible ethnic strife over the regions in which Meskhetian Turks would be resettled. In that period, international actors were also conducting special programs for contributing to the repatriation process in collaboration with authorities in Tbilisi. Additionally, the Public Defender's Office of Georgia as well as purposefully organized activities by Georgian mass media facilitated the creation of positive posture within Georgian society towards Meskhetian Turks' repatriation.

In the summer of 2011, Tbilisi under renewed pressures coming from Europe initiated the official process of granting status of repatriate to Meskhetian Turks. Nevertheless, the process was again impeded by economic and legal obstacles. Without obtaining Georgian citizenship, it became very hard for Meskhetian Turks to reside and find jobs in Georgia. Meanwhile, Georgian authorities continued to deal with the repatriation issue just for the sake of indicating the nominal commitment of Tbilisi towards pluralistic and liberal values of Europe (Chelidze, 2013: 6).

MAJOR OBSTACLES TO REPATRIATION PROCESS

In spite of many constructive steps taken for realizing the repatriation of deported Meskhetian Turks, there are major obstacles to the repatriation

process. Reluctance of Tbilisi towards Meskhetian Turks' repatriation derives from several factors including Georgian nation-building process that is not hospitable towards minority groups, concerns regarding the possible ethnic conflict in Armenian populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region, and fears on territorial integrity, especially after the de facto loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia is perceived as a threat on the side of ethnic Armenians residing in Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which is a kind of corridor to the outside world for Armenia. Armenians' concerns about the possibility that resettlement of Meskhetian Turks will bring about blockade to Armenia, and thus they strictly object to their repatriation so as to refrain from the encirclement of Armenia by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Since many Armenians settled in the houses of deportees, they are also afraid of losing lands and properties due to possible reclamation of them by repatriates. According to Armenians, ethnic composition of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region will be dramatically changed as a result of the prospective repatriation process.

Another important obstacle to the repatriation process is the emergence of numerous internally displaced people owing to Georgia's conflicts with Russia. From the declaration of independence, Tbilisi has had very tense relations with Moscow, and thus a huge number of internally displaced people cannot return to their homeland. In particular, nearly 300.000 people were displaced as a result of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Following this, the August War in 2008 resulted in considerable increase in the number of refugees. The conditions deteriorated when Russian and separatist forces jointly destroyed the abodes and properties in the conflict zones. In that sense, Meskhetian Turks' repatriation became a heavy financial burden on the Georgian state which had to simultaneously deal with a large number of refugees. Hereby, the repatriation process could not be sufficiently financed.

In addition to political, economic, and social problems of Georgia, the organizational problems in the associations of Meskhetian Turks also brought about challenges for the repatriation process. Meskhetian Turks were geographically scattered, and thus diverse organizations were established in different countries where Meskhetian Turks settled. However, this situation gave rise to disintegration among Meskhetian Turks in terms of diverse ideological orientations on their identification. Therefore, these different associations had to meet on a common ground

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for persuading Tbilisi to adopt a legislative framework on the issue of repatriation since the mid-1990s. In order to eliminate the aforementioned organizational problems, the "World Union of Ahıska Turks" was established in Istanbul in May 2010. The main objective of this organization is to unify different Meskhetian Turks' organizations in the world and conduct a large-scale struggle for the repatriation in a systematic way (Keskin, 2019: 36). Currently, fewer than 1.000 Meskhetian Turks reside in different regions of Georgia. Even though many of them have managed to acquire Georgian citizenship and made their residence legal in the country, they continue to experience political and socio-economic integration problems.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Meskhetian Turks became the subject of deportation due to Soviet authorities' concerns about their cross-border ethnic ties with Turkey. In the aftermath of the deportation, Meskhetian Turks suffered the loss of a considerable part of their population, and they encountered the threat of the eradication of their ethnic identity and collectivity under the special settlement regime. Against all tragic experiences, Meskhetian Turks managed to preserve their collective consciousness. In addition to their shared societal features such as religion, language, and family ties which are the elements mostly remarked in the literature; traumatic experiences that they have undergone during and after the deportation turned into the main component of their communal heritage. This situation also enabled them to bolster and deepen their collective identity as well.

However, the repatriation attempts of the Meskhetian Turks to Georgia have remained mostly inconclusive. It is evident that Georgian authorities did not welcome the return of the Meskhetian Turks due to several factors stemming from different dimensions. Particularly, Georgia's series of conflicts and wars with Russia became the main hurdle for their repatriation. Besides, the intense unpopularity of Meskhetian Turks' return to their homeland among ethnic Armenians and the existence of an extreme amount of internally displaced persons in Georgia delayed the repatriation process. Even, discrepancy among institutional factions of Meskhetian Turks, which brought about a conspicuous inter-group disagreement, contributed to this situation.

If authorities in Tbilisi insist on their Euro-Atlantic orientation, they have to engage in practical instead of symbolic attempts concerning the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation to Georgia. Nevertheless, Georgia is still not capable of dealing with the issue of repatriation alone. Thus, the support of the international community will be very vital for providing favorable conditions in the country in order to ensure safe return of Meskhetian Turks and the successful conduct of repatriation. In the course of time, this will also contribute to the progress of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation.

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