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DIASPORA, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND ETHNIC IDENTITY AMONG AHISKA (MESKHETIAN) TURKS: EXPLORING HISTORICAL ROOTS, CONTEMPORARY ISSUES, AND TÜRKİYE'S ROLE IN RESETTLEMENT

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The Ahıska (Meskhetian) Turks are an ethnic group originally from Georgia's Meskheti region who experienced forced migrations and displacement during the 20th century, leading to their widespread diaspora in countries such as Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and the United States. (U.S.) This history of upheaval has shaped their transnational identity, characterized by a strong connection to their homeland while also integrating into host societies. The study of transnationalism and diaspora is vital for understanding the Ahıska Turks' experiences, highlighting how they have navigated complex identities across borders, with a particular focus on the impact of Soviet-era deportations and subsequent resettlements. This article aims to fill gaps in academic knowledge by exploring their historical roots, diaspora identity, and Türkiye's role in supporting Ahıska Turks displaced from Ukraine.

Keywords: Ahıska Turks, Transnationalism, Ethnic Identity, Diaspora, Resettlement

The Ahıska (Meskhetian) Turks are a distinct ethnic group whose history has been shaped by forced migration, displacement, and transnational identity formation. Originally from the Meskheta region of Georgia (Suny, 1994: 48), they experienced multiple waves of forced displacement throughout the 20th century, leading to their dispersion across various countries, including Türkiye, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Ukraine, and the U.S. (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrst Kilimnik et al., 2011: 55). As a result, the Ahıska Turks have developed a transnational identity characterized by strong ties to their ancestral homeland and active engagement with both their diaspora and host societies (Aydingün, 2014: 8).

This article argues that the Ahıska Turks' identity is shaped by the interplay of transnationalism, diaspora, and ethnic identity, which have become key analytical frameworks in migration studies, particularly in the context of globalization. While transnationalism reflects the Ahıska Turks' ability to maintain cross-border ties and navigate multiple national affiliations (Schiller, Basch and Blanc, 1995; Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004: 1177; Diener and Hagen, 2009), diaspora (Cohen, 1997; Brubaker, 2005: 5). highlights their collective memory, cultural continuity, and connection to a homeland despite displacement. However, these two concepts do not always align seamlessly. Faist describes transnationalism and diaspora as "awkward dance partners," suggesting that while they intersect, they also present distinct perspectives on migration (Faist, 2010: 9).

The Ahıska Turks' historical trajectory—from their 1944 deportation by the Soviet Union to their resettlement across various regions and their continued displacement following the collapse of the Soviet Union—has shaped their evolving ethnic identity and relationship with host states (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrst Kilimnik, 2011: 48). Today, as they seek to establish stable communities in different countries, they grapple with questions of belonging, integration, and identity negotiation.

This study examines the Ahıska Turks' transnational and diasporic experiences by addressing key questions: To what extent do they fit the definition of a diaspora community? How do they sustain transnational connections across different nations? How has their ethnic identity evolved during and after the Soviet regime? What legal and policy measures have been implemented in Türkiye, particularly in response to the relocation of Ahıska Turks from Ukraine?

Despite the limited academic literature on Ahıska Turks (Aydingün et al., 2006: 17; Nowak, 2021: 348), this article seeks to bridge the knowledge gap by employing an interdisciplinary approach that draws from anthropology, sociology, political science, and public policy reports, as well as personal field research.

The first section will explore the historical roots of the Ahıska Turks. The second section will analyze diaspora, transnationalism, and ethnic identity in relation to their contemporary challenges. Lastly, the article will assess Türkiye's role in assisting Ahıska Turks displaced from Ukraine and facilitating their integration into Turkish society.

1. An Overview of the Ahıska Turks: Their Identity and Historical Background

The ethnic identity of the Ahıska Turks, who speak Turkish and originate from a southern Georgian region close to the Turkish border, remains a topic of contention (Suny, 1994: 11, Cagırkan, 2017:4, Dogan, 2020: 169). Some argue that they constitute a separate ethnic group with Turkish lineage, while others believe they are Georgian by ethnicity who, at some point in their history, converted to Islam, either voluntarily or through coercion. (Chervonnaya, 1998: 1) The Georgian authorities have historically offered official accounts, both during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, maintaining that the Ahıska Turks are the progeny of an ancient Georgian tribe known as the "Meskhs." This tribe is thought to have embraced Islam during Ottoman sovereignty over the southwestern Georgian region spanning from the 16th to the 19th century. (Alekseeva, 1985: 160) Many Ahıska Turk leaders challenge the official historical account, contending that their ancestors were originally from Turkic tribes who migrated to the region between the fifth and seventh centuries. This conflicts with the hypothesis that the Ahıska Turks have their roots in the Meskhs, an archaic Georgian tribe (Chervonnaya, 1998: 2).

Historically, after the Ottoman Empire's conquest of Georgia in 1578, the Meskhetian region became an entirely Turkish land. The region remained under Ottoman rule for 250 years (Zeyrek, 2001: 14). The Ottoman Empire lost sovereignty of the area to Russia during the Ottoman-Russian Wars of 1828. But Ahıska Turks sided with the Ottomans in the First World War rather than the Russians. The Soviet government thus started to see Ahıska Turks as a potentially rebellious group (Topal, 2008: 625). Therefore, the Soviet authorities were afraid that the Ahıska Turks might attempt to divide the Soviet Union, and therefore, they were deemed untrustworthy (Aydingün et al., 2006: 6).

Stalin ordered the Soviet government to expel the Ahıska Turks from Georgia, their ancestral country, in 1944 to break their tie from the region and assimilate them.

The time that followed this catastrophe is regarded as the darkest in their history and was a critical turning point (Aydingün et al., 2006: 6). There were 137,921 Ahıska Turks living there as per those estimates (Topal, 2008: 624). This forced the displacement of between 100,000 and 115,000 Ahıska Turks from the area, which took more than two months exile (Human Rights Watch, 1991: 51). Some research indicate that the exile caused approximately 15,000 Ahıska Turks to lost their lives (Human Rights Watch, 1991: 53). Following their expulsion, Ahıska Turks resettled across Soviet Union, particularly in nations in Central Asia including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (Çınar, 2007).

Until June 1989, the Ahıska Turks population in the Soviet Union was significant. According to the 1989 census, there were about 207,502 Turks living in former Soviet countries included Russia (Aydingün, 1999: 3). Nonetheless, escalating nationalism and insufficient governmental aid in Uzbekistan culminated in a violent attack on the Ahıska community in the Fergana Valley, claiming the lives of roughly 100 individuals. The occurrence, commonly referred to as the "Fergana events" or "Fergana Pogrom," commenced on June 3rd, 1989, and attracted global notice. Consequently, the Ahıska Turks of Uzbekistan faced a second exile the following the 1944 exile. After the pogrom, the government ordered about 20,000 Ahıska people to be relocated from Uzbekistan, with another 70,000 being moved to, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Ukraine and Kazakhstan (Kütükçü, 2005: 274; Mirkhanova, 2006: 37; Bilge, 2011: 9). Some were relocated to various regions, including Krasnodor Krai in Russia (Swerdlow, 2006: 1831). Subsequently, they encountered additional prejudice in the form of the withholding of their propiska, which is essential for obtaining residency and employment (Suny, 1994). Consequently, they were unable to engage in various activities, such as land ownership, mobility, legal employment, marriage and birth registration, higher education, and healthcare access (Mirkhanova, 2006: 38). Due to these adverse conditions, the U.S. government granted refugee status to approximately 16,000 Ahıska Turks, facilitating their resettlement in the U.S. (Karipek, 2017: 386).

According to the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), the estimated population of Ahıska Turks in nine different countries is between 400,000 and 450,000. This includes approximately 137,000 in Kazakhstan, 100,000 in Azerbaijan, 75,000 in Russia, 40,000 in Türkiye, 22,500 in Uzbekistan, 12,500 in the U.S., 10,000 in Ukraine, and 1,500 in Georgia (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrst Kilimnik, 2011: 56). These figures are corroborated by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which similarly estimates the total population of Ahıska Turks at nearly half a million across nine countries (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

2.Exploring the Ahıska Turk through the Lenses of Diaspora, Transnationalism, and Ethnic Identity: A Multidisciplinary Evaluation

2.1. Ahıska Turks Within the Context of Diaspora

For three decades, diaspora discourse has been a topic of discussion among numerous academics from various perspectives. Due to its extensive usage, the term's definition has expanded to serve diverse intellectual, cultural, and political agendas. Consequently, the term "diaspora" has become dispersed across different disciplines, resulting in a distribution of its semantic and conceptual meanings (Brubaker, 2005: 1). The concept of diaspora denotes how individuals perceive themselves as connected to various locales and possessing a multifaceted identity that balances their comprehension of these places with their adaptability. Furthermore, the definition of 'diaspora' should encompass such transformations in the diasporic community's identity and that of its constituents, acknowledging the blurring of borders and the complexity of manifold affiliations and notions of belonging (Berns-McGown, 2008: 6).

Most definitions of diaspora can be described using various characteristics. The first relates to the reasons for the movement, with earlier concepts emphasizing forced displacement, based on the experiences of groups like the Jews and more recently, Palestinians (Cohen, 1997: 177). These communities represent a diverse array of non-traditional diasporic encounters and can be viewed as groups that have severed ties with their conventional regional markers, transforming into dynamic and multi-ethnic cultures (Cohen, 2022: 36). Cohen's presentation of the development and utilization of diaspora provides a structured approach for comprehending the present-day encounters of the Ahıska Turks (Tuls, 2022: 39). Diaspora phenomenon among the Ahıska Turks has been validated in various countries (Alkan, 2022: 573).

The second characteristic links the homeland with the destination, with older ideas suggesting a return to a (possibly imagined) homeland, exemplified by homeland-oriented initiatives aimed at shaping a country's future from overseas or promoting return migration (Safran, 1991: 83). Some diasporic groups may not have a strong desire to go back to their own country, or there are those whose place of origin is unclear (Berns-McGown, 2008: 6). In this sense, Dogan (2016: 85) highlights that the Ahıska Turks are a diasporic community that has experienced forced displacement and lacks a sovereign state.

The Ahıska Turks are without a nation-state and do not identify exclusively with either Georgia or Türkiye. Despite this, they view Georgia as their ancestral homeland and consider Türkiye to be their "replacement homeland" or "motherland," due to their shared Ottoman history (Dogan, 2016: 86).

The final characteristic link, by contrast, reflects a shift in contemporary migration studies toward a greater emphasis on sustained cross-border connections rather than viewing migration as a singular journey with a definitive return. Unlike traditional perspectives that primarily focused on the linear movement of migrants from their home country to a destination and back, newer understandings highlight the ongoing exchanges—economic, social, and cultural—that persist between migrants and their places of origin. This approach is particularly relevant in the context of migration and development, where transnational networks, remittances, and diaspora engagement play a crucial role in shaping both sending and receiving societies. Rather than perceiving return migration as the endpoint of a migrant's journey, scholars now recognize that many individuals maintain active ties across borders, fostering interconnected communities that challenge conventional notions of settlement and belonging (Faist, 2008: 26).

After the Soviet Union's dissolution, newly independent countries aimed to develop their unique national identities by promoting their territorial heritage. Unfortunately, minority groups, such as the Ahıska Turks, who lacked official recognition, suffered from increased marginalization in these newly independent countries. These small non-titular groups had difficulties adjusting to the nationalization process in the newly independent states. As a consequence, the Ahıska Turks residing in Uzbekistan experienced violence, known as the Fergana Pogrom, in 1989 that arose from nationalist sentiments before independence (Oh, 2012: 15). Similar to the example provided, their process of diaspora is currently experiencing alterations due to external factors (Alkan, 2022: 573).

The diaspora identity of Ahıska Turks is characterized by various and sometimes conflicting elements that change over time in response to new circumstances. Despite maintaining their ethnic identity, Ahıska Turks exhibit differences across the countries in which they reside, highlighting the complexity of their multi-place identity. The situation of Ahıska Turks can be described as having ties to both their ancestral homeland and their adopted countries, akin to the concept of a legendary homeland and an adoptive country (Bilge, 2011: 16).

The Ahıska Turks, who are a diaspora group, established cultural centers and social events to connect with other members of their community (Oh, 2012: 24). Hulya Dogan contends that the Ahıska Turks' worldwide dedication and ongoing bargaining in the diasporic arena are rooted in their shared ethnic heritage. Their self-identities are anchored in their local origins, but the diaspora presents challenges to this local identity. Hence, she concludes that to identify as an Ahıska Turks inherently means to be part of the diaspora (Dogan, 2016: 48).

The Ahıska Turks, formed diasporic communities in the newly independent states of Central Asia, including those whose members reside in many different countries. The Ahıska Turks diaspora also extended to the U.S. due to ethnic discrimination in the Krasnodar region (Dogan, 2023: 130). In 2005, Ahıska Turks who had been displaced for the third time, this time from post-Soviet Union, were granted refugee status by the U.S. government. As a result, over 15,000 Ahıska Turks migrated to around 33 states within the U.S. during the same year (Swerdlow, 2006: 1871). It is noteworthy that the concept of "home, land, and root" may not correspond to the actual residential patterns of many diasporas in Central Asia when considering the notion of diaspora and diasporic identity among the Ahıska Turks (Dogan, 2023: 134).

2.2. Ahıska Turks Within the Context of Transnationalism

The phenomenon of displacement of people is becoming more prevalent worldwide, leading to a growing number of individuals being categorized with different status (El-Shaarawi, 2012: 43). The displaced individuals' homeland and their intricate relationship with the host country have led to the creation of a transnational community that surpasses the geographical borders of both their countries of origin and host nations. It appears that the cultures of communities can no longer be regarded as limited to specific regions. Consequently, the changing rhetoric of transnationalism in the contemporary era of globalization introduces a fresh perspective on our understanding of marginalized communities (Appadurai, 1993: 424).

Transnationalism refers to the actions taken to create and uphold multifaceted social connections that link immigrant communities and settlements. The term is currently used to highlight the fact that many immigrants establish social networks that extend beyond physical, cultural, and political borders.

The transnational approach endeavors to comprehend the day-to-day exchanges that take place across national borders and the encounters of migrants who identify with several societies and a solitary nation-state (Schiller, Basch and Blanc, 1995: 48). Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004: 1178) used the term "transnationalism" to designate distinctive and specific commitments that contradict the consequences of globalization embodied by the concept of "transnational civil society". The relationship between places of origin and destination is regional rather than national in nature, as the majority of immigrants come from rural areas and have limited knowledge of the country as a whole (Waldinger and Fitzgerald, 2004).

Employing expressions like "trans-migrant" recognizes that migration is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be simplified to a unidirectional transmission of identity into a novel national domain (Parla, 2006: 544). People who possess familiarity with two or more languages, cultures, and societies are prone to formulating and asserting a transnational identity (Bradatan, Popan and Melton, 2010: 174). Transnational immigrants belong to a distinct category of individuals who possess the capability to uphold multiple connections to their homelands across the world. They can make decisions and take actions that link them to networks of relationships connecting them to two or more countries simultaneously, leading to the development of new identities (Diener and Hagen, 2009: 1208). Technological advancements in telecommunications and long-distance travel have significantly impacted transnational migrants, allowing them to establish and maintain connections with their country of origin with relative ease. Despite geographical distance, immigrants can now easily stay informed about political and social developments in their homeland, fostering a sense of connection to their former communities that may have been challenging or time-consuming to maintain in the past (Vertovec, 2001: 574).

The social structure of the Ahıska Turks living in different geographies, particularly those residing in Türkiye, and their transnational relations with others in different countries are important factors to consider. The Ahıska Turks have been displaced for more than 70 years as a group that is incompatible with their nation-state (Aydingün, 2014: 27). They are currently dispersed throughout various Central Asian republics, as well as in Türkiye, Russia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and the (U.S.). Despite Georgia being their geographical homeland, they have faced reluctance from the country to accept them back after their exile (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrst Kilimnik, 2011: 40).

They maintain relationships that transcend geographical, cultural, and political boundaries, thanks to technology and new forms of communication (Aydingün, 2014: 8). This supports Vertovec's view on how communities can maintain robust transnational relations. The utilization of social media and the internet exerts a substantial influence on sustaining the transnational character and uninterrupted social connections that unite Ahıska Turks residing in disparate nations (Aydingün, 2014: 8). For instance, they can watch a wedding ceremony live in the U.S. while they are in Türkiye. Another notable example of this is the annual online meetings that Ahıska Turks hold to foster and maintain connections with their fellow community members residing in Türkiye and other countries around the world (Aktepe, Tekdere and Gürbüz, 2017: 160). Technology has made it possible for the Ahıska Turks to build social spaces that go beyond the limitations of traditional social structures (Aydingün, 2014: 32).

Despite facing challenges in maintaining communication with their dispersed relatives, Ahıska Turks have found the internet to be a highly valuable transnational communication tool. While physical distance can sometimes have a negative impact on their relationships, the use of online platforms has helped to mitigate these difficulties (Aktepe, Tekdere and Gürbüz, 2017: 160). Presently, a considerable quantity of migrants have established communal areas that surpass geographical and cultural limitations, where technology plays a significant role. The employment of social media and the internet has a noteworthy influence on the perpetuation of transnationality and ongoing social ties that unite all Ahıska Turks situated in diverse nations (Dogan, 2020: 173).

The interpretation of transnationalism is subject to diverse viewpoints. The Transnational discourse has altered the emphasis from the starting point and end destination, prompting the belief that immigrants can regard multiple places as their homeland (Dogan, 2020: 170). As a community, they exemplify transnationalism, whereby families and communities maintain connections despite being geographically dispersed across multiple nation-states. The Ahıska Turks have integrated the customs and traditions of the various cultures they have lived amongst, and as a result, have developed a sense of loyalty towards each of these cultural identities (Reisman, 2013: 35). Furthermore, according to Aydingün (2014: 28), Ahıska Turks can be classified as "transnational villagers" similar to Levitt's (2001) viewpoint. Although they have a deep emotional bond with their village, they do not consider Georgia, the geographical location of their village, as their homeland. Instead, they feel a strong connection to Türkiye, primarily driven by their political and ancestral ties.

As the younger generations of Ahıska Turks gradually become more detached from their actual lived experiences, the representation of their historical homeland in Georgia increasingly assumes a symbolic significance. While a few groups of Ahıska Turks may settle in Georgia, significant groups residing in Türkiye, the U.S., and post-Soviet countries will retain the transnational nature of the entire community (Kuznetsov, 2007: 235). Even though Georgia still represents the Ahıska Turks' ancestral homeland, some of them residing in Türkiye are an excellent illustration of living in several homelands (Dogan, 2020: 184).

2.3. Ahıska Turks within the Context of Ethnic Identity

Each individual possesses a distinct identity, and there exist diverse methods of identifying such identities. It is important to note that these methods are not limited to genealogy or regional assumptions. Instead, the determination of identities is influenced by certain predetermined factors such as family relations, ethnic background, geographic location, and shared customs and beliefs. (Malkki, 1992: 26) In the process of forming one's identity, the emergence of ethnic identity is crucial. Both traditional and modern academics have defined and examined the idea of "ethnicity" from a variety of perspectives. Primordialist, Instrumentalist, and Constructivist are three opposing theories of ethnicity that sociocultural anthropologists have discovered (Hill, 1996). Primitivist approaches view "ethnic identity" as a naturally developed concept that defines a given entity and groups based on an objective essence, which could be biological and/or cultural relations. Such an approach regards "identity" as a fixed entity from an objective standpoint, but this perspective is challenged in many contemporary theories (Hornborg and Hill, 2011: 2).

On the other hand, instrumentalist approaches perceive "ethnic identity" as a construct created by cultural elites to assert and reclaim power, with the aim of increasing wealth, status, and power (Smith, 1992). Lastly, constructivist approaches highlight the subjectivity and dialectic between 'objective traits and subjective experiences of identity.' Unlike primordialist approaches, constructivist approaches view identity as a fluid entity that is subjectively constructed in specific social and cultural contexts and sustained by intergroup boundary mechanisms (Hornborg and Hill, 2011: 2). This fluidity might lead to a loss of deep regional connections and undermines the cultural distinctiveness of various locations and the rejection of cultural practices and codes (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8).

Thus, people around the world are increasingly becoming "homeless," resulting in a shift towards a different or deterritorialized form of identity. (Said, 1979) Deterritorialized identity will inevitably subject to some degree of integration. Nevertheless, immigrants must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their ties with their country of origin and adapting to their new environment (Erdal and Oeppen, 2013: 879).

Gupta and Ferguson add another dimension to displacement and deterritorialization, suggesting that it is not only those who are displaced that experience displacement, but even those who remain in familiar and ancestral places. They argue that the nature of the relationship between people and their places has inevitably changed, leading to a natural and fundamental disconnection between culture and place (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8). Aydingün (2002) posits that the experience of Ahıska Turks is similar to other deterritorialized or displaced ethnic groups (Aydingün, 2002: 54). After their expulsion, they have lived in various countries for over six decades. Due to the diversity of their geographical locations and the variety of circumstances Ahıska Turks encounter, they may associate themselves with different nationalities (Sumbadze, 2007).

The Ahıska Turks have managed to preserve unique cultural practises associated with the Caucasus, notably the Meskhetian area of Georgia, despite spending a significant amount of time away from their historical homeland (Kuznetsov, 2007: 234). Even in a symbolic way, they continue to have a close connection and view this area as their "homeland". The fact that they identify themselves as Ahıska Turks supports this perceptions (Karaman and Mursül, 2018: 95). Displaced Ahıska Turks tend to identify themselves with both their ethnic and regional identities to develop a sense of belonging. Even though they did not migrate voluntarily, the presence of familial relationships in the lands they left behind contributes to their identity (Kuznetsov, 2007: 235).

After the exile, Russian culture among the Ahıska Turks became apparent in everyday life and language usage due to the intense assimilation policies implemented by the Soviet Union. The tradition of arranging extensive celebrations was put on hold for a generation, which had an impact on a specific Turkish language, customs, and settlement identities shared among other ethnic groups in Georgia (Kuznetsov, 2007: 214). There are two important developments affecting the ethnic identity of Ahıska Turks. The first is that the Soviet regime saw them as "potential enemies of the regime" and as a result, they were exiled from the region (Aydingün et al., 2006: 5).

Nevertheless, the Soviet regime's policy produced a result that was entirely contrary to its intended outcome. Research indicates that efforts to eliminate ethnic identities among migrant groups may reinforce their enduring ethnic identities, which have been preserved across generations instead of being assimilated into the dominant society (Steinberg, 2001). The situation unfolded precisely as Steinberg asserted. Prior to their forced relocation in 1944, Ahıska Turks did not have a strong sense of their distinct ethnic identity. During their exile, however, their identity was reinforced through interaction with other ethnic groups. These circumstances have fostered a heightened sense of ethnic awareness among the Ahıska Turks, which in turn has reinforced their Turkish identity (Aydingün, 2002: 61). Avcı (2012: 21) endorses Aydingün's view that the mistreatment they faced in Uzbekistan and Russia aided in maintaining their ethnic identity. The constant acknowledgement of their minority status enables Ahıska Turks to uphold their cultural and ethnic identity. Erten (2016) and Faigov (2020: 1153) added different perspective that one of the key means for Ahıska Turks to safeguard their sense of identity is through their religious customs and rituals besides pressure by Soviet regime policy.

Avcı provided an additional perspective to Steinberg's argument, indicating that implementing policies of assimilation or marginalization on minority communities can jeopardize their ethnic identity. This means that the lack of persecution and oppression towards these communities may also endanger the survival and continuity of their culture. The Ahıska Turks in the U.S. serve as a concrete example, where the freedom and individualism they experience may weaken their ethnic identity and leave them vulnerable to potential threats (Avcı, 2012: 2).

The Ahıska Turks have diverse cultural backgrounds and identities, which vary across different regions (Aydingün et al., 2006: 1). Nevertheless, the degree to which their identity has been maintained varies depending on the dispersed groups' subsequent fate. Additionally, the Ahıska Turkish identity has been shaped by generational differences, as younger generations raised in countries such as Türkiye or Kazakhstan or the U.S. do not exhibit the same level of affinity and loyalty as older generations (Trier, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrst Kilimnik, 2011: 114). Therefore, it is not possible to draw conclusions or make sweeping generalizations about the entire group. (Aydingün, 2014: 115) However, considering the current ethnic associations, it is unquestionable that the Turkish identity is the most dominant, whereas those classified as Georgian make up a negligible minority (Kuznetsov, 2007: 217).

Aydingün (2006: 7) have a similar perspective that the majority of Ahıska Turks living in Türkiye consider Türkiye as their homeland owing to their cultural and identity affinity. Aktepe, Tekdere and Gürbüz (2017: 146) used both qualitative and quantitative methods to survey 94 Ahıska Turkic families who was resettled to Türkiye to find out the ethnic identity of them. Interviews conclusions support all other scholar's opinion that the Ahıska people frequently use the discourse of "finding their ethnic identity" in Türkiye, citing the presence of their language, customs, religions and traditions as evidence.

3. Ahıska Turks in Türkiye: Legal Studies and Resettlement

Türkiye faced with a significant amount of Turkish-origin migrants since the beginning of the 1990's. An important feature of these immigrants is that they feel culturally and ethnically close to Türkiye (Makaryan, 2012: 6). Today, due to their mobility and ambiguous legal status, there is a lack of official data regarding the Ahıska Turks in Türkiye, including information regarding their demographics and total population. Based on the approximations of the The World Union of Ahıska Turks (2019), a minimum of 40,000 Ahıska Turks are presently residing in Türkiye. In 2019, the count of Ahıska Turks who obtained Turkish citizenship exceeded 40,000.

Ahıska Turks, having no nation-state and significant connections with the Ottoman Empire, are particularly appreciated by Turkish nationalists. (Parla, 2011: 460) The legal regulations in Türkiye regarding immigration and settlement were established by the Settlement Law No. 2510 in 1934. This law defined the concepts of communities seeking to settle in Türkiye and the requirements for Turkish identity and kinship. The Ahıska Turks, who are the focus of this study, are among the groups that benefit from these laws as immigrants of Turkish descent (Turkish Resettlement Law, 1934). Although the Ahıska Turks enjoyed this law and they have continuously migrated to Türkiye through self-arrangement, but they were not provided with an authorized residency permit. In this context, the Turkish government began a programme of repatriation in 1992, giving citizenship to Ahıska Turks who could demonstrate their Turkish origin (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Through this programme, Türkiye organized the collective transportation of Ahıska Turks to its territory. This was carried out under the Law No. 3835, which aimed to provide a new settlement for Ahıska Turks, who previously lived in dispersed areas and faced challenging living conditions.

The law allowed the resettlement of these individuals as free or settled immigrants, with the caveat that the number of immigrants per year did not exceed the limit set by the state. This initiative was launched following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and it aimed to offer better living conditions to Ahıska Turks in Türkiye (Law on Admission and Settlement of Ahıska Turks to Türkiye, 1992).

The repatriation initiative has officially ceased in 2005 (Dogan, 2020: 175). Since then, several legislative actions have been put into place recently to alleviate the problems encountered by Ahıska Turks. A legal foundation for the protection of foreigners' rights in Türkiye was established in 2013 with the introduction of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. Ahıska Turks have had to comply with the same regulations as other foreign residents residing in Türkiye (Turkish Presidency of Migration Management, 2023). The Ahıska Turks encountered intricate legal predicaments in Türkiye, however, despite this, they were informally received by both the state and the surrounding community (Aydingün, 2002). In 2015, the Turkish government initiated efforts to relocate Ahıska Turks to areas of Ukraine affected by armed conflict (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

The Ahıska Turks community has a relatively less population in Ukraine compared to other countries. Nearly 10,000 Ahıska Turks migrated and established residence in Ukraine following the 1989 Fergana Events. This group consisted of families who arrived in the region and sought refuge in certain villages within Ukraine, after being unable to secure a place to settle in Azerbaijan and Southern Russia (Kıyas 1995, cited in Devrisheva, 2019: 340). The Ahıska people were well-behaved in Ukraine, but within the past few years, over 600 Ahıska Turks residing in the area were forced to migrate from their established homes. (Uramalı 2015, cited in Devrisheva, 2019: 340). An instance of mass revolt occurred amidst the conflict between the Ukrainian government, which had pro-Russian sentiments, and groups advocating for Ukraine's accession to the European Union (DailySabah, 2022). The ongoing conflict with Russia has resulted in Ahıska Turks being caught in the middle and Ahıska Turks, who were helpless in the hot regions of the war, applied to Türkiye as a last resort and asked for help. 2,960 Ahıska Turks from 677 families, were compelled to leave their homes (Uramalı 2015, cited in Devrisheva, 2019).

As a respond to Ahıska Turks requests, the Turkish government facilitated their resettlement in TOKİ residences that had been constructed in Erzincan and Bitlis as part of a government program aimed at encouraging settlement (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016).

Türkiye immediately started negotiations on this issue and with the decision numbered 2015/7668 in the Official Gazette on May 17, 2015, the bringing of Ahıska Turks in Ukraine to Türkiye became official. Overall, 2312 Ahıska Turks were brought from Ukraine to Üzümlü district of Erzincan and 300 Ahıska Turks were brought to Ahlat district of Bitlis and settled in TOKİ's built by the state (Turkish Presidency of Migration Management, 2022).

The resettlement of Ahıska Turks to Erzincan is a fitting example of the migration patterns of sense of belonging within a host society. Immigrants tend to cluster in certain areas because of the housing options available to them. Some scholars argue that this cluster can foster a sense of place and belonging among immigrants, which can speed up the identity process (Murdie and Ghosh, 2010). The Ahıska Turks who come to Türkiye with the expectation of settling permanently in their "homeland," seeing themselves as members of a historically privileged category of immigrants - "ethnic relatives." (Dogan, 2020: 178). Ahıska Turks undergo a migration process that is less spatially and personally taxing than other migrants due to the significant financial and moral support they receive (Aktepe, Tekdere and Gürbüz, 2017: 161). In my personal field experience with Ahıska Turks in Erzincan is in line with view of Aktepe et al. and many of them expressed a sense of belonging and trust in Türkiye, stating that they "feel at home."

On the other hand, it is worth noting that some literature on migration suggests that social and spatial clustering of immigrants within a particular region, province, district, or neighborhood of the host country may hinder the belonging and ethnic identity process with the local population, (Franklin and Tranter, 2021) making it difficult for them to fully integrate into their new environment (Andersen, 2003). Üzümlü is a district within the Erzincan province, having an approximate population of 10,000 citizens. The area is situated at a distance of approximately 15 kilometers from the city centre of Erzincan, and it is known for having a challenging transportation network that links it to the city center (Orhan and Çoşkun, 2016: 42). Thus, Aktepe et al. survey with Ahıska Turks also support these views. The Ahıska Turks who express dissatisfaction with their idle lifestyle, advocate for the establishment of business environments in other cities. Inadequate social activity with local society and citizenship status are highlighted as the primary problem for feeling absence of sense of belonging and identity (Aktepe, Tekdere and Gürbüz, 2017: 148).

Overall, the relationship between the state-sponsored migrant network and the migration process is interdependent. The state's efforts to resettlement aim to benefit both parties involved by reducing the costs of relocation, providing information about immigration laws, and preventing illegal migration. This planned and structured resettlement reflects the state's commitment to a mutually beneficial and regulated migration system (Dogan, 2020: 184).

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the Ahıska Turks' historical displacement, transnational connections, and ethnic identity, demonstrating how these factors have shaped their experiences as a migrant and diasporic community. The central claim that the Ahıska Turks' identity is shaped by the interplay of transnationalism, diaspora, and ethnic belonging has been supported through a detailed examination of their historical trajectory, socio-political challenges, and Türkiye's role in their resettlement.

The historical analysis presented in this paper underscores that the forced migration of Ahıska Turks, beginning with their 1944 deportation by the Soviet Union, established the foundation for their dispersed existence across multiple states. This displacement was not a singular event but rather a continuous process, with further relocations occurring in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and later, after the fall of the Soviet Union, in countries such as the U.S., Ukraine, and Türkiye. These migratory patterns have contributed to the formation of a transnational community that maintains strong ties to their homeland while adapting to the socio-political contexts of various host nations.

The study also highlights how the Ahıska Turks navigate their dual existence as both a diaspora and a transnational group. While their sense of diaspora is rooted in their collective memory of forced displacement, cultural preservation, and historical injustices, their transnationalism is evident in their ability to maintain economic, social, and political ties across borders. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Schiller, Basch, and Blanc and Brubaker, the paper demonstrates that these two frameworks—transnationalism and diaspora—are not mutually exclusive but rather intersect in complex ways. Faist's characterization of these concepts as "awkward dance partners" is particularly relevant to the Ahıska Turks, as they simultaneously engage in homeland-oriented activities while integrating into new societies.

Türkiye's role in the resettlement and integration of Ahıska Turks provided critical insight into state-led initiatives that influence diaspora policies. The analysis of Türkiye's legal and institutional frameworks, including citizenship grants and resettlement programs in provinces like Erzincan and Iğdır, demonstrated how Türkiye positions itself as a homeland for the Ahıska community. By granting citizenship, facilitating legal pathways, and offering economic and social support, Türkiye has played a significant role in shaping the Ahıska Turks' sense of belonging and integration. However, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring long-term social cohesion, economic stability, and cultural adaptation within Türkiye's broader migration framework.

Moreover, this study has revealed the persistent socio-political challenges faced by Ahıska Turks in various host countries. Issues such as legal status uncertainty, economic marginalization, and identity negotiations have influenced their ability to establish stable communities. These challenges further reinforce the argument that Ahıska Turks experience a fluid and evolving identity shaped by historical displacement and contemporary resettlement dynamics.

While this paper has contributed to a deeper understanding of Ahıska Turks' transnationalism, diaspora, and ethnic identity, several gaps remain in the academic literature. Future research should explore the socio-economic integration of Ahıska Turks in Türkiye and other host countries, the evolving perceptions of homeland among younger generations, and the impact of Türkiye's migration policies on their long-term resettlement.

In conclusion, the Ahıska Turks serve as a critical case study in migration studies, illustrating the intricate interplay between forced displacement, transnationalism, and diasporic identity. Their experiences challenge conventional categorizations of migrants and demonstrate the fluidity of ethnic identity in the context of historical upheavals and modern globalization. Through analysis, theoretical engagement, and contemporary policy examination, this study reaffirms the claim that the Ahıska Turks' identity is a product of both their displacement and their enduring ability to maintain transnational and diasporic ties across generations and geographies.

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