

*Research Article*

# BLACK SEA TURKS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TÜRKİYE

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**Abstract:** The community living in Kyrgyzstan, known as the Black Sea Turks, is descended from Laz families who migrated from the Artvin, Rize, and Trabzon regions of the Eastern Black Sea to Batum, particularly in the early 1900s, during the final period of the Ottoman Empire, a Turkic empire. The families mentioned here were also affected by Stalin's 1944 deportation campaign targeting ethnic Turkic peoples. Although their names did not appear directly as a community in the decree on the deportation, they were included in the deportation because they spoke the Turkic language and had Turkish names. This distinction and these events are essential for understanding the community's traumas throughout history and today, as well as its ongoing struggle for identity. This article draws on concepts from transnational studies and the notions of the kinship state/kinship society. The community maintains its relationship with Türkiye through its relatives and media organizations. This situation exemplifies the preservation of the diaspora and its transnational status. The perspective of atayurt/ancestral homeland shapes Türkiye's relationship with Turkistan/Central Asia. This perspective is framed by the principles of supporting and developing cooperation with brotherly peoples/ethnic relatives of the exact origin. Still, the experience of the Black Sea Turks presents another problem. The Black Sea Turks have been considered both during the Exile and today as part of the Ahıska Turks. This experience of the Black Sea Turks has created certain disadvantages for them. This study discusses whether considering one diaspora within another diaspora marginalizes them politically and institutionally. The Black Sea Turks in Kyrgyzstan constitute a marginal micro-diaspora due to the two-fold restriction on their desire to return to Türkiye, which they consider their homeland: The main reasons for this are their structurally secondary position within the Ahıska

Turks and the bureaucratic politics of the Republic of Türkiye, which may fall short in resolving this problem. (Pentikäinen & Trier, 2004: 12; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2018). The Black Sea Turks in Kyrgyzstan are descended from the Laz people who settled in Batum during the Ottoman Empire. Despite various debates about their ethnic Turkish identity, they were deported to West Turkistan by Stalin in late 1944 because they spoke Turkish and had Turkish names. Today, most of this group of approximately 1,300 people live in Kyrgyzstan. They identify themselves as Turks. The Black Sea Turks consider Türkiye their homeland. Currently, some of them want to obtain Turkish citizenship or a residence permit from Türkiye. (Özgür, 2015). The history, population, settlements, identity definitions, civil society structures, current situation, relations with Türkiye, and assessments regarding the transition to Turkish citizenship of the Black Sea Turks living in Kyrgyzstan are presented below. (European Centre for Minority Issues, 2012).

**Key Words:** Black Sea, Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan.

## KIRGIZİSTAN VE TÜRKİYE'DEKİ KARADENİZ TÜRKLERİ

**Öz:** Kırgızistan'da yaşayan ve Karadeniz Türkleri olarak bilinen topluluk, özellikle 1900'lerin başlarında, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun son dönemlerinde, Doğu Karadeniz'in Artvin, Rize ve Trabzon bölgelerinden Batum'a göç eden Laz ailelerinin soyundan gelmektedir. Burada bahsedilen aileler, Stalin'in 1944'teki Türk kökenli halkları hedef alan sürgün kampanyasından da etkilenmiştir. İsimleri sürgün kararnamesinde doğrudan bir topluluk olarak geçmese de, Türkçe konuşmaları ve Türk isimlerine sahip olmaları nedeniyle sürgüne dahil edilmişlerdir. Bu ayırım ve bu olaylar, topluluğun tarih boyunca ve günümüzde yaşadığı travmaları ve devam eden kimlik mücadelesini anlamak için önemlidir. Bu makale, ulusötesi çalışmalar ve akrabalık devleti/akrabalık toplumu kavramlarından yararlanmaktadır. Topluluk, akrabaları ve medya kuruluşları aracılığıyla Türkiye ile ilişkisini sürdürmektedir. Bu durum, diasporanın korunmasını ve ulusötesi statüsünü örneklemektedir. Atalar yurdu perspektifi, Türkiye'nin Türkistan/Orta Asya ile ilişkisini şekillendirir. Bu perspektif, kardeş halklarla/aynı kökenden gelen etnik akrabalarla iş birliğini destekleme ve geliştirme ilkeleriyle

çerçevelenmiştir. Ancak Karadeniz Türklerinin deneyimi başka bir sorunu ortaya koymaktadır. Karadeniz Türkleri hem Sürgün döneminde hem de bugün Ahıska Türklerinin bir parçası olarak kabul edilmiştir. Karadeniz Türklerinin bu deneyimi onlar için bazı dezavantajlar yaratmıştır. Bu çalışma, bir diasporayı başka bir diaspora içinde değerlendirmenin onları siyasi ve kurumsal olarak marjinalleştirip marjinalleştirmedini tartışmaktadır. Kırgızistan'daki Karadeniz Türkleri, vatanları olarak gördükleri Türkiye'ye dönme isteklerine yönelik iki yönlü kısıtlama nedeniyle marjinal bir mikro-diaspora oluşturmaktadır: Bunun başlıca nedenleri, Ahıska Türkleri içindeki yapısal olarak ikincil konumları ve bu sorunu çözmede yetersiz kalabilecek Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin bürokratik politikalarıdır. (Pentikäinen & Trier, 2004: 12; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2018). Kırgızistan'daki Karadeniz Türkleri, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu döneminde Batum'a yerleşen Laz halkının soyundan gelmektedir. Etnik Türk kimlikleri hakkında çeşitli tartışmalara rağmen, Türkçe konuşmaları ve Türk isimlerine sahip olmaları nedeniyle 1944 yılının sonlarında Stalin tarafından Batı Türkistan'a sürgün edildiler. Bugün, yaklaşık 1300 kişiden oluşan bu grubun çoğu Kırgızistan'da yaşamaktadır. Kendilerini Türk olarak tanımlamaktadırlar. Karadeniz Türkleri Türkiye'yi vatanları olarak görmektedir. Şu anda, bazıları Türkiye'den Türk vatandaşlığı veya oturma izni almak istemektedir. (Özgür, 2015). Kırgızistan'da yaşayan Karadeniz Türklerinin tarihi, nüfusu, yerleşimleri, kimlik tanımları, sivil toplum yapıları, mevcut durumu, Türkiye ile ilişkileri ve Türk vatandaşlığına geçişine ilişkin değerlendirmeler aşağıda sunulmuştur. (Avrupa Azınlık Sorunları Merkezi, 2012).

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Karadeniz, Türkiye, Kırgızistan.

### **Historical Process**

During and after the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War, migrations occurred from the Caucasus to Ottoman territories, including from the Borçalı, Acara, Batum, and Ahıska regions of Georgia. Similarly, migrations also took place from Ottoman cities in the Eastern Black Sea region to Batum. Similarly, in the early 1900s, a group of Laz families from Trabzon-Rize-Artvin settled in the Georgian coastal city of Batum to work. At that time, they were engaged in fishing and agriculture. With the 1921 Treaty of Moscow, Batum, which was within the Ottoman borders, remained within the borders of Soviet Russia, and the people belonging to this community lost their connection with Türkiye. Thus, the fate of the Muslim families who remained here was left to the arbitrary discretion of Soviet Russia, like that of other peoples. (King, 2008: 153).

During World War II, the Black Sea Turks, like other Muslim peoples in the Caucasus region, suffered greatly from Stalin's deportation policies. In November-December 1944, the Black Sea Turks in Batum were deported to West Turkistan (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) along with the Ahiska Turks. Although the names of other Muslim Acars and Lazs (Black Sea Turks) were not mentioned in the deportation decision concerning the Muslim Turks of Ahiska and its surroundings, the Soviet Secret Service, which carried out the deportation, included every Muslim family that spoke Turkish in the deportation convoy. Thus, the Muslim Acara and Laz (Black Sea Turks) were also "mistakenly" sent into exile. The Black Sea Turks applied to the authorities of the time with a petition to return from exile. Upon this, efforts were made for their return. However, the efforts to return to Batum were limited to 1-2 families, and the exiled Laz people (Black Sea Turks) were unsuccessful in their return due to their Turkish names and Turkish language. (Aydingün & Aydingün, 2015: 10).

### **Population and Geograph**

During the exile, a portion of their population died, similar to the Ahiska Turks. Although they themselves state the figure to be between 40% and 50%, the actual rate is thought to be 20%. Despite living in Batum and its surroundings for centuries, their true origins are Trabzon, Sürmeli, Fındıklı, Of, Çay, and Arhavi. The Black Sea Turks were deported to Western Turkistan: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Some of the Black Sea Turks were settled in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan, some in the Cambul region of Kazakhstan, and others in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan. They live predominantly in the Kok-Jar and Kızıl-Kiya regions of the Talas and Osh provinces of Kyrgyzstan. Some families have settled in.

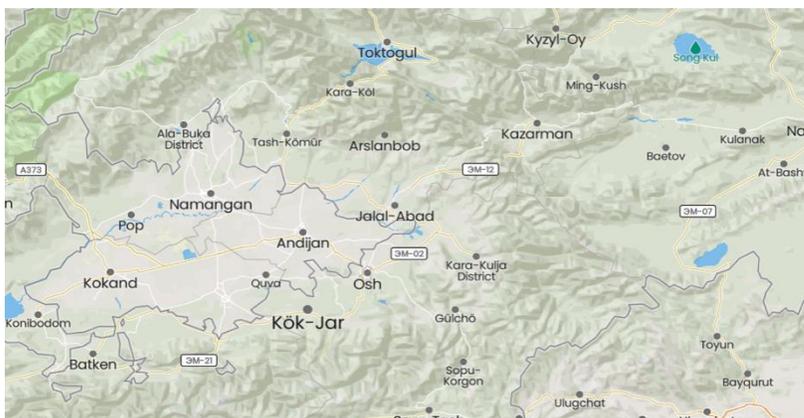


Figure 1: Location of Kok-Jar Village in Nookat District, Osh Province

Bishkek in search of better job opportunities. In addition, a small group continues to live in the Jambul province of Kazakhstan. Academic sources indicate that their total number is approximately 1,300. The Embassy in Bishkek has verbally confirmed the figure of 1,300-1,500. However, the fact that these families are scattered among the Ahıska Turks makes it difficult to determine their actual number. (Özgür, 2015; Balcı, 2019: 341; Turkish Embassy Records, 2021). The Black Sea Turks living in Uzbekistan left the region after the 1989 Fergana events and went to Krasnodar, Russia. On the other hand, many of the Black Sea Turks who went to Krasnodar emigrated to the United States in 2004, along with the Ahıska Turks, because of pressure from Russia.

In this regard, it can be argued that the Black Sea Turks who were subjected to exile are now scattered across various parts of the world. All this division and dispersion make it impossible to determine their exact numbers. (Cornell, 2001: 12).

### Identity Verifications

In interviews, Black Sea Turks express their sense of identity by saying, “We are Black Sea Turks,” “We are Black Sea people,” or “We are Black Sea Laz people.” They speak with a Black Sea accent. These people, whose ethnic identity is Laz, mostly define themselves through Turkishness as their superordinate identity. Black Sea Turks have not lost their sense of belonging; they have made the geography they come from their superordinate identity. They live the culture of the Black Sea region. The sense of attachment to Türkiye is very strong among families. At the same time, they do not have any negative attitudes towards Kyrgyzstan. They closely follow Türkiye through satellite television channels. It

is known that they are in contact with their relatives in Türkiye. It has been observed that they maintain their Turkish identity through customs such as weddings and funerals. (European Centre for Minority Issues, 2012; Jones, 2005: 32).

Black Sea Turks identify themselves as Kyrgyz citizens while also identifying as Black Sea Turks (Turks). In the only study conducted on this subject with a limited sample, it was found that only 3% of Black Sea Turks responded with "I am only Turkish" or "I am only Kyrgyz." The percentage of those who responded with "I am both Turkish and Kyrgyz" was over 50%. (Balci, 2019: 348).

The reason why Black Sea Turks are not very well-known today is that their numbers are relatively small and they are classified in the same category as the Ahiska Turks. There is very little difference between them and the Ahiska Turks in terms of language, culture, and customs. With the loss of their native language, Laz, they now speak Black Sea Turkish. They say they are Black Sea Turks and that their homeland is Batum and Trabzon. They state that they are not very close to the Kurds and Hemshin people with whom they live in the same region in Kyrgyzstan. They report that they have good relations with the Ahiska Turks and marry among themselves. However, they maintain a distance from the Kurds and Hemshinli due to cultural and linguistic differences. Although rumors circulate that they are Hemshinli, these claims are far from reality in terms of their identity. (Sunny, 1994; Pentikäinen & Trier, 2004)

### **Civil Society Organizations**

The total population of the Black Sea Turks is estimated to be between 1,300 and 1,500. They have no civil society structures. Currently, Muhammed Uzunoğlu is the unofficial leader of the Black Sea Turks. However, due to Muhammed Uzunoğlu's advanced age, his nephew İskender Muratoğlu is more active in the current process. Due to their arrival in West Turkistan during the 1944 exile and their use of the Turkish language, their ethnicity is associated with the Ahiska Turks. In an interview with İskender Muratoğlu, one of the opinion leaders of the Black Sea Turks, it was learned that they established an NGO in 2008-2009 to represent themselves. They were able to operate for a short time under the umbrella of this organization, which they named the "Exile Black Sea Association." The main reason for the association's short-lived existence was the pressure exerted on them by the Ahiska Turks. İskender Muratoğlu stated that they received a lot of backlashes from the Ahiska Turks during the time they were

a separate association. Muratoğlu reported that they closed the association following this pressure. (Turkish Embassy Records, 2021; Balcı, 2019: 351).

### **Expectations from Türkiye**

Three separate short documentaries/interviews about the Black Sea Turks were produced by Banu Avar, Seyfullah Türksoy, and TRT Avaz. Thanks to this content, the situation of the Black Sea Turks has attracted more attention from the Turkish state and public. In these programs, the Black Sea Turks in exile expressed their desire to return to Türkiye. Muhammed Uzunoğlu, a community leader representing the Black Sea Turks in Kyrgyzstan, expressed the community's expectations from Türkiye: "During the Soviet era, it was risky to express feelings of closeness to Türkiye in social settings. Therefore, families kept their love for Türkiye within themselves, in their hearts. When the Soviet Union collapsed, we immediately expressed this closeness in every setting. Documentary films have been very helpful in allowing us to express/introduce ourselves. Today, everyone in Kyrgyzstan knows that we are immigrants, Black Sea Turks, or Turkish citizens. Our grandparents are Turkish citizens. We have relatives in Türkiye. Let Türkiye invite us, and we will find our relatives and reunite with them. All we ask is that they make it easier for us and our young people to find work (work permits) and get an education. We have no other requests." (TRT Avaz, Banu Avar, Seyfullah Türksoy).

As a result of these kinds of statements and documentaries, it is known that during official visits from Türkiye to Kyrgyzstan, meetings were held at the level of the President and Prime Minister with representatives of the Black Sea Turks. Former President Abdullah Gül, then Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ, and former Minister of Environment and Forestry Osman Pepe held one-on-one meetings with the aforementioned group during their official visits to Kyrgyzstan. In addition, İskender Muratoğlu, a leader of the Black Sea Turks community, stated that during their visits to Türkiye, they met with Beşir Atalay and Ali Babacan, who were ministers at the time. The Black Sea Turks claim that during all these meetings, Turkish officials verbally stated that their requests to return to their homeland would be met.

The verbal statements of support made by Turkish officials during these visits created expectations among the Black Sea Turks. As a result, some families submitted documents to Turkish public institutions showing that their grandparents were born in Türkiye. The applications of these families, numbering around 50, have been delayed and remain unanswered at this time.

However, it is known that only a very small number of families have obtained residence permits under the name of Ahiska Turks based on the 1992 Law No. 3835 on the Acceptance and Settlement of Ahiska Turks in Türkiye (Özgür, 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2020).

### **Current Situation and Relations with Turkish Authorities**

The sense of homeland stands out in the identity definitions of the Black Sea Turks. They express that they are currently facing the threat of extinction and fear assimilation. The small size of the community is a significant factor in this situation. Nevertheless, their rural lifestyle and relatively homogeneous community have prevented this situation from occurring so far. The Black Sea Turks mainly earn their living by working in livestock and agricultural fields. It is known that the group of young people who went to Bishkek are engaged in construction work. Their biggest shortcoming is their inability to create job opportunities for young people. Although they verbally express their longing for their homeland, it is possible that their main motivation for requesting Turkish citizenship and residence permits in Türkiye stems from their desire to work in Türkiye. The Kyrgyz state does not exert any pressure on the community. However, regarding their relations with the Ahiska Turks, it has been observed that they experience problems with the Ahiska Turks if they wish to act independently of them. (World Bank, 2019; Turkish Embassy Records, 2021).

Individuals from the community who were interviewed in person stated that they regularly expressed their requests for residence permits verbally and submitted applications through the Turkish Embassy. During discussions with the Turkish Embassy, it was learned that the Ahiska Turks are the priority group in Kyrgyzstan, while the Black Sea Turks are of secondary importance. It has also been learned that the Black Sea Turks have not applied for residence permits from Türkiye through official channels. However, they are frequently visited by the Turkish Ambassador in their regions. They feel the support of Türkiye. (TİKA, 2020; Manas University Research Division, 2021).

During another meeting with the TİKA Bishkek Project Coordination Office, it was learned that the Black Sea Turks are valued, that they receive aid packages during Ramadan, and that a park has been built in the village of Kok-Jar in the Nookat district of Jalal-Abad, where they live in large numbers. The Red Crescent Kyrgyzstan Representative stated that they had no information about the Black Sea Turks and that no project or activity had been carried out for them. (TİKA, 2020; Turkish Embassy Records, 2021).

During a meeting with the Media Manas Director of Manas University in Kyrgyzstan, it was learned that the Black Sea Turks are a subject being studied by university academics. On the other hand, it was determined that the number of Black Sea Turkic students studying at the university is so small that it can be expressed as a few individuals. The main reason for this situation is that, as with the Ahiska Turks, trade takes precedence over education among the Black Sea Turks. (Manas University Research Division, 2021).

Furthermore, while the Turkish Agency for Turks Abroad does not discriminate based on ethnicity in its scholarship awards, we know that it attempts to give partial priority to disadvantaged groups in their countries of residence. Accordingly, the son of İskender Muratoğlu, a community leader among the Black Sea Turks, has also received a scholarship at Ege University. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The experience of the Black Sea Turks in Kyrgyzstan lies at the intersection of historical trauma, the existence of a secondary ethnic group within an ethnic group, and specific problems encountered in implementing kinship-state policy. Therefore, it is both an intriguing and tragic case study.

This study confirms that a micro-diaspora, administratively included solely because they spoke the Turkish language in Stalin's inhumane 1944 deportations, faces deep vulnerability stemming from two constraints: Structural political control stemming from being a secondary minority within the Ahiska Community and the inability of the Republic of Türkiye's bureaucracy to take the necessary initiative to resolve this issue.

The Black Sea Turks maintain a powerful attachment to Turkey. They closely follow the Republic of Turkey via satellite television and the internet. They keep their traditions specific to the Black Sea region. However, our study shows that this strong emotional and cultural bond is now inextricably linked to the practical, economic struggle for survival. The desire to "return to the homeland" has now shifted from a purely emotional, historical impulse to an urgent necessity mediated by economic factors.

As mentioned earlier, community leaders clearly express the need for work permits in Turkey and for young people to have access to education. This finding shows that although the return movement is emotionally grounded in ethnic-national identity, in practice it is driven by other reasons. Despite Turkey's symbolic political support, it has also been slow to process blood-based citizenship applications.

The most urgent and politically dangerous threat for the Black Sea Turks at present is not only their increasing population growth rate, but also their vulnerability to ethnic-political assimilation. For example, the initiative to establish independent representation, the “Association of Black Sea Exiles,” has been blocked by the dominant Ahiska community. Such practices ensure that the smaller group remains administratively invisible and compliant, preventing them from independently accessing resources and political positions. Furthermore, the existence of Law No. 3835, which specifically addresses the settlement of Ahiska Turks, reinforces the dominant group's privileged position and institutional authority. (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020)

Furthermore, the Turkish Embassy's classification of the Black Sea Turks as a “secondary” group also serves to formalize the internal hierarchy, albeit unwittingly. This official classification, which directs aid and political focus primarily toward the Ahiska community, jeopardizes Turkey's commitment to provide support without discrimination to all ethnic kin who suffered under Soviet deportations.

At this point, it is considered essential to implement specific institutional reforms in Turkey to reduce the risks of policy and cultural assimilation that have emerged. First, Turkey must expand the legal framework for the return to the homeland. Although Law No. 3835 provides a mechanism for the Ahiska Turks, as our study notes, it excludes secondary diasporas. In addition, diaspora support institutions such as the Presidency for Turks Abroad, TİKA, and the Red Crescent should actively and impartially support the formation and operation of independent civil society organizations for Black Sea Turks.

The example of the Black Sea Turks is a striking illustration of how Turkey's successful policy towards related communities can fail for relatively minor, marginal groups. Unless the necessary legal and institutional reforms are made urgently, the Black Sea Turks will be left facing the risk of political marginalization and cultural assimilation.

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