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## **The Issue of the Meskhetian Turks at the Crossroads of Interests of Georgia and its Neighbouring Countries**

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*The article represents the results of the multilateral study of the Meskhetian Turks' issue. It analyzes the emergence of the issue, the movement of the Meskhetian Turks, the positions of the organizations and their effectiveness. The study reveals the multi-layered aspect of the issue, the components of which are the issues of self identity preservation, repatriation, integration into society in their current residence, as well as social-economic and legal problems. The analysis of the Georgian policy and of the interests of its neighboring countries in this issue allows to conclude that the issue poses a certain danger for Armenia, for the prevention of which the verges of cooperation with Georgia are presented within the framework of the subject under discussion.*

### **Keywords**

Meskhetian Turks, organizations, region, Samtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia

### **Introduction**

Meskhetian Turks have been formed in the historical Meskheti region<sup>1</sup>, located in the south of Georgia. The majority of them are Sunni Muslims, speaking on Eastern-Anatolian dialect of the Turkish language. There are two main theories on their origin, the first of which may be conditionally called “Turkic”, the second - “Georgian”. The supporters of the first theory are scholars of Turkish or Azeri

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<sup>1</sup>The name “Meskheti” is used in two ways. In a narrow sense, it includes the places of Meskhetian settlements, the territory of historic Upper Kartli, the modern Samtskhe, and the adjacent territories within Turkey. In a broad sense, “Meskheti” is understood as the entire territory of one of the medieval Georgian state formations - the Samtskhe-Saatabago (Samtskhe atabagate), which also included some northern regions of historical Armenia.

ethnicity<sup>2</sup>, while the second theory is widespread mainly among the Georgian researchers<sup>3</sup>. This ethno-religious community is known for various names, i.e. Meskhetian Turks, Turkish Meskhetis, Meskhs, Meskhetis, Ahiska (Akhalsikhe) Turks. The abovementioned names have also political background. Thus, the Georgians are keen to call them “Meskhs” or “Meskhetians”, considering them as Islamized and Turkified Georgians. The majority of Meskhetian Turks as well as Turkish and Azeri researchers prefer using the terms “Turks” or “Ahiska Turks” (AhiskaTürkleri), which derives from the name of their previous homeland Eyalet of Akhalsikhe. In the scientific literature, the term "Meskhetian Turks" is frequently used, and it is a compromise option<sup>4</sup>. The term first appeared in the 1970s and spread only in the 1980s. Many Meskhetian Turks do not use this name, which is indicated in the census conducted in the Russian Federation in 2010; only 4825<sup>5</sup> people from nearly 100,000 Meskhetian Turks living there were registered as "Meskhetian Turks", while most were registered as "Turks", thereby proving that most of them are of Turkish ethnicity.

Currently Meskhetian Turks are living in Georgia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan,

<sup>2</sup>Zeyrek Y., Ahıska bölgesi ve Ahıska Türkleri, Ankara, 2001, s. 6-40; Юнусов А., Ахыскинские (месхетинские) турки: дважды депортированный народ - [https://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-02-1999/st\\_20\\_junusov.shtml](https://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-02-1999/st_20_junusov.shtml) (09.01.2019).

<sup>3</sup>ლომსაძემ., სამცხე-ჯავახეთი (XVIII საუკუნის შუაწლებიდან XIX საუკუნის შუაწლებამდე), «მეცნიერება», თბილისი, 1975; Beridze M., Kobaidze M., An attempt to Create an Ethnic Group: Identity Change Dynamics of Muslimized Meskhetians, “Language, History and Cultural Identities in the Caucasus” conference, Malmö University, 2005., pp. 53-67; Мамулия Г., Концепция государственной политики Грузии в отношении депортированных и репатриированных в Грузию месхов. История и современность - [https://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-02-1999/st\\_19\\_mamulija.shtml](https://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-02-1999/st_19_mamulija.shtml) (09.01.2019).

<sup>4</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., Meskhetians Homeward Bound..., ECMI - Caucasus, Georgia, 2001, pp. 37-38.

<sup>5</sup>Ахметьева В., Карастелев В., Юдина Н., Жизнь без прав. Положение ахыска-турок на юге России в 2015 году, доклад центра «Сова» и Московской Хельсинкской группы, Москва, 2015, с. 6.

and the United States. Their total number is 425-450 thousand people<sup>6</sup>.

Meskhethian Turks consider Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative district in the Southern Georgia as their homeland, where they seek to return. Their aspirations are related to the interests of Georgia and its neighbours, as a result of which the issue of Meskhethian Turks automatically gains an emphasized geopolitical context. The problem remains unresolved, and the dynamic changes in the alignment or political situation in countries, where a compact group of Meskhethian Turks lives, may become a reason for a possible aggravation. Since historically Samtskhe-Javakheti has a large Armenian population, borders with Armenia, the multi-aspect study of the issue is important from the perspective of the Armenian people's security. For this purpose, it is necessary to study the formation of Meskhethian Turks' issue, attempts to solve it, the policy of Georgia in the process of repatriation as well as the interests of international actors involved in it.

### **The Origins of the Meskhethian Turks' Issue**

Until 1944, Meskhethian Turks were residing in more than 200 villages of Adigeni, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka regions<sup>7</sup>. On 15–18 November of the same year, the Meskhethian Turks and Kurds, living in the abovementioned regions, were deported from their settlements to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. On 25–26 November, Muslim Hemshin-Armenians and Turks, living in Ajaria, were deported to the same countries. According to the official

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<sup>6</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup>Панеш Э. Х., Ермолов Л. Б., Турки-месхетинцы (историко-этнографический анализ проблемы), *Советская этнография*, 1990, 1, с. 16; Swerdlov S., Reflections on Transitional Minorities and Human Rights Meskhethians and Hemshins in Georgia and Krasnodar, *Anthropology, Minorities, Multiculturalism*, 2004, 5, p. 6; Kurt S., Ahıska'nın Türkiye İçin Jeopolitik Önemi, *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*, 2018, 58, s. 203; Ersöz S., Ahıska'da iki büyük ağız grubu: terekeme ve yerli türk ağız, *Uluslararası Türkçe Edebiyat Kültür Eğitim Dergisi*, 2014, 2, s. 105.

data, the total number of deportees was about 91,095<sup>8</sup>. The number of people reached to and settled in the Central-Asian Soviet countries, according to the official statistics, is 92,307<sup>9</sup>. The Azeri and Turkish researchers indicate a wider number of deportees<sup>10</sup>, including the ones who served in the army - approximately 145,000 people<sup>11</sup>. However, these numbers contradict the estimates of census, conducted in 1897, 1926 and 1939.

As stated in the first Russian Imperial census of 1897, in the provinces of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, totally including the five regions mentioned above, 24,433 and 19,299 people were registered under “Turks” and “Tatars” names respectively<sup>12</sup>, 43,732 people in total. As reported in the First All-Union census of the Soviet Union calculations in 1926, they have submitted under collective “Tyurks”<sup>13</sup> name, whose total number was 56,110<sup>14</sup>. As for the All-Union census calculations of 1939, 87,971 “Azerbaijanis” were residing in Adigeni, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka regions<sup>15</sup>, which was the collective name of Muslimized native population (Georgians and partly Armenians), Turks from various districts of the Ottoman Empire, as well as Terekeme and other small groups of Turkic-

<sup>8</sup> Докладная записка наркома внутренних дел Л.П. Берии И.В. Сталину, В.М. Молотову, Г. М. Маленкову о проведении операции по переселению турок, курдов и хемшинов из пограничных районов Грузинской ССР, Архив Александра Н. Яковлева, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1022541> (07.01.2019); Бугай Н. Ф., Турки из Месхетии: долгий путь к реабилитации (1944–1994), «РОСС», Москва, 1994, с. 76-77.

<sup>9</sup> Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Aydingün A., Harding C. B., Hoover M., Kuznetsov I., Swerdlow S., Meskhetian Turks An Introduction to their History, Culture and Resettlement Experiences, *Culture Profile*, 2006, 20, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Гаджиев А., Ахалцихские турки: история, этнография, фольклор, *ИРС Наследие*, 2007, 2, 26), с. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Первая всеобщая перепись населения Российской империи 1897 года, т. 69, 1905, с. 90-93.

<sup>13</sup> In Russian the term “tyurks” (тюрки) is used to describe all Turkic peoples.

<sup>14</sup> Всесоюзная перепись населения 1926 г., т. 14, Москва, 1929, сс. 84-91.

<sup>15</sup> Всесоюзная перепись населения 1939 года. Национальный состав населения районов, городов и крупных сел союзных республик СССР, [http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr\\_nac\\_39\\_ra.php?reg=777](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr_nac_39_ra.php?reg=777) (05.01.2019).

speaking Muslims<sup>16</sup>. The number of Turks, living in Ajaria, was 2201.<sup>17</sup> Thus, during 30 years their average birth rate did not exceed 2500. So before men are conscripted to military service their number should be estimated as far as 92,000 people. According to statistics of 1939, the number of Kurds was 3858<sup>18</sup>. 120 Hamsheni-Armenian families or about 1000 people were deported<sup>19</sup>. The number of Meskhetian Turks, serving in army and deported to Central Asia, was about 10,000<sup>20</sup>. So, the official statistics are not too far from the reality, and the deported population along with the military servicemen form in total of 100,000 people.

The official reason for the deportation was that a large part of the local population, having kin relations with the inhabitants of regions bordering Turkey, wanted to emigrate to Turkey, engaged in smuggling and spying for the benefit of Turkey's intelligence service.<sup>21</sup> The deportation of Muslim population, living in border regions, was also justified with the risk of possible attack by Turkey<sup>22</sup>. It should be highlighted that the deportation of Meskhetian Turks, Kurds and Muslim Hamsheni-Armenians took place by the time there was a breakthrough in the war, as the allies were a step closer to victory, and there was no longer a danger of Turkish intervention.

<sup>16</sup>It is noteworthy that over the years, the overwhelming majority of people registered under names of "Turks", "Tatars", "Turks" and "Azeris", lived in the Adigen, Akhaltsikhe and Aspindza regions (former Akhaltsikhe province), as for census data estimated in Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka regions (former Akhalkalaki 1897-1939), their number ranged from only around 5-7 thousand.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>**Swerdlov S.**, op. cit., p. 9; **მოღებამეც.** „მეცხურობრობლემისანალიზი, „კალმოსანი“, თბილისი, 2010, გვ. 77.

<sup>20</sup>**Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Докладная записка наркома внутренних дел Л.П. Берии И.В. Сталину, В.М. Молотову, Г.М. Маленкову о проведении операции по переселению турок, курдов и хемшинов из пограничных районов Грузинской ССР, Архив Александра Н. Яковлева, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/1022541> (07.01.2019).

<sup>22</sup>**Израелян В.**, Дипломатия в годы войны (1941–1945), Москва, 1985, с. 137; История Великой Отечественной войны Советского Союза 1941– 1945гг., т. II, Москва, 1961, с. 193.

That is the reason why some authors consider the preparation of an attack on Turkey by the USSR and the proposals on reviving the agriculture of underdeveloped Central-Asian provinces as the main motivation of those deportations<sup>23</sup>.

The authorities reinhabited 25-30,000 Georgians from different parts of the country in villages that were left off. Some of those people, taking into consideration the unfavourable circumstances, preferred to return to their initial places of residence<sup>24</sup>.

The data on the number of people, who died due to starvation, cold and diseases as a result of the deportation is controversial. The number of 30-50,000 victims<sup>25</sup>, provided by some Azerbaijani and Turkish researchers, is far from reality, and such unrealistic numbers come from exaggeration of the estimates of displaced people. The reports on victims of 15-17,000 people are considered as more realistic<sup>26</sup>.

The deported people were attached the status of "special settlers", were deprived of the right to abandon their residence and were under control<sup>27</sup>. The local population often treated them negatively, considering them as "betrayers"<sup>28</sup>.

The small Turkish-speaking community, deported to Central Asia, appeared in an environment where there were almost no cultural and language barriers, and had to be dissolved among the locals. However that did not happen. Among the reasons was the "native-

<sup>23</sup> **Մոլդեբաձե**, op. cit., թ. 76-77.

<sup>24</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., pp. 12-13; **Modebadze V.**, Historical Background of Meskhetian Turks' Problem and Major Obstacles to the Repatriation Process, *IBSU Scientific Journal*, 2009, 3, p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> **Zeyrek Y.**, op. cit., s. 54; **Гаджиев А.**, op. cit., c. 10.

<sup>26</sup> **Swerdlov S.**, op. cit., p. 9; **Юнусов А.**, op. cit.; **Մոլդեբաձե**, op. cit., թ. 78; **Շաքարյան Ա.**, Մեսխեթի թուրքեր. Աշխարհաքաղաքական գործն տարածաշրջանում, Թուրքագիտական և օսմանագիտական հետազոտություններ, «Ասողիկ», Երևան, 2006, էջ 74:

<sup>27</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., p. 14; **Մոլդեբաձե**, op. cit., թ. 78.

<sup>28</sup> **Մոլդեբաձե**, op. cit., թ. 78-79; **Swerdlov S.**, Understanding Post-Soviet Ethnic Discrimination and the Effective Use of U.S. Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Meskhetian Turks of Krasnodar Krai, *California Law Review*, 2006, 6 (94), p. 1835.

newcomer" social-psychological contradiction, as well as anthropological differences<sup>29</sup>.

In 1956, after the Stalin's death, the status of "special settlers" was removed from the deported peoples, so many of them were allowed to repatriate to their homeland. However, Meskhetian Turks were not allowed to return to Georgia<sup>30</sup>. According to a number of authors, one of the reasons was that in 1952 Turkey became a NATO member-state, and as a result, the regions surrounding its borders (including Akhaltsikhe and its adjacent districts) automatically gained strategic importance<sup>31</sup>.

In 1968, by the resolution of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union, the Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, Hemshins and Azerbaijanis, deported from the Southern Georgia and Ajaria during 1940s, were granted the right to live in the USSR territory<sup>32</sup>. However, in the second paragraph of the same resolution it was stated that these citizens had already been "settled" in the Central-Asian republics, the authorities of which were advised to create appropriate conditions for them. In fact, that point provided only a formal opportunity for repatriation. The system of permanent residence in the Soviet Union itself was also causing difficulties. Besides, the Georgian SSR leaders considered the Meskhetian Turks's repatriation as impossible, because these territories were already inhabited by Christian Georgians, so the

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<sup>29</sup> Арис Казинян: Грузия и американо-турецкий проект по возвращению турок-месхетинцев: история и реальность, <https://regnum.ru/news/671851.html> (10.01.2019).

<sup>30</sup> Панеш Э. Х., Ермолов Л. Б., *op. cit.*, с. 16; Aydingün A., Harding C. B., Hoover M., Kuznetsov I., Swerdlow S., *op. cit.*, p. 7; Zeyrek Y., *op. cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., *op. cit.*, p. 18; Pentikäinen O., Trier T., Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks, ECMI Working Paper no 21, Flensburg, 2004, pp. 11-12; Swerdlow S., Understanding Post-Soviet Ethnic Discrimination..., p. 1836, Aydingün A., Harding C.B., Hoover M., Kuznetsov I., Swerdlow S., *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> Усманов А. О., К вопросу о конституционно-правовой реабилитации месхетинских турок: политико-правовой аспект, *Гуманитарные и юридические исследования*, 2017, 3, с. 160; Бугай Н. Ф., Проблемы возвращения «плановых переселенцев» в районы прежнего проживания до 1940-ых гг., *Вестник Калмыцкого института гуманитарных исследований РАН*, 2014, 4, с. 50.

return of Muslims could destabilize the situation<sup>33</sup>. The return of the Meskhetian Turks was also hampered by the fact that the Georgian SSR authorities forced the returnees to accept their Georgian origin and to change their surnames into Georgian surnames, which wasn't acceptable for many of them<sup>34</sup>.

In the 1950-1960's, small groups of Meskhetian Turks were relocated in the Azerbaijani SSR and in the North Caucasus. During that period, about 25-30,000 Meskhetian Turks moved to Azerbaijan, having documents with "Azerbaijani" inner note<sup>35</sup>. At the same time, the Meskhetian Turks also began the movement on the idea of returning to Georgia<sup>36</sup>. In the 1960-1970s, smaller groups of Meskhetian Turks were established in Western Georgia, but lately some of them left the country for discrimination abuses<sup>37</sup>. It is noteworthy that the Meskhetian Turks in Georgia found shelter in Abkhazia's autonomous republic. In 1969, around 250 families were settled in the Gali district, particularly in the Achigvara village<sup>38</sup>.

Before 1989, the Soviet authorities did not recognize the issue of the Meskhetian Turks as such. The situation changed in May-June 1989 as a result of the massacres in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan, the target of which were the Meskhetian Turks. The reasons for targeting the Meskhetian Turks have not been addressed appropriately so far. Some researchers point to the context of tense relations between Uzbeks and Tadjiks<sup>39</sup>. Others believe that these events were organized by the Soviet authorities to solve a number of issues: to promote the economic development of the Russian central provinces, to distract the Uzbek nationalists from the Slavs and to prevent

<sup>33</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>34</sup>Панеш Э. Х., Ермолов Л. Б., op. cit., с. 19.

<sup>35</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., p. 116; Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>36</sup>Շարքարյան Ա., op. cit., էջ 74:

<sup>37</sup>Оганесян А., Политика Турции и Грузии в отношении проблем тюрко-месхетинцев, Kantegh, 2001, 3, p. 171:

<sup>38</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>39</sup>Панеш Э. Х., Ермолов Л. Б., op. cit., сс. 17-18; Арис Казинян: Грузия и американо-турецкий проект по возвращению тюрко-месхетинцев: история и реальность, <https://regnum.ru/news/671851.html> (10.01.2019).



separatist movements in the South Caucasus<sup>40</sup>. Besides the political motivation of the massacres, the low level of legal protection of the Meskhetian Turks, their "closed" communities, i.e. isolation from the locals, and the indifference of the Soviet authorities to the issue, were the factors contributing to it. As a result of the Fergana massacres, about 100 people were killed, more than 1000 people were injured, and many Meskhetian Turks living in Uzbekistan had to leave the country<sup>41</sup>.

In 1989, the Soviet authorities drove about 17,000 Meskhetian Turks from Fergana Valley to the central parts of the European part of Russia<sup>42</sup>. About 70,000 Meskhetian Turks, who left Uzbekistan, found shelter in Kazakhstan, Russia (mainly in the North Caucasus), Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine<sup>43</sup>.

After the Fergana events, the Meskhetian Turks' issue came to the attention of the USSR authorities and a number of resolutions were adopted, i.e. the Declaration of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the "recognizing the discrimination against the deported peoples as illegal and criminal and guaranteeing their rights" (adopted on November 14, 1989); the resolution of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR "on cancellation of the Statutes related to the Declaration of November 14, 1989 (announced on March 7, 1991); the resolution of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on "abolishing the decisions of the former USSR Defense Committee and USSR Government over the Soviet peoples subjected to pressure and forced displacement"

<sup>40</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., p. 118; Seferov R., Akış A., Sovyet Döneminden Günümüze Ahıska Türklerinin Yaşadıkları Coğrafyaya Göçlerle Birlikte Genel Bir Bakış, *Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2008, 24, s. 400-401; Гаджиев А., op. cit., c. 11.

<sup>41</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 28; Մուղղաբաձե՞, op. cit., թթ. 83; Zeyrek Y., op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>42</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., p. 118; Aydıngün A., Harding C. B., Hoover M., Kuznetsov I., Swerdlow S., op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>43</sup>Pentikäinen O., Trier T., op. cit., pp. 11-12; Kurt S., op. cit., p. 205; Մուղղաբաձե՞, op. cit., թթ. 84-85; Ахметьева В., Карастелев В., Юдина Н., op. cit., c. 5-6.

(adopted on June 6, 1991)<sup>44</sup>. These documents did not have practical significance in the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks as the Soviet Union collapsed soon. Meanwhile, by adopting those legislative acts, the USSR authorities recognized the existence of the Meskhetian Turks' issue. If previously it was ignored, now the issue started to be discussed on different platforms in order to look for solutions.

### **The Meskhetian Turks' Movement, Organizations and their Positions**

In the 1950-1960s, the idea of returning to homeland began to emerge among the Meskhetian Turks who had been deported to Central Asia. Initially, a number of underground organizations emerged, which, however, did not gain common recognition among the Meskhetian Turks. In 1962, the first founding congress of Meskhetian Turks was held in the Bukinski district of Tashkent region, where the issue of the repatriation national movement was the subject of discussion. To properly organize the movement, the "Temporary Organizing Committee" was elected<sup>45</sup>. The congress marked the beginning of the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation movement. Until 1989, ten congresses took place. The Committee has sent numerous requests to the official Moscow, as well as to the authorities of the Georgian SSR. Until 1989, there was no significant step was taken to address the issue

According to the Georgian authors, in the 1960s and 1980s the Meskhetian Turks, under the pressure of the Government, moved from their theory of Georgian origin to that of Turkish<sup>46</sup>. The supporters of the latter claim that the majority of Meskhetian Turks used to accept the Georgian origin theory only because of the hope to be granted the right to return to their homeland<sup>47</sup>. Regardless the reasons, the leaders of the Meskhetian Turks, as well as part of the people, have valued the issue of repatriation more than national identity, which could easily be

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<sup>44</sup>Усманов А.О., op. cit., с. 160.

<sup>45</sup>Панеш Э. Х., Ермолов Л. Б., op. cit., сс. 18-19.

<sup>46</sup>მოდებამეც., op. cit., გვ. 88-89.

<sup>47</sup>Zeyrek Y., op. cit., s. 58; Панеш Э.Х., Ермолов Л. Б., op. cit., с. 19.

adjusted based on the current situation. This resulted in the formation of two fractions of the Meskhetian Turks. The first group advocated the version of their Georgian origin and agreed to return to any region of Georgia, while the others had a Turkish identity and viewed the homeland as not the whole republic but the former Akhaltsikhe pashalik. Meanwhile, some of those who had Turkish identity, considered Turkey as their homeland<sup>48</sup>.

On July 28, 1988, the ninth congress of the Meskhetian Turks took place in Psikod district of the Autonomous Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, accompanied by a fierce struggle between two opposing fractions. After a long debate, most of the delegates assisted the supporters of the "Turkish origin", and the position of the Georgian-origin-supporters was labeled as "betrayal of national interests"<sup>49</sup>. As a result, the congress decided to reach the goal of repatriation with the condition of accepting their Turkish national identity. Several months after the congress, Fergana's events took place.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation movement remained ununited. A number of organizations have been created with similar goals, but there are still disagreements on a number of issues.

In 1990, Meskhetian Turks' International Association "Vatan" was founded<sup>50</sup>. In 1991, it was officially registered in Russia. The head office is located in Moscow and has branches in Krasnodar, several other Russian cities and in Azerbaijan. "Vatan" is considered to be one of the most influential organizations of Meskhetian Turks. The Association presents the interests of most Meskhetian Turks, although some communities are not even aware of its existence<sup>51</sup>. Representatives of the organization consider Meskhetian Turks as ethnic Turks, and they pursue two main goals - to recognize the 1944

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<sup>48</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>49</sup>Панеш Э. X., Ермолов Л. Б., op. cit., cc. 19-20.

<sup>50</sup>The word "vatan" means "homeland" in Turkish and derives from the Arabic وطن (watan) with the same meaning.

<sup>51</sup>Pentikäinen O., Trier T., op. cit., p. 27; Царцарյան У., op. cit., էջ 80:

deportation as illegal and to allow the Meskhetian Turks to return to their homeland without preconditions. They view the territory of former Akhaltsikhe pashalik as a homeland rather than a whole of Georgia<sup>52</sup>. "Vatan" also demands from the Georgian authorities to provide Meskhetian Turks with cultural autonomy, including the right for education in their native language (i.e. Turkish) after their repatriation<sup>53</sup>. The social-economic difficulties in the Meskhetian Turks' residence, the integration in the society and similar issues are often sidelined<sup>54</sup>. The approach of "Vatan" to such important issues can be explained by ideological reasons (considering the Meskhetian Turks' temporary residence in Russia and other countries as the only solution to the repatriation problem)<sup>55</sup>; as well as the scarcity of the Organization's financial resources<sup>56</sup>, that makes the solution of socio-economic challenges harder to overcome. Consequently, the inability to solve these problems is the reason for the political orientation of the organization's goals and position.

As part of "Vatan" activities, regular meetings are held in Russia, in which the Meskhetian Turks demand the Georgian government to apply the Georgian law on repatriation<sup>57</sup>.

In 1992, the "Khsna" organization of Georgians and their descendants, exiled from Georgia in 1944, was established in Kabardino-Balkaria<sup>58</sup>. In the same year, it was registered by the Georgian Justice Ministry, and close ties with the Georgian authorities were established<sup>59</sup>. "Khsna" had a pro-Georgian stance. The members

<sup>52</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., pp. 120-121.

<sup>53</sup>მოღებამძევ., op. cit., გვ. 90-91; Pentikäinen O., Trier T., op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>54</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 32; Pentikäinen O., Trier T., op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>55</sup>Бугай Н. Ф., Проблемы возвращения «плановых переселенцев»..., сс. 50-51.

<sup>56</sup>Мавашев Ю., Игры вокруг турок-месхетинцев, <http://www.politrus.com/2015/11/14/ahiska-turks/> (14.01.2019).

<sup>57</sup>Турки-месхетинцы в годовщину депортации потребовали реабилитации своего народа, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/312488/> (13.01.2019); Турки-месхетинцы на юге России отметили 72-ю годовщину депортации, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/292637/>(13.01.2019).

<sup>58</sup>“Khsna” (ხსნა) means “salvation” in Georgian.

<sup>59</sup>მოღებამძევ., op. cit., გვ. 91-92.

consider themselves as Muslimized Georgians, and consider the entire territory of Georgia as their homeland, refraining from the demand of cultural autonomy<sup>60</sup>. “Khsna” had fewer supporters among Meskhetian Turks than “Vatan”. In 1999, “Khsna” suspended its activities and instead rebranded itself into "Georgian Repatriates Union". Unlike “Khsna”, the aim of the "Georgian Repatriates Union" was not the solution of the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation issue, but the integration of Meskhetian Turks already settled in Georgia as well as the protection of their rights<sup>61</sup>.

There are also some other organizations of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia, among them “the Deported Meskhetian Youth Association “Meskheti”, “Meskheti” Latifshah Baratashvili Foundation”, and “Gurjistan” International Union of Muslim Georgians named after Khalil Gozalishvili”. All of them are supporters of the Georgian version of the Meskhetian Turks' origin.

In fact, the organizations operating in Georgia have a closer connection with the Georgian authorities than Meskhetian Turks. Therefore, it might be concluded that these organizations were established in contrast to "Vatan", and have a very underlined political stance. Though these organizations are also busy with the daily problems of Meskhetian Turks, living in Georgia, their number in the country is rather small (about 1,700)<sup>62</sup>.

In 1994, "Umit" organization was established in Krasnodar Krai of Russian Federation<sup>63</sup>. The organization operated only in the mentioned area. According to Akram Bairakhtarov, the founder of "Umit", Meskhetian Turks are ethnic Turks, and the issue will be solved as soon as they move to the Turkey<sup>64</sup>. In 1999, the organization suspended its operation.

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<sup>60</sup>**Pentikäinen O., Trier T.**, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Written statement on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia, submitted by the NGO Federal Union of European Nationalities , [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930\\_1443084042\\_g1520228.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930_1443084042_g1520228.pdf) (12.01.2019).

<sup>63</sup>“Umit” (ümit) means “hope” in Turkish.

<sup>64</sup>**Pentikäinen O., Trier T.**, op. cit., p. 29.

Meskhetian Turks' organizations with similar position were also established in Kyrgyzstan (the "Union of Turks living in Kyrgyzstan" and "International Union of Ahiska Turks of the CIS countries"). "Meskhetian Turks Cultural Center" operates in Tashkent.

There are about 20 organizations of Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, 15 of which are active. Most of the organizations operate in the city of Bursa, where the majority of the Meskhetian Turks lives. In August 2003, nine of these organizations formed the Union of Ahiska Turks Organizations<sup>65</sup>, which is an important step towards unification and coordination of activities implemented by Turkey-based Meskhetian Turks' organizations. The Union and many organizations from Turkey consider the fact of living in Turkey already a return to their homeland. The support for the newcoming Meskhetian Turks and contribution to the integration of Turkish society are included in the agenda of their activities. However, not every organization in Turkey shares the same position. The Istanbul-based "Educational, Cultural and Social Support Organization of the Ahiska Turks" considers the homeland of Samtskhe-Javakheti as their own homeland and strives for returning there<sup>66</sup>.

In November 2008, the "Union of the Ahiska Turks" (DATÜB) was established in Ankara, the aim of which was to unite the Meskhetian Turks living in different countries and solve common problems<sup>67</sup>. Despite the fact that the organization enjoys the support of the Turkish government, its effectiveness is not tangible.

In 2006-2007, the Meskhetian Turks, who moved to the United States from Krasnodar Krai, have established the "Ahiska Turkish-American Union", which deals with their integration and other issues<sup>68</sup>. The Russians consider the activity of the organization as anti-

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Modebadze V., op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>67</sup>DATÜB, [www.ahiska-gazeta.com/ru/pages/312.html](http://www.ahiska-gazeta.com/ru/pages/312.html) (15.01.2019).

<sup>68</sup>Бугай Н. Ф., Мамаев М. И., Международное общественное объединение турок-месхетинцев «Ватан» как институт власти гражданского общества, *Историческая и социально-образовательная мысль*, 2015, 7, 8, сс. 25-26.

Russian, and it included the Union in its list of prohibited organizations operating in Russia back in 2015<sup>69</sup>.

Thus, Meskhetian Turks have a large number of organizations and associations, but their efficiency is low due to a number of objective and subjective factors. One of the factors hindering the unity of Meskhetian Turks is that they are spread across the territories of 9 countries. None of the organizations is represented in at least some of these countries, which does not allow any of them to lead the Meskhetian Turks' movement. In this case, the compromise may be the cooperation between those organizations, but the controversies on a number of issues (for instance, the Meskhetian Turks' origin and homeland issue) does not allow to unite for addressing common problems. The political nature of the Meskhetian Turks' attitudes and goals plays a negative role, and many daily problems of the representatives of that ethnic group are ignored. That is why the organizations do not receive popular support, which limits their opportunities.

### **The Meskhetian Turks' Issue in the International Structures**

Since the collapse of the USSR to 1996, the issue of Meskhetian Turks has not received an international response because the international community's focus was on conflicts in territories of former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. Only after the end of the active phase of these conflicts, the issue started to be discussed in international platforms.

In May 1996, the declaration of the “Regional Conference addressing the problems of refugees, displaced persons, the other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighboring States” (also known as CIS Conference), taken place on the initiative of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and

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<sup>69</sup>Мавашев Ю., op. cit.

the International Organization for Migration (IOM), recognized the voluntary repatriation right of the deported peoples to their settlements<sup>70</sup>. Based on this document, the international community recognized the Meskhetian Turks' issue, which was a basis for raising it at the international level. The reports of the IOM, Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) and Human Rights Watch have focused the international community's attention on the issue.

On the initiative of the OSCE and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, discussions on the issue of the Meskhetian Turks were held from 7-10 September 1998 in Hague, which was attended by the representatives of Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and the Meskhetian Turks living in those countries and "Vatan" organization. The aim of the consultations was the discussion of the issue and the ways to address it. Among the issues discussed was the denomination of the Meskhetian Turks. The Georgian delegation suggested to use the terms "Meskhs" or "Meskheti's expelled population", which were unacceptable for the Meskhetian Turks. At the end, the parties agreed to use the term "Meskhetian Turks" in the final document<sup>71</sup>.

From 15-17 March 1999 another meeting was held in Vienna, with the participation of the same interested parties. This time the issues under discussion were the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation conditions, the commitments of Georgia, as well as the issue of the status they had in the location at that moment. As a result of the discussions Georgia was obliged to create a legislative basis for the return of the Meskhetian Turks within two years of joining the

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<sup>70</sup> Regional Conference to address the problems of refugees, displaced persons, other forms of involuntary displacement and returnees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighbouring States (Geneva, 30-31 May, 1996),

<https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/rcps/cis-conference/CIS%20Declaration%20POA%20Regional%20Conference%201996.pdf> (20.01.2019).

<sup>71</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., pp. 37-38.



Council of Europe, and carry out the repatriation up to 201172. Regarding the discussions on the violations of Meskhetian Turks rights in the RF Krasnodar region, they did not yield any result. The RF representative even mentioned that the Meskhetian Turks' issue is limited only to the lack of the conditions of their return to Georgia, and in the RF they are simply temporary residents73.

In the following years, the Council of Europe adopted a number of resolutions criticizing the policy pursued by the Georgian authorities and urging them to accelerate the performance of the assumed commitments74.

Thus, during 1996-1999, the international record of the Meskhetian Turks' issue and the steps taken for its solution were instrumental in developing a consistent and coordinated approach to the settlement of the issue.

### **Georgia's Policy and Repatriation Process**

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, regardless of non-favorable state policy, a part of the Meskhetian Turks had returned to Georgia. After gaining independence, the majority of them had to leave the country due to the atmosphere of national intolerance in the country, as well as the abrupt deterioration of social and economic conditions75.

After the change of the power in Georgia in 1992, "The Expatriation Commission of the deported Meskhetians" has been created, the members of which, together with the Krasnodar Krai

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<sup>72</sup>Georgia's application for membership of the Council of Europe, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=16669&lang=en> (17.01.2019).

<sup>73</sup>**Симоненко В. А.**, Месхетинские турки: историческая судьба и проблемы культурной адаптации, дис. канд. ист. наук., Краснодар, 2002., с. 133.

<sup>74</sup>**Pentikäinen O., Trier T.**, op. cit., pp. 37-38; **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>75</sup>**Swerdlow S.**, Understanding Post-Soviet Ethnic Discrimination..., p. 1838; **Мамулия Г.**, op. cit.; Теймураз Ломсадзе: "80-85% месхетинцев – фактически этнические грузины", <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/25141402.html> (09.01.2019).

representatives, worked out the “Concept program on repatriation of the population deported from the Georgian SSR Meskheti and Javakheti in 1944”<sup>76</sup>. The document was of declarative nature, as it did not provide specific mechanisms for achieving its goals.

In 1993, with the decree of the President of Georgia E. Shevardnadze, the “Adaptation Center for Georgian and Georgia’s History” was established in Tbilisi, where the young Meskhetian Turks were given the opportunity to pass the necessary training for entering the country’s universities<sup>77</sup>. By that step the Georgian authorities were probably trying to promote the change of the ethnic identity of Meskhetian Turks in favor of the Georgian version.

In December 1996, E. Shevardnadze signed the decree “On approval of the state program on solving the legal and social issues of deported and repatriated Meskhetians in Georgia”, the objectives of which was the granting of citizenship, restoration of the nationality and surname, granting of economic privileges based on the current legislation, insurance of social protection and the assistance in integration into society. For the fulfillment of those objectives, a state committee was set up headed by the Minister of Refugees and Resettlement, V. Vashakidze. In the first phase of 1997-2000, 5000 people were supposed to return to Georgia<sup>78</sup>. Actually, the decree objectives show that only the people considering themselves as Islamized Georgians were given the right of repatriation. However, even in that case, the decree did not produce any result, but rather created an illusion of repatriation.

The law “On the victims of political repressions and restoration of justice” adopted in December 1997, also bypassed the

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<sup>76</sup> Деловая Грузия. Экономика и связи с Россией в 1999-2001 гг., т. 1, Москва, 2002, с. 25.

<sup>77</sup> Мамулия Г., *op. cit.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

Meskhetian Turks' issue, because it regarded only those citizens of Georgia who faced repressions in the territory of the republic<sup>79</sup>.

In 1999, after assuming the commitment of organizing the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation in joining the Council of Europe, Georgia's policy on resolving the Meskhetian Turks issue has not undergone significant changes. In subsequent years, the creation of a legislative framework was much slower than it was planned. Immediately after assuming the commitment by joining the Council of Europe, a bill on repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks was drafted, which for 7 years have not been included in the agenda of parliamentary discussions.

The Georgian side explained its inactivity by the lack of measures and the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Given this, multilateral financial support from the European structures was expected<sup>80</sup>. The Georgian politicians also expressed concern that the return of Meskhetian Turks to Samtskhe-Javakheti could destabilize the region and even threaten the country's territorial integrity<sup>81</sup>.

As an obstacle for the Meskhetian Turks' return, the Georgian politicians and researchers highlight the fact that a part of the Meskhetian Turks' former villages are settled by the Javakhk-Armenians, and the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation could cause a new conflict. The Javakhk-Armenians' negative attitude towards that process is also mentioned among the obstacles<sup>82</sup>. However, it should be mentioned that the Armenians are settled only in a few villages out of Meskhetian Turks' more than 200 former villages. Approximately two third of the villages is populated by ethnic Georgians, while the

<sup>79</sup>საქართველოს კანონის საქართველოს მოქალაქეთა პოლიტიკური უპრესიციბ  
ისმსხვერპლად აღიარებისადრე უპრესიციბ ულთასოციალური დაცვის შესახებ  
ბ, - <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/31408?publication=11> (09.01.2019).

<sup>80</sup> Деловая Грузия. Экономика и связи с Россией в 1999-2001 гг., с. 26;  
ხაინდრავამაჰმადიანი მესხების რეპატრაციის შესახებ საუბრობს -  
<https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=12432> (11.01.2019); **Շարաթյան Ա.**, op. cit.,  
Էջ 74:

<sup>81</sup> **Modebadze V.**, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>82</sup> **Modebadze V.**, op. cit., p. 122; **Оганесян А.**, op. cit., с. 173.

other part is abandoned<sup>83</sup>. Besides, Georgia's authorities used the prospective of the Meskhetian Turks' return as an additional factor to repress the local Armenians. The Javakhk-Armenians have even expressed their discontent against Georgia's policy<sup>84</sup>. For the Javakhk-Armenians the Meskhetian Turks' return to Samtskhe-Javakheti is undesirable. However, they are not against the repatriation, if the repatriates are settled in those places where they had been exiled from, namely in Samtskhe (Adigeni, Akhaltsikhe, Aspindza regions)<sup>85</sup>.

Despite all this, the official Tbilisi is well aware that a large population with Turkish identity may start a new separatist movement, or their existence may be used as an additional lever against Tbilisi by Ankara and Baku. Most likely, this is the reason why the Georgian side is trying to implicitly hamper the return of Meskhetian Turks to that region.

After 2003 Rose revolution in Georgia, a more constructive approach of the Meskhetian Turks' issue was expected from the new government. Initially, these hopes seemed to be justified. After active discussions during 2005-2006, on 11 July 2007, the Georgian parliament adopted the law "On repatriation of persons forcefully resettled from Georgian SSR by the Soviet Union in the 40s of 20th century"<sup>86</sup>. The Georgian government also adopted the resolution "On simplified procedure of granting Georgian citizenship to those who have a status of a repatriated person". The law allowed to start the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation process, which was to begin in 2008 and end in 2011.

The repatriation law adopted by the parliament received sharp criticism for strict restrictions and the complicated requirements for the submission of the applications on repatriation. In addition, the

<sup>83</sup> **Калишевский М.**, Турки-месхетинцы: из одного изгнания в другое, ч.2, <https://www.fergananews.com/articles/6281> (11.01.2019).

<sup>84</sup> Армяне Джавахети обвиняют власти Грузии в противозаконных действиях, <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/78636/> (16.01.2019).

<sup>85</sup> **Калишевский М.**, op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> ყოფილისრკ-ისმიერ XXსაუკუნის40-იანწლებშისაქართველოსსსრ-იდანიმულებითგადასახლებულპირთარეპატრიაციისშესახებ, - <https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/view/22558?publication=7> (09.01.2019).

application was limited to one year only. The full package of documentation included about 14 different references, including the documents, proving the forcible displacement<sup>87</sup>. Such special document was not provided to exiled people by the Soviet authorities, and it is not clear which documents could be considered as “forcible displacement approval”. The application had to be completed in Georgian or English, while the majority of the people, populated in the Middle Asia, could not speak any of them. The law did not define the status of repatriate nor did it provide financial support or privileges.

Though in December 2008, the Georgian parliament extended the deadline for the submission of the documents up to July 1, 2009, however it did not have any essential impact on the repatriation process. According to the Georgian side, 5841 applications<sup>88</sup> (approximately 8900 people) were registered in Georgian embassies of different countries till 2011. 1700 people have received a status of a repatriated person. They were inhabited in different regions of the country<sup>89</sup>. The press of Russia, Azerbaijan and most of the other interested countries, as well as separate researchers questioned the statistics, provided by the Georgian side, pointing out that the number of people, who wanted to return to Georgia was greater and the small number of applications was explained by an artificially complicated process<sup>90</sup>. The Georgian authorities were also accused in the international structures for avoiding to fulfill their commitments<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> ყოფილი სსრკ-ის მიერ XX საუკუნის 40-იან წლებში საქართველოს სსრ-იდან იძულებით გადასახლებულ პირთარეპატრიაციის შესახებ (მუხ. 4.2.ა), <https://matsne.gov.ge/ru/document/view/22558?publication=7> (09.01.2019).

<sup>88</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>89</sup> Written statement on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia, submitted by the NGO Federal Union of European Nationalities, [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930\\_1443084042\\_g1520228.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930_1443084042_g1520228.pdf) (12.01.2019); დეპორტირებული მესხები: ფერგანამდე და უკან, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/54490-deportirebuli-mesxebi-ferganamde-da-ukan> (12.01.2019).

<sup>90</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., pp. 44-45; Теймураз Ломсадзе: "80-85% месхетинцев – фактически этнические грузины", <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/25141402.html> (09.01.2019); Грузия отказалась

Although the abovementioned proves that the Georgian authorities are not interested in the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks and they are creating additional obstacles for solving the issue, it should be mentioned that there are also a number of objective circumstances that also complicate the repatriation process. One of them is the unfavorable socio-economic conditions in Samtskhe-Javakheti. At the same time, the Meskhetian Turks, living in Turkic countries, are well integrated in society. Many Meskhetian Turks, living in Turkey, Kazakhstan, the United States, and somehow in Russia and Azerbaijan, are unlikely to leave their property and move to Samtskhe. Moreover, currently most Meskhetian Turks are descendants of exiles, who have never been in Samtskhe and their psychological attachment to that area is not so great.

The population of Georgia also has a negative stance on the return of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia<sup>92</sup>. According to the poll held in Akhaltsikhe and surrounding villages in 2009, 87% of the respondents was against the Meskhetian Turks' return<sup>93</sup>. It means that in Georgia, particularly in Samtskhe, the Meskhetian Turks' return is unacceptable at the level of public opinion as well.

### **Interests of Foreign Actors in the Issue Settlement**

The issue of Meskhetian Turks, though one of the internal problems of Georgia, is at the same time related to the geopolitical interests of states neighboring Georgia.

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возвращать турок-месхетинцев, <https://rg.ru/2014/04/08/turki-site.html> (11.01.2019).

<sup>91</sup>Written statement on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia, submitted by the NGO Federal Union of European Nationalities, [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930\\_1443084042\\_g1520228.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1236549/1930_1443084042_g1520228.pdf) (12.01.2019); Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution, "Honouring of Obligations and commitments by Georgia", [http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20100624\\_amondoc24rev\\_2010.pdf](http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20100624_amondoc24rev_2010.pdf) (12.01.2019).

<sup>92</sup>Теймураз Ломсадзе: "80-85% месхетинцев – фактически этнические грузины", <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/25141402.html> (09.01.2019).

<sup>93</sup>მოღვაძე, *op. cit.*, გვ. 181-182.

Turkey and Azerbaijan are the most interested countries in the Meskhetian Turk's repatriation to Georgia. It is also evidenced by the fact that the issue has appeared in the focus of international attention thanks to Turkey. It is notable that the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation issue has been raised in the OSCE with the efforts of the spokespersons of Turkey and Latvia<sup>94</sup>. Though Latvia has no direct interest in this issue, the Latvians are too sensitive to the repression of the Stalin era since thousands of Latvians were exiled from the country. By raising the issue in the international arena, Latvia once again brought to light the lawlessness of USSR totalitarian regime. Perhaps Turkey could use those moods in favor of its political interests.

Turkey supports those organizations of the Meskhetian Turks, that express their willingness to move to Turkey or demand from the Georgian authorities to allow them to return to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Back in June 1992, Turkey adopted a law facilitating the immigration of Meskhetian Turks from the former Soviet republics. Though the Turkish government was ready to finance 500 families, the initiative did not have a great success, and during 1993-1994 only 179 families have moved to Turkey, half of which were granted citizenship<sup>95</sup>. Most of them were inhabited in the eastern regions of the modern Turkey, in the territory of historical Western Armenia.

In subsequent years, Ankara continued to host the Meskhetian Turks. Those who have moved to Turkey in recent years are mainly from the territory of the Ukrainian conflict zone, and the Turkish authorities are trying to settle them in the eastern regions too<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Арис Казинян: Грузия и американо-турецкий проект по возвращению турок-месхетинцев: история и реальность, <https://regnum.ru/news/671851.html> (10.01.2019).

<sup>95</sup> Շարաթյան Ա., *op. cit.*, էջ 78:

<sup>96</sup> Ukrayna'daki çatışmalardan kaçan Ahıska Türkleri Erzincan'a getirildi, <https://tr.euronews.com/2015/12/26/ukrayna-daki-catismalardan-kaçan-ahıska-turkleri-erzincan-a-getirildi> (24.01.2019); Ukrayna'dan Van Gölü kıyısına: Yeni Ahıska Ahlat, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/ukraynadan-van-golu-kiyisina-yeni-ahıska-ahlat-40116688> (24.01.2019).

Nevertheless, the majority of the Meskhetian Turks ignores the policy of the Turkish authorities and settles in the western regions, centralizing in the cities of Bursa, Istanbul and Antalya. The number of the Meskhetian Turks living in Turkey is around 35000<sup>97</sup>. Considering the Meskhetian Turks, moved to Turkey in the XIX century and in the first half of the XX century, their number is big, however the majority of the early migrated people have already dissolved.

Although Turkey welcomes Meskhetian Turks, the existence of large population of Meskhetian Turks in Samtskhe is important for Turkey as well. Turkey has actively participated in the international discussions on that issue and has repeatedly raised it in relations with Georgia, putting pressure on the Georgian authorities along with OSCE<sup>98</sup>.

Turkey considers Georgia, and especially Samtskhe-Javakheti, as strategically important territories for the country. It seeks to compete with Russia pursuing geopolitical interests in the region, and the importance of Samtskhe-Javakheti in this issue is growing more and more. Samtskhe-Javakheti is getting important from the point of view of economy and energy security, as well as from political perspective. It is a transit zone for oil and gas pipelines, having significant importance for Turkey and Azerbaijan, as well as the roads and railways, connecting Turkey to Azerbaijan and Central Asian states. At the same time, Samtskhe-Javakheti is the only region on this route, where the number of Turkic-speaking population is not great and, in fact, it divides the Turks from the Azerbaijanis.

Moreover, in case of Meskhetian Turks return to Samtskhe-Javakheti, the official Ankara and Baku can more effectively organize Armenia's blockade and put more pressure on Armenia in order to solve the Artsakh issue in their favor<sup>99</sup>. In essence, the interests of

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<sup>97</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>98</sup>Арис Казинян: Грузия и американо-турецкий проект по возвращению турок-месхетинцев: история и реальность, <https://regnum.ru/news/671851.html> (10.01.2019).

<sup>99</sup>Kurt S., op. cit., pp. 208-212.



Turkey and Azerbaijan in the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation issue do coincide. It should be also noted that the huge Turkish community in the territories bordering Georgia will have pro-Turkish position in many questions which will allow Turkey to get additional levers and in case of necessity put pressure on Georgia's authorities in favor of Turkish regional policy.

Azerbaijan tried to use the Meskhetian Turks in its anti-Armenian policy yet in the beginning of 1990s, when it sought to settle a part of the refugees, who had come to Azerbaijan after the events in Fergana, in the territory of NKAO, seeking to change the ethnic composition of the region<sup>100</sup>.

The total amount of the Meskhetian Turks, living in Azerbaijan is about 70-100 thousand<sup>101</sup>. The interest of Azerbaijan in Meskhetian Turks' repatriation is also evident from the fact that 5389 out of 5841 applications submitted to Georgian embassies for obtaining a repatriate status were only from Azerbaijan<sup>102</sup>. Taking into account the complexities of the application process, it becomes evident that the Meskhetian Turks, living in Azerbaijan, have been directed and supported, which could have been done by the Azerbaijani authorities.

The interests of Azerbaijan and Turkey contradict the interests of Meskhetian Turks in Samtskhe-Javakheti and those of Armenia and Artsakh directly threatening their security.

Though the official Yerevan does not express its opposition against the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks, it is anxious about this issue. Samtskhe-Javakheti has strategic importance also for Armenia as it is the only region neighboring Armenia where no Turkic-speaking population lives, and it is the only safe way to Europe and Russia. In case of the Meskhetian Turks' return to that region,

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<sup>100</sup>Карабахские депутаты: Ходжалу стал жертвой политических интриг и борьбы за власть в Азербайджане, <https://regnum.ru/news/962004.html> (25.01.2019); Арис Казинян: Грузия и американо-турецкий проект по возвращению турок-месхетинцев: история и реальность, <https://regnum.ru/news/671851.html> (10.01.2019).

<sup>101</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>102</sup>Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F., op. cit., p. 44.

Armenia will be caught in a complete Turkish-Azerbaijani ring, which will undoubtedly be used against Armenia in case of resumption of military actions. Its striking example is the periodic explosions of the only gas pipeline from Russia to Armenia in the Marneuli region having numerous Azerbaijani population in 1990s. Besides, the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation to Samtskhe-Javakhetia may be accompanied by emptying the Armenians of the region, or cause tense relations with the Armenians and Georgians of the region. The case has a historical precedent; in 1918 the Muslim population of Samtskhe has opposed Christian Armenians and Georgians<sup>103</sup>.

The Russian Federation is also interested in the Meskhetian Turks' issue. The number of Meskhetian Turks, living there, is about 75-100 thousand people, who live mainly in the Northern Caucasus and partly in central regions<sup>104</sup>. In general, the Russian authorities consider the Meskhetian Turks as temporary residents, and the local authorities have a discriminatory attitude toward the people established in the Krasnodar Krai<sup>105</sup>. At the same time, the RF representatives, acting in favor of the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation in Georgia, are trying to put pressure on the Georgian authorities. That pressure increased significantly after the war in August 2008. In October 2008, the law on the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation, adopted a year earlier in Georgia, was criticized in the RF State Duma announcement, and the RF deputies called on the OSCE and the international community to put pressure on Georgia<sup>106</sup>. Such position of the RF may be aimed to the destabilization of the internal political

<sup>103</sup> Մելքոնյան Ա., Ջավախքը 19-րդ դարում և 20-րդ դարի առաջին քառորդին, «Ջանգալ-97», Երևան, 2003, էջ 272-285; **Майлян М.**, Между Грузией и Турцией: особенности ирредентизма на примере Аджарии и Самцхе-Месхетии (1918-1921 гг.), Историческое пространство. Проблемы истории стран СНГ, Москва, 2015, сс. 137-142.

<sup>104</sup> **Trier T., Tarkhan-Mouravi G., Kilimnik F.**, op. cit., p. 55; **Ахметьева В., Карастелев В., Юдина Н.**, op. cit., с. 6.

<sup>105</sup> **Swerdlow S.**, Understanding Post-Soviet Ethnic Discrimination..., pp. 1838-1849.

<sup>106</sup> ГД призвала надавить на Грузию в вопросе репатриации турок-месхетинцев, <https://ria.ru/20081017/153397643.html> (17.01.2019).

situation of Georgia, creating tension in the settlements of the Meskhetian Turks. Meanwhile, it should be noted that the Meskhetian Turks' repatriation will strengthen the positions of Turkey and NATO, which is not desirable for Russia.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the multilateral study and analysis of Meskhetian Turks' issue shows that it is a multilayered problem with a number of important components: the clarification and preservation of the Meskhetian Turks' national identity; the danger of assimilation; repatriation, the social integration in the current settlements as well as the solution of socio-economic and legal problems. One more factor is the impact of geopolitical competition in the region on possible developments. The deportation of the Meskhetian Turks, living in the south of Georgia, by the USSR authorities gave rise to this issue. The USSR authorities recognized the legal aspect of the problem only after the Fergana events in 1989, and on international platforms it was discussed only in 1996-1999. The record of this issue by the international bodies was followed by an attempt to resolve it. It includes the period of 1999-2011, during which the issue had no positive solution, and till now it remains in the agenda of international diplomacy and inter-ethnic relations.

None of the Meskhetian Turks' organizations, established to solve the issue, have enough influence and resources to lead the movement. They are not united either in the achievement of their common objective, which is the consequence of the prominent politicization of those organizations or the support of countries with contradictory interests - Georgia or Turkey.

The solution of Meskhetian Turks' issue is forced to Georgia by the foreign countries, particularly by Turkey. Though Georgia may change the demographical situation of Samtskhe-Javakheti by settling the Meskhetian Turks there, however it tries to avoid settling them near the border with Turkey. Georgia tries to moderate the social-

economic situation of Javakhk-Armenians and their demand for cultural autonomy. Georgia is ready to accept only those Meskhetian Turks who admit their Georgian origin and allocates them in different regions. Tbilisi avoids the increase of Turkey's influence in the country.

Turkey and Azerbaijan use the Meskhetian Turks' issue for the fulfillment of their geopolitical interests. By resettling the Meskhetian Turks in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Turkey will gain a significant privilege in strengthening its domination in the region. Azerbaijan is interested in the issue primarily in the context of the anti-Armenian policy. Baku hopes in this way to make the Turkish-Azerbaijani blockade of Armenia more complete, and to use this situation to provide a favorable solution to the issue of Artsakh. Russia also uses the Meskhetian Turks' issue to repress Georgia. At the same time, its geopolitical interests contradict those of Turkey. It can be assumed that in case of aggravation of the issue, Russia's position will be mainly related to the nature of relations with Georgia and Turkey at that time.

For Armenia, the Meskhetian Turks' return to Samtskhe-Javakheti may be a serious threat to the country's security. At the same time, the interests of Armenia and Georgia in Meskhetian Turks issue mostly coincide. This can be another political platform, which may further strengthen the Armenian-Georgian cooperation and face the rise of Turkish-Azerbaijani influence in the region.