

**BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND  
RESETTLEMENT:  
THE MESKHETIAN TURKS**

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## List of Abbreviations

CIPDD	The Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CoE	Council of Europe
FMP-OSI	Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute
FSU	Former Soviet Union
FUEN	Federal Union of European Nationalities
GYLA	Georgian Young Lawyers' Association
IOM	International Organization for Migration
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSCE-HCNM	OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities
UGR	Union of Georgian Repatriates
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



## **I. Introduction**

The Meskhetian Turks is a population, which was deported to Central Asia, along with seven other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union during World War II. Whilst other deported people, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachais and Kalmyks were rehabilitated after Stalin's death and allowed to resettle in their pre-deportation territories, three groups were not permitted to return. These included the Crimean Tatars, who were only to be rehabilitated with the demise of the Soviet Union, and have subsequently returned in significant numbers to Crimea in Ukraine over the past 15 years. Another group, the Volga Germans, originally deported from the Soviet Volga German Republic, have largely emigrated to Germany in the post Soviet Era, and do not have territorial aspirations in the Volga region. Hence, the Meskhetian Turks are the last of the 8 deported peoples, for whom rehabilitation and resettlement remains unresolved.

As the last of Stalin's deported people, the Meskhetian Turks today live dispersed throughout several countries: Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Meskhetian Turks face very different living conditions in their countries of settlement, ranging from statelessness and discrimination in southern Russia, to higher levels of socio-economic integration, e.g. in Ukraine, Azerbaijan or in Central Asia. The Meskhetian Turks were originally deported from Georgia, which has since become an independent state, but opposes repatriation of Meskhetian Turks and has effectively blocked efforts to implement the repatriation plans pledged by Meskhetian Turk's organizations and the international community.

Relatively little is known about the current situation of the Meskhetian Turks. This working paper attempts to give an overview of the main aspects of the 'Meskhetian Turkish question', including their history, the population group's current socio-economic situation, their organization and civic life, and the international dimension of the deportation and resettlement issue. The paper also

seeks to identify areas for further research that have not been explored in-depth, but which are crucial for future attempts to address the issue coherently in order to find durable solutions to the issue of return.

This working paper also marks the launch a large-scale research project, “Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks”, which has been made possible through generous support of the Volkswagen Stiftung, to be carried out by the European Centre for Minority Issues from July 2004 to February 2006.

The project aims to produce a comprehensive and comparative cross-border study of today’s Meskhetian Turk communities, and strives to develop an alternative discourse to the framework maintained by international actors addressing the problems of the Meskhetian Turks, which is based on an *a priori* assumption that Meskhetian Turks desire to return to their region of origin. The project, through multi-disciplinary research in the eight above countries, seeks to grasp the complexity of the subject by obtaining a thorough understanding of Meskhetian Turkish identity, migration processes, concepts of ‘home’ and social organization, which can provide the basis for new approaches to find durable solutions to the problems of the Meskhetian Turks.

The findings of the project are envisaged to form a scholarly basis for future national and international endeavors to find durable solutions to the long-lasting problems faced by this disadvantaged population group. The project will yield an authoritative research volume to be published in late 2006.

This paper will briefly examine the history of the people and the events that have largely shaped the present fate of the population group in question. The first section will provide brief country-specific accounts of the conditions Meskhetian Turks are facing in their countries of residence. The second chapter gives an account of Meskhetian Turks’ organizations, including their diverse aspirations and arguments on identity. The third chapter discusses the international process

and the most prominent international attempts to address the issue, including a particular examination of the repatriation issue. The fourth chapter provides a brief review of the existing literature, and explores the deficiencies of data and material available on the subject at present. The final chapter opens a discussion of the discourses on the repatriation issue and identifies their shortfalls, while identifying new approaches for the research to be conducted under the ECMI research project on Meskhetian Turks.



## 1. Who Are the Meskhetian Turks?

The origin of the Meskhetian Turks is a widely disputed and contested issue. There is little agreement as to whether the Meskhetian Turks are in fact ethnic Turks, or rather ethnic Georgians who at some stage in history adopted or were converted to Islam. In historical documents, Meskhetian Turks have variously been labeled as ‘Turks’, ‘Georgian-Sunnis’ and ‘Tatars’ amongst other names. After the deportation of 1944, the terminology used by the locals in Central Asia referred mostly to their original place of settlement in the Caucasus, such as ‘Georgians’ and ‘Azerbaijanis’, whilst the official Soviet documents primarily designated them ‘Turks’, ‘Caucasians’ or even ‘Uzbeks’. In Turkey the term ‘Ahiska Turkleri’ is widely used with reference to Akhaltsikhe, the largest city in their native region.<sup>1</sup>

In Georgia, Soviet and post-Soviet historiography mostly follows the view that Meskhetian Turks are descendants of the ancient Georgian tribe of ‘Meskhet’. The argument goes that strong Turkish cultural influences from the sixteenth through nineteenth century and processes of Islamic conversion separated the Meskhetian Turks from the Christian Georgians.<sup>2</sup> The counter-argument holds that the ancestors of Meskhetian Turks were people from Turkic tribes that settled

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<sup>1</sup> Yunusov Arif, “Meskhetian Turks: Twice Deported People”, Institute of Peace and Democracy, Baku, Azerbaijan, 2000, at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409931.html>. According to some sources, the local Muslims of Samtskhe-Javakheti prior to the Soviet Era referred to themselves as ‘Gurcu oğlu’, i.e. son of Georgians, ‘Gurcu donme’, i.e. Georgian convert, ‘Yerli’, i.e. local, or ‘Ahiska Turks’. Nana Sumbadze, “Muslim Population of Southern Georgia: Challenges to Repatriation” in Gia Nodia (ed.) “Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia”, Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development - CIPDD (Tbilisi, Georgia 2002), 43-44; Binali Aliev, “Meskhetia and the Meskhi (Meskhetian Turks): Their Ethnic and Political Past”, *1 Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies* (2002) 13, 156.

<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Chervonnaya, “The Problem of the Repatriation of the Meskhet-Turks, Appendix to the fact-finding mission of the FUEN delegation to Georgia, November 1998” (ed. FUEN - Federal Union of European Nationalities), 1-2 at [http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/MINELRES/min/meskh/FUEN\\_Meskh.htm](http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/MINELRES/min/meskh/FUEN_Meskh.htm).  
Sumbadze, “Muslim Population...”, 43-44.

in the region between the fifth and seventh century.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that during the eleventh through twelfth and especially from the sixteenth through eighteenth century, when the present-day Georgian lands were under Ottoman rule, the local Turkish tribes were effectively consolidated, thereby creating a new ethnicity: the Meskhetian Turks.<sup>4</sup>

The vernacular spoken by the mostly Sunni Muslim Meskhetian Turks is an East Anatolian dialect of Turkish.<sup>5</sup> Their language, in comparison with the Turkic languages spoken in Central Asia, is very close to Turkish spoken in neighboring Turkey, although it has adopted some new elements due to the changing socio-linguistic circumstances of the population. Culturally, Meskhetian Turks are closely related to Anatolian Turks, with many ‘Caucasian’ features adopted from the Georgians. In addition to their native language, most Meskhetian Turks spoke Georgian before the 1944 deportation.<sup>6</sup>

However important the origin of the Meskhetian Turks may be, the issue of terminology is both politically and emotionally highly charged and is not explored here in length. The term *Meskhetian Turk(s)* applied in this paper is not a statement indicating sympathies towards any of the opposing orientations, and the term is adopted exclusively for convenience purposes. The term refers to the people deported from southwest Georgia, today the region known as Samtskhe-Javakheti, in November 1944. The adoption of this term is made with reference to the 1998 ‘Hague Meeting on issues relating to Meskhetian Turks’, during which all participants for the sake of clarity accepted that the term be used in the meeting’s final document.<sup>7</sup> By applying the term, this paper does not maintain

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<sup>3</sup> Chervonnaya, “The Problem of the Repatriation...”.

<sup>4</sup> Yunusov, “Meskhetian Turks...” at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409937.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Memorial Human Rights Centre, “The Situation of the Turks-Meskhetians – The Violation of the Rights of Forced Migrants and Ethnic Discrimination in Krasnodar Territory” at <http://www.memo.ru/hr/discrim/meshi/ENG/chapter4.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> Chervonnaya, “The Problem of the Repatriation...” at [http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/MINELRES/min/meskh/FUEN\\_Meskh.htm](http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/MINELRES/min/meskh/FUEN_Meskh.htm).

<sup>7</sup> “Document of The Hague Meeting on the issues relating to the Meskhetian Turks 7-10 September 1998”, in “Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security, Appendix One” Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute – FMP OSI, 1998, New York , 66. A significant

that the population group in question is necessarily homogeneous, with uniform ethnonational aspirations or identity, or that the people under discussion even formed a cohesive group in 1944, as it is widely assumed among political actors today.

## 2. A History of Forced Migration

The Stalin Regime's deportation of the Meskhetian Turks, which took place on 15 to 17 November 1944, resulted in the exile of the entire population group, an estimated 90,000-120,000 people. They were resettled mostly in Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan. Many deportees died *en route* or as an indirect consequence of the resettlement.<sup>8</sup> There is no consensus on the reasons for the deportation.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other deported people, who were rehabilitated in the 1950s and 1960s (or the Crimean Tatars who have been allowed to return since the late 1980s), the Meskhetian Turks have neither been rehabilitated, allowed to return to their land of origin, nor had their property returned. In 1956, a few years after Stalin's death, the restrictions on Meskhetian Turks' movement were lifted. In the

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part of the meeting was spent arguing terminological issues, as was also the case at the follow-up meeting in Vienna 1999. At the 1998 meeting, the participants finally agreed to use the term "Meskhetian Turks" in the end document, as long as all the participants' views were recorded.

<sup>8</sup> The official number of deportees from Georgia (dated in 1948) was 95,542 of which most were Meskhetian Turks; 15,432 died *en route* or in exile. Also Kurds (est. 3000) living in the same region as well as Khemsins (est. 1000; Armenians whose ancestors converted to Islam) and Terekeme (a Turkic pastoral nomadic tribe that arrived to the region from eastern Caucasus in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century) were deported. It is worth noting that some people of Azeri and Laz nationality (also Muslim) living in the region were likewise deported. However, after the authorities realised the mistake they were allowed to return (Yunusov "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409932.html#i7>), whereas Meskhetian Turks, Khemsils and Terekeme were not. Extremely little is known about the deported Kurdish, Khemsil and Terekeme populations. However, it is known that in some localities they live together with Meskhetian Turks. Some sources consider the official data regarding the deportation to be depleted (see e.g. Chervonnaya, "The Problem of Repatriation..."; IOM, "Deported Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: the Case of the Meskhetians", (Geneva, Switzerland 1998), 5.

<sup>9</sup> The most commonly held view among historians is that the Meskhetian Turks were seen as potential subversive elements in the region, especially when taking into consideration the proximity of the Turkish border. The official Soviet justification followed the pretexts of the deportation of Chechens, Ingush, Tatars and other peoples, namely alleged "co-operation" with the advancing German Army, although at the closest, the German Army was a hundred miles away from Meskhetia. Some scholars have also argued that Meskhetian Turks would have been a seditious factor in Stalin's alleged plans of invading Turkey; see FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 5.

new era of the Cold War, however, the native lands of the Meskhetian Turks adjacent to the border-zone between the Soviet Union and NATO had become geo-politically important, thus hampering efforts towards repatriation. The deep suspicion of the local Soviet Georgian authorities towards repatriation also translated into a range of technical obstacles. Small numbers of Meskhetian Turks migrated from Central Asia to other Union republics from 1956 onwards, but the vast majority remained in Central Asia until 1989.<sup>10</sup>

The winds of Gorbachev's liberal policies of *glasnost'* and *perestroika* brought further suffering to the Meskhetian Turks. The repatriation of Crimean Tatars to Crimea, which started *en masse* after 1988 and resulted in the repatriation of an estimated 250,000 Crimean Tatars, is by no means comparable to the situation of the Meskhetian Turks. In June 1989, a pogrom broke out against the Meskhetian Turks in the Uzbek section of the Ferghana Valley, and resulted in the deaths of dozens of Meskhetian Turks.<sup>11</sup> The underlying causes for the pogrom are still ambiguous. After intervention by the Soviet Army, the situation was somehow stabilized. However, as a result 17,000 Meskhetian Turks were immediately evacuated by Soviet Army troops, and the events led to a larger outflow of Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan. It is estimated that over 60,000 Meskhetian Turks left the republic after the initial evacuation. Thus a large segment of Uzbekistan's Meskhetian Turks faced a second involuntary resettlement 45 years after Stalin's deportation. The bulk of the displaced Meskhetian Turks settled in Azerbaijan, while many found their ways to different parts of Russia, especially to

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<sup>10</sup> The migration was mainly directed to Russia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In 1974, the Central authorities lifted the restrictions on movement of Meskhetian Turks to their homeland through a special decree. In practice, both Moscow and Tbilisi prevented this from happening; see Yunusov "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409932.html#i7>.

<sup>11</sup> 112 were killed, 1032 were wounded and hundreds of domiciles were destroyed; Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 45. Of the casualties about half were identified as Meskhetian Turks (Personal correspondence with Alexander Osipov in 29.8.2003). The reasons for the pogrom are disputed. Some argue that it was the liberal political tendencies that unleashed Uzbek nationalism, the poor conditions in the over-populated Ferghana Valley that lead to ethnic violence; see FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 6; or just a series of contingent factors that gathered a critical mass resulting in an unplanned outbreak of violence (Personal correspondence with Osipov in 29.8.2003), while others argue that they were orchestrated by the Soviet authorities; see Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409932.html#i9>.

various regions in central and southern Russia, and to Ukraine, while yet others settled in the republics adjacent to Uzbekistan: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup>

## **II. The Meskhetian Turks' Current Demographic and Socio-Political Situation**

Due to a lack of reliable census data on Meskhetian Turks in the former Soviet Republics, and because of inconsistent practices for counting Meskhetian Turks, statistics as to their numbers vary greatly. Most experts estimate the number of Meskhetian Turks currently living in the former Soviet Union at 270-345,000. It is estimated that 90-110,000 live in Azerbaijan, 90-100,000 in Kazakhstan, 50-70,000 in Russia, 25-30,000 in Kyrgyzstan, 10-15,000 in Uzbekistan and 5-10,000 in Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> The Meskhetian Turks living in Russia and Ukraine are mostly migrants and evacuees from the Ferghana Valley. Moreover, it is estimated that over 25,000 Meskhetian Turks reside in Turkey, including those who resettled in the country officially or illegally before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. 12,000 Meskhetian Turks who arrived in Turkey prior to 1997 received status as “national refugees”, securing them access to education, work and healthcare, as well as future prospects for Turkish citizenship.<sup>14</sup>

The present living conditions of the Meskhetian Turks vary significantly according to their place of settlement. The problems are most acute in the Russian section of the Caucasus, especially in Krasnodar Krai, where the local Meskhetian

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<sup>12</sup> 74,000 left Uzbekistan; 40,000 went to Azerbaijan; 17,500 went to Kazakhstan; 16,000 went to Russia. Yunusov, in support of his conspiracy view on the riots, writes that by 1989 Uzbekistan had become the centre of Meskhetian Turks' (political) activities, as at the time 106,000 (or 51% of all) Meskhetian Turks lived in that republic. Yunusov “Meskhetian Turks...”, at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409932.html#i9>.

<sup>13</sup> Yunusov, “Meskhetian Turks...”, at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i11>; Sumbadze, “Muslim Population...”, 47-49.

<sup>14</sup> Sumbadze, “Muslim Population...”, 48; According to another source, Turkey has overall sponsored the resettlement of 5,000 Meskhetian Turks to Turkey since the collapse of the Soviet Union; Anna Matveeva, “The South Caucasus – Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities”, Minority Rights Group International Reports (London, 2002), 21.

Turks face discrimination and a range of bureaucratic obstacles for normal livelihood imposed by the local authorities. Xenophobic regional policies and difficult relations with the local Cossack population have left Meskhetian Turks anxious about their future. Although there are other national minorities in the region, Meskhetian Turks are the primary target for ethnic discrimination. Having been denied refugee status on the one hand, and not being able to gain Russian citizenship or *propiska* (residence permit) on the other, many Meskhetian Turks are left without official status to secure their basic human rights in Krasnodar Krai. This policy makes many Meskhetian Turks de-facto stateless in the Krai. The lack of *propiska* prevents many Meskhetian Turks from working, possessing property or even from registering their marriages officially. Moreover, campaigns of forced expulsion of Meskhetian Turks from the region as well as physical attacks have taken place repeatedly in Krasnodar Krai. Nightly Cossack raids on Meskhetian Turks' homes are also common.<sup>15</sup>

The Meskhetian Turks living in other parts of Russia, notably Belgorod Oblast', Rostov Oblast', Stavropol Krai and Volgograd Oblast' also encounter various degrees of official harassment and antipathy from local populations, but their general conditions are unquestionably better compared those in Krasnodar Krai. In most regions of the Russian Federation, in contrast to Krasnodar Krai, the

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<sup>15</sup> Of the estimated 16-18,000 Meskhetian Turks (0.3% of the districts total population) living in Krasnodar Krai, an estimated 10-12,000 have been denied permanent residence registration leading to refusal of most social, political and legal rights; Alexander Osipov, "The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in Russian Federation", Memorial Human Rights Centre (Moscow 2003), 4-5, 8; see also Memorial "O Soblyudenii Rossiiskoi Federatsiyey Mezhdunarodnoi Konvetsii o Likvidatsiya Vsekh form Rasovoi Diskriminatsii – Pryamaya Diskriminatsiya Meskhetinskikh Turok v Krasnodarskom Krae", (Moscow 2002), at [http://www.memo.ru/hr/discrim/ethnic/docl\\_ind.htm](http://www.memo.ru/hr/discrim/ethnic/docl_ind.htm).

The most detailed and insightful reports of the Meskhetian Turks' situation in Southern Russia are: Sergei Ryazantsev, "Ethnic Migration and Condition of the Meskhetian Turks at the South of Russia", an unpublished report prepared for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Danish Refugee Council, (Stavropol, 2000); Alexander Osipov, "Narusenie Prav Vinuzhdennikh Migrantov I Etnicheskaya Diskriminatsiya v Krasnodarskom Krae – Polozhenie Meskhetinskikh Turkov", Memorial (Moscow Part 1 in 1996, Part 2 in 1999) at <http://www.memo.ru/hr/discrim/meshi/index.htm>. For legal aspects of the issue in Southern Russia see Alexander Osipov, "The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in Russian Federation", Memorial Human Rights Centre (Moscow 2003). See also Anton Popov, "Ethnic Minorities and Migration Processes in Krasnodar Territory", *1 Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies* (2002), 13,

majority of Meskhetian Turks have received Russian citizenship under the 1991 Law on Citizenship.<sup>16</sup>

The conditions for Meskhetian Turks living in other former Soviet republics are also beyond doubt better than those in southern Russia. Due to linguistic and cultural ties and an absence of discrimination from the local authorities, the Meskhetian Turks living in Azerbaijan face few of the problems prevalent in the North across the Caucasus mountain range. In the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the socio-political conditions for the Meskhetian Turks also seem relatively unproblematic. The situation in Uzbekistan is stable for the time being, but the 1989 pogrom has left the local Meskhetian Turk community wary of a possible recurrence.<sup>17</sup> In general, the problems encountered by the Meskhetian Turks in Central Asia and Azerbaijan are similar to those facing the population as a whole, and are mainly economic.

## **1. Georgia**

A USSR Supreme Soviet's decree 135/142 issued in 1956 eased some of the previously imposed restrictions on the formerly deported peoples. As mentioned, the Meskhetian Turks were not rehabilitated, but in the years that followed some Meskhetian Turks were allowed to resettle in Azerbaijan. In 1974, all the officially authorized acts restricting Meskhetian Turks' return were overturned, but in practice the Soviet *propiska* system, southwest Georgia's special status as a border-region and perhaps most importantly the Georgian authorities' unwillingness to receive Meskhetian Turk repatriates, effectively blocked efforts for return to southwest Georgia and Georgia as a whole. From 1974 until the late 1980s, many Georgian dissidents and intellectuals petitioned intensely for Meskhetian Turks' repatriation. As a result, several hundred Meskhetian Turkish families eventually returned to various regions of Georgia (though not to their historic homeland of southwest Georgia) prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>16</sup> Alexander Osipov, "The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in Russian Federation", Memorial Human Rights Centre, (Moscow, 2003), 8.

<sup>17</sup> FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 8-16.

Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first post-Soviet president, initially supported the return of the formerly deported people, but changed his position as communist rule came to an end. After attaining power, Gamsakhurdia's jingoistic policies caused the forced expulsion of many Meskhetian Turk returnees, while many others decided to leave voluntarily.<sup>18</sup> Although his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, changed Georgia's official position *vis-à-vis* repatriation, very little practical progress has been made beyond the pledges of the international community to solve the issue.<sup>19</sup>

The official number of repatriates by the end of 2001 was 644 persons. However, according to UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, no new Meskhetian Turks have settled in Georgia since the end of 2000.<sup>20</sup> No one knows the numbers of those who have arrived in Georgia illegally – they are a group with poor prospects for obtaining residence documents and civil rights. According to some estimates there are an estimated total of 1,000 Meskhetian Turks in Georgia.<sup>21</sup> A range of preconditions set by the Georgian authorities has hampered the process of repatriation and dispirited most potential resettlers. Of the mentioned 644 Meskhetian Turks who have officially returned after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and decided to stay so far, 32 remained without legal status in 2001.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 46.

<sup>19</sup> Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i15>.

<sup>20</sup> UNHCR Global Report 2001 – Georgia, 383, 384; UNHCR Global Report 2002 - Georgia; telephone interview with UNHCR/Protection Unit, Tbilisi, Georgia, 30.7.2003.

<sup>21</sup> Nino Gertsmava, "Meskhetians Make a New Life in Georgia", Institute for War & Peace Reporting Caucasus Reporting Service CRS No. 199 at [http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau\\_200310\\_199\\_5\\_eng.txt](http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200310_199_5_eng.txt).

<sup>22</sup> UNHCR Global Report 2001 – Georgia, 383; Citizenship was granted only after combined pressure from UNHCR and OSCE to the Georgian government (Matveeva, "The South Caucasus...", 21). According to a report by the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe in Sep 2001 the number of returnees to Georgia was 655 of which 570 had become citizens of Georgia, at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2Fdocuments%2Fworkingdocs%2Fdoc01%2Fedoc9191.htm>. According to Marat Baratashvili, the chairman of the Georgian Repatriates Union, a single largest Meskhetian Turkish organization in Georgia, the population group's overall number in the republic is around 700, of which 21 remain stateless (interview with Marat Baratashvili in Tbilisi, Georgia 11.11.2003).



Indeed, some of the repatriates have left again due to technical obstacles imposed by the local authorities, including prolonged bureaucratic procedures to obtain residence/work permits and citizenship, and prerequisites to obtain Georgian surnames. The main areas of the Meskhetian Turkish resettlement are the regions of Imereti, Guria and the capital Tbilisi. Only about eight families are known to have resettled in the native territories of Samtskhe-Javakheti.<sup>23</sup> The lack of integration programs and language tuition has made it increasingly difficult for Meskhetian Turks to integrate into society. The lack of Georgian language skills caused problems among the repatriate community with respect to their integration into Georgian society. Many of these obstacles are seen as deliberate attempts by the authorities to prevent a larger repatriation. Georgian public opinion is predominantly against Meskhetian Turks' resettlement to Georgia and popular prejudices seem, to a large extent, to guide the course of debate over the repatriation issue. This is especially the case in Samtskhe-Javakheti, making the promotion of resettlement a daunting task for any politician in the country.

Presently, the obstacles and opposition to repatriation of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia and Samtskhe-Javakheti can be described as two-fold: firstly, the Georgian government has shown great reluctance to agree on the principles for repatriation of Meskhetian Turks in the Republic and has introduced a range of technical obstacles to impede the process. Secondly, popular attitudes in Georgia at large, and especially among the largely ethnic Armenian populated region of Samtskhe-Javakheti (its clear already from the 'Georgia at large'), seem to be unfavorably disposed towards any possible repatriation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Indra Oeverland, "Defusing a Ticking Bomb? Disentangling International Organizations in Samtskhe-Javakheti", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, NUPI Working paper No 646, at <http://www.nupi.no/IPS/filestore/646.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> According to a survey conducted in Tbilisi in 1999, 46.4% of interviewed were against repatriation of Meskhetian Turks in Georgia, 44% supported only a return of deported population who consider themselves Georgians, while only 6.6% thought that all deportees had a right to return; Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 55; According to another survey (conducted in Tbilisi and in the regions of Guria and Imereti), Georgians' attitude towards Meskhetian Turks improved upon actually meeting some of them. The survey also concluded that national identity of returnees is an integral part of the debate over the repatriation (Nana Sumbadze & George Tarkhan-

Samtskhe-Javakheti's geopolitical location further perplexes the issue of repatriation. The borders with both Armenia and Turkey increase the region's political and emotional charge among the local population, the political elite of the region, and the central government.<sup>25</sup> The promotion of the unpopular issue of repatriation in the Republic's domestic politics can gravely damage politicians' future in the power structures. This is especially the case in Samtskhe-Javakheti, where politicians are expected to vigorously oppose any repatriation to the region.

Most of the deported Meskhetian Turks were exiled from the western part of today's Samtskhe-Javakheti region, i.e. Samtskhe. To repopulate the formerly Meskhetian Turk inhabited lands, an estimated 30,000 ethnic Georgians were forcefully resettled from the Zemo, Imreti and Racha regions of Georgia, thus changing the ethno-demographic composition of the region.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, ethnic Armenians predominantly populate Javakheti, from which only some 8,000 Meskhetian Turks were deported. The majority of those Meskhetian Turks who may wish to repatriate to their native land are anticipated to desire a move back to villages in Samtskhe. However, it seems that Armenians and Georgians alike oppose repatriation to Samtskhe, and repatriation, without confidence-building measures, is likely to increase the already tense inter-ethnic relations in the region. Nevertheless, most current assumptions on Samtskhe-Javakheti's population's attitudes are not based on scientific facts but popular

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Mouravi, "Repatriation and Adaptation of Deported Meskhetians: Society and State in Supranational Context", Centre for Geopolitical and Regional Studies (Tbilisi, Georgia 2001). The number of repatriates interviewed in Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi was 154 persons. At the time the number returnees was 644. The main concerns of the Georgian public regarding a possible repatriation are: "Turkisation" of Samtskhe-Javakheti, or secessionist tendencies, ethnic tension in the region (widely based on historical memory), comparisons with Georgia's internally displaced persons (i.e. Why shouldn't the problem of IDPs from South Ossetia and Abkhazia be solved first?), property issues and economic adversity in Georgia (for more in detail see Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 56-58).

<sup>25</sup> See Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 55. 95% of Javakheti's population are Armenian; Matveeva, "The South Caucasus...", 20.

<sup>26</sup> Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409932.html#i7>

beliefs that have been widely reproduced in literature on the issue. In fact, very little is known about the popular attitudes in the region.

## **2. Azerbaijan**

The total number of Meskhetian Turks in Azerbaijan is 90-110,000 of whom an estimated 48,000 are refugees from Uzbekistan. Meskhetian Turks first came to Azerbaijan in 1957 from Central Asia. According to the 1989 Soviet census, there were 17,700 Meskhetian Turks in Azerbaijan, of whom only 4% lived in urban areas. Some 5,000 are believed to have arrived from Russia during the 1990s, and a few hundreds arrived from Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan proper during the 1991-1994 war.

Most of the first wave of Meskhetian Turkish refugees from the Ferghana Valley settled in the Saatli and Sabirabad region and the regions of Khachmaz, Beylagan and Baku.<sup>27</sup> Today there are Meskhetian Turkish communities in 46 different regions of Azerbaijan. As a rule, those Meskhetian Turks who have resided in Azerbaijan for the longest are in the best socio-economic position. Due to linguistic and cultural similarities, Meskhetian Turks live in relative harmony with the local Azeris. This partly explains the community's considerable size in the republic, though Azerbaijan's proximity to Georgia has also attracted Meskhetian Turkish migration to the country. In general, there is no official discrimination against the Meskhetian Turks living in Azerbaijan. According to the republic's 'Law on Citizenship' of 1998 those Meskhetian Turks with status as refugees or IDPs (internally displaced persons) are eligible to obtain Azeri citizenship. However, according to some sources, most of the Meskhetian Turks have not acquired citizenship and many of the Meskhetian Turkish refugees and IDPs do not receive the free social service, health care and education they are

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Personal correspondence with Yunusov in 23.9.2003.

entitled to according to the 1999 'Law on Social Protection of Forcibly Displaced Persons and Refugees.'<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Ukraine

An estimated 10,000 Meskhetian Turks reside in Ukraine, constituting the country's youngest national minority. The majority arrived to Ukraine in 1989-1990 following ethnic persecution in the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan; most others immigrated later to re-unite with their relatives. The Meskhetian Turks live almost exclusively in rural areas scattered over twelve different regions, with the majority, according to the 2001 census in Ukraine, in the regions of Donetsk (about 1,700), Kyiv, Mykolayiv (about 1,000) and Kherson (about 1,000).<sup>29</sup>

Ninety percent had lived in rural areas prior to their arrival and only a tenth were born in Georgia before the Meskhetian Turks' initial forced resettlement. An estimated 20% have arrived via different regions and countries from Uzbekistan to Ukraine (mostly through Voronezh, Kursk, Stavropol and Krasnodar regions in the Russian Federation as well as Azerbaijan). According to a sociological survey in 1998 almost all of the local Meskhetian Turks considered their living standards in Uzbekistan twice as high as compared to Ukraine. By 1998, 89.4% had received Ukrainian citizenship, the rest have had few problems in acquiring *propiska*, and some are citizens of Azerbaijan, Russia or Uzbekistan. According to a study conducted in 2001, the majority (56.4%) of the Meskhetian Turks have not experienced discrimination or injustice because of their ethnic origin, whereas the rest (43,6%) have experienced various kinds of popular discrimination.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> FMP OSI, Meskhetian Turks..., 13. "World Refugee Survey 2003 Country Report", U.S. Committee for Refugees, Information by Country at <http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/europe/2003/azerbaijan.cfm>.

<sup>29</sup> Olena Malinovska, "Meskhetian Turks in Ukraine" (Kiev, Ukraine, 1999), a report based on a sociological survey on Meskhetian Turks in Ukraine conducted in 1998 (1255 persons, or an estimated 12% of the researchers' assumed 10,000 strong Meskhetian Turkish population were surveyed for the study). Personal correspondence with Malinovska 9.10.2003.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

#### 4. Russia

An estimated 50-70,000 Meskhetian Turks reside in Russia, of whom 40-60,000 are assumed to be forced migrants from Uzbekistan. 17,000 Meskhetian Turks were evacuated from Ferghana Valley to Central Russia; however, due to the unfamiliar climate and overall difficult conditions 6-7,000 Meskhetian Turks have left Russian cities such as Oryol, Tver and Smolensk, mostly to other regions of Russian and Azerbaijan. Approximately 10,000 Meskhetians, who already lived in the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic before 1989, possessed *propiskas*. For those Meskhetian Turks who have resettled to Russia from Uzbekistan since 1989 no long-term integration programs have been implemented.<sup>31</sup> At present, Krasnodar Krai remains the only region where Meskhetian Turks have been widely denied *propiska* and citizenship. Meskhetian Turks live almost exclusively in the rural areas of the Russian Federation and communities of more than 100 households are rare.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Osipov, (1996; 1999; 2003; personal correspondence with Osipov); Sergei Ryazantsev, “Ethnic Migration and Condition of the Meskhetian Turks at the South of Russia”, an unpublished report prepared for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Danish Refugee Council, (Stavropol, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> For recommendations and concerns for the Russian Federation regarding the Meskhetian Turkish population in Krasnodar Krai and Cossack organizations in the country, see United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 62<sup>nd</sup> session 3-21 March 2003 “Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Russian Federation 21/03/2003. (CERD/C/62/CO/7)”, at [http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/CERD.C.62.CO.7.En?Open\\_document](http://www.unhcr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/CERD.C.62.CO.7.En?Open_document); On the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the Russian Federation see “Council of Europe Committee of Ministers Resolution ResCMN(2003)9 10.7.2003”, at [https://wcm.coe.int/rsi/common/renderers/rend\\_standard.jsp?DocId=51325&SecMode=1&SiteName=cm&Lang=en](https://wcm.coe.int/rsi/common/renderers/rend_standard.jsp?DocId=51325&SecMode=1&SiteName=cm&Lang=en); and Council of Europe’s “Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the protection of National Minorities – Opinion on the Russian Federation 13.9.2002” at [http://www.coe.int/T/E/human\\_rights/Minorities/2\\_FRAMEWORK\\_CONVENTION\(MONITORING\)/2\\_Monitoring\\_mechanism/4.Opinions\\_of\\_the\\_Advisory\\_Committee/1.Country\\_specific\\_opinions/ACFC\\_INF\\_OP\\_I\(2003\)005%20E%20Opinion%20Russian%20Federation.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/T/E/human_rights/Minorities/2_FRAMEWORK_CONVENTION(MONITORING)/2_Monitoring_mechanism/4.Opinions_of_the_Advisory_Committee/1.Country_specific_opinions/ACFC_INF_OP_I(2003)005%20E%20Opinion%20Russian%20Federation.asp#TopOfPage); European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (CoE) country reports (1&2) on the Russian Federation: First “Country-report” on 26 Jan 1999, at [http://www.coe.int/T/E/human%5Frigh%5Fecri/5%2DArchives/1%2DECRI%27s%5Fwork/1%2DCountry%5Fby%5Fcountry/Russian%5FFederation/Russian\\_Federation\\_CBC\\_1.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/T/E/human%5Frigh%5Fecri/5%2DArchives/1%2DECRI%27s%5Fwork/1%2DCountry%5Fby%5Fcountry/Russian%5FFederation/Russian_Federation_CBC_1.asp#TopOfPage) and “Second country-report” in 13.11.2001, at [http://www.coe.int/t/E/human\\_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-bycountry\\_approach/Russian\\_Federation/Russian\\_Federation\\_CBC\\_2.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/E/human_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-bycountry_approach/Russian_Federation/Russian_Federation_CBC_2.asp); and for a detailed

Krasnodar Krai: 16-18,000 Meskhetian Turks live in the region, or 0.3% of the Krai's total population. An estimated 3,000 arrived prior to 1989. After the Ferghana Valley programs, an estimated 13,600 arrived from Uzbekistan. 10-12,000 people have been denied *propiska* by the local authorities, making the population effectively stateless and resulting in the absence of basic civil and human rights, i.e. employment, personal documents, social/medical benefits, property ownership and right to higher education and the registration of marriages. In general, the local authorities and the local media depict the Meskhetian Turks as illegal immigrants, or as a transit-population that poses a threat to the region. The Meskhetian Turks have also become the target of physical harassment and violence exerted by local Cossacks. Overall, the Meskhetian Turks' situation and living conditions in Krasnodar Krai are by far the worst in comparison to other regions and republics with Meskhetian Turk populations.<sup>33</sup>

Stavropol Krai: 3,500-5,000 Meskhetian Turks reside in the Krai. Some twenty Meskhetian Turkish families arrived in the Stavropol Krai in the late 1970s and early 1980s from Central Asia, invited by the local authorities to work in the agricultural sector. After the events of 1989 in the Ferghana Valley, an estimated 2,000 people arrived from Uzbekistan. Furthermore, around 2,700 Meskhetian Turks have arrived from the Chechen Republic to the Krai in 1994-1996, most of whom have been registered as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Interestingly some of the local Meskhetian Turkish activists and leaders are female.

Furthermore, there are an estimated 15-20,000 Meskhetian Turks in Rostov oblast'; 5,000-5,500 in the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria; 4,000-5,500 in

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overview of the situation in Russia, see Alexander Osipov, "The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in Russian Federation", Memorial Human Rights Centre, (Moscow 2003).

<sup>33</sup> The most detailed and insightful reports of the Meskhetian Turks' situation in Southern Russia are: Ryazantsev (2000); Osipov (1996, 1999, 2003); for legal aspects of the issue in Southern Russia see Osipov: (2003); See also Anton Popov, "Ethnic Minorities and Migration Processes in Krasnodar Territory", *Central Asia and the Caucasus Journal of Social and Political Studies* (2002) 13 1

Belgorod oblast'; 4,500-5,000 in Volgograd oblast'; 3,500-5,000 in Voronezh oblast'; and smaller Meskhetian Turkish populations in the oblast's of Kursk, Astrakhan, Orenburg, Oryol, Tula (100-200), Tversk and Smolensk, and the republics of Kalmykia and Chechnya (approx. 1,300). Some of the Meskhetian Turkish populations of the Volgograd, Kursk and Belgorod oblast's have been forcefully resettled three times (1944/Georgia, 1989/Uzbekistan and 1990s/Georgia during Gamsakhurdia's rule), and predominantly consider themselves Georgians. The bulk of Tversk and Smolensk oblast's Meskhetian Turkish population has moved from the areas where they were initially resettled after the Ferghana Valley pogrom, mostly to the southern regions of the Russian Federation. Tula oblast' provides an interesting example of good interethnic relations, where the local population even take pride in their small Meskhetian Turkish population. Contrary to the myths that Cossacks and Meskhetian Turks are unable to live together in harmony, Volgograd and Rostov stand out with largely harmonious interethnic relations. The Meskhetian Turks in Kabardino-Balkaria are largely economic migrants from the 1950-70s with a smaller post-1989 forced migrant population from Uzbekistan.

## **5. Uzbekistan**

It is commonly believed that Uzbekistan today has a 10-15,000 strong Meskhetian Turkish population. Although at present the local Meskhetian Turks' conditions in the republic are relatively stable, the ethnic strife of 1989 has left many wary of a possible recurrence. Economically, many of those who stayed have recuperated their losses. Many have chosen assimilation to the dominant Uzbek culture and adopted Uzbek and Russian languages, rather than promoting original identities and language. Many Meskhetian Turks see President Islam Karimov's authoritarian rule as a guarantor of interethnic harmony and political stability in the country. Although cultural activities – including cultural centers – for national minorities are permitted by the government, pledges are not matched with funding, leaving the Meskhetian Turkish community largely in limbo.

Furthermore, many local Meskhetian Turks are registered as Azeris, Uzbeks or Turks, making it impossible to determine their exact numbers in the republic, but also, ironically, giving many better prospects for employment than a genuine declaration of identity. Unlike in most other republics, Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan have become largely urbanized, and undertake many entrepreneurial activities. This has translated into relative affluence, which, on the other hand, has made the Uzbek government reluctant to accommodate any outward migration of Meskhetian Turks from the republic. The community's mobilization is frail, due largely to the aforementioned anxiety of Meskhetian Turks to assert their ethnicity, and also to the relatively high rate of interethnic marriages. This, coupled with the lack of any political leverage in the republic's domestic politics has left the local Meskhetian Turks balancing between a fragile interethnic tranquility and efforts to maintain their diminishing cultural traditions and language. Otherwise, very little is known about the Meskhetian Turkish population in Uzbekistan.<sup>34</sup>

## **6. Kazakhstan**

An estimated 90-100,000 Meskhetian Turks reside in Kazakhstan, mostly in the southern regions of Shymkent and Almaty bordering Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Over 28,000 deportees from Georgia were resettled to Kazakhstan. More than 17,000 arrived to the republic from Uzbekistan immediately after the 1989 ethnic violence in Ferghana Valley. In general, very little is known about the Meskhetian Turkish population in Kazakhstan.<sup>35</sup>

## **7. Kyrgyzstan**

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<sup>34</sup> Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i17>; OSI FMP, "Meskhetian Turks...", 14-16; OSI FMP (1998) estimates the number of Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan at 40 thousand, but also acknowledges that it is very difficult to obtain any data apart from vague estimates.

<sup>35</sup> Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i2>.



According to a census carried out in Kyrgyzstan, 33,327 Meskhetian Turks, or 0,7% of the whole population, lived in the republic of Kyrgyzstan in 1999. The main areas of their settlement are the regions of Batkensk, Dzhahalal-Abadsk, Osh, Talass, Chuis and Bishkek. Otherwise it is estimated that the population figure today is between 25,000-30,000.<sup>36</sup> There are two distinct groups of Meskhetian Turks living in the republic: firstly, those who were deported from Georgia in 1944 (over 10,500) and their descendants. This group resides mainly in the Osh region bordering Uzbekistan. The second group consists of those who arrived later, especially refugees from neighboring Uzbekistan after 1989. According to some sources over 12,000 arrived in the country after the events in the Ferghana Valley.<sup>37</sup> Otherwise, very little is known about the Meskhetian Turkish population in Kyrgyzstan.

## **8. Turkey**

It is estimated that there are 25,000-30,000 Meskhetian Turks living in Turkey. There are two main groups: Meskhetian Turks who arrived from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century until Stalin's repression and World War II from Georgia, and their descendants; and those who have arrived from various former Soviet republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The latter constitutes a more distinguishable group and a majority, while the former is rather indistinguishable as a group and has largely assimilated into local society. Moreover, many amongst the latter group have arrived to study or have come illegally, making estimates of the total Meskhetian Turkish population in Turkey very difficult. Some sources estimate the total number of Meskhetian Turks to be closer to 30,000 rather than 25,000.

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<sup>36</sup> Correspondence with IOM in Kyrgyzstan; Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i13>.

<sup>37</sup> Personal correspondence with the Center of Sociological Research of the Kyrgyz National Academy of Science, Biskek, Kyrgyzstan in 13.10.2003.

Many of the pre-1944 immigrants resettled in the southern (Hatay – border with Syria) and eastern (Agri – border with Iran and Iğdir – border with Armenia) regions of the country. Post-Soviet Meskhetian Turkish migrants have also resettled in the eastern regions (Iğdir and Erzurum), but also in western (Bursa and Inegöl) Turkey and urban areas in general.

In 1992, the Turkish government passed a law that allowed the resettlement of 500 Meskhetian Turkish families from Russia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the country. The resettlement program was accomplished in 1994 and contrary to initial plans, the government ceased to support Meskhetian Turkish migration to Turkey largely because of fears of prompting an unmanageable volume of immigration from Central Asia.

The 12,000 who arrived before 1997 are entitled to the status of “national refugee” that guarantees them access to healthcare and education, prospects for citizenship, and working permits.<sup>38</sup> As a whole, integration has been relatively successful; nevertheless, many have returned to their country of previous residence for various reasons, including difficulties adapting to the relatively modern lifestyle in Turkey and difficulties in finding work. In the eyes of some traditional Meskhetian Turkish communities in the former Soviet republics, Turkey is seen as somewhat ‘morally corrupt’, a country where traditional values are declining. On the other hand, many of those who have arrived in the country appreciate the relative security and stability in Turkey and have given up further demands for resettlement to Georgia. The major problems facing most Meskhetian Turkish communities in Turkey are economic. Jobs are hard to find due to the fact that (post-) Soviet educational achievements are not recognized and also because of the prevailing economic conditions in the country. Housing and land are also in many cases beyond their reach making many feel like “long-term tourists” and adding to their frustration. The Turkish government provides

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<sup>38</sup> Sumbadze, “Muslim Population...”, 48.

the communities with little, if any, financial support, but on the other hand it does not prosecute Meskhetian Turks who live illegally in the country.<sup>39</sup>

### III. Meskhetian Turks' Organizations

In terms of organizational life, the most prominent Meskhetian Turkish organizations have been the International Society *Vatan* ("Homeland" in Turkish) and *Hsna* ("Salvation" in Georgian), which was succeeded by the Union of Georgian Repatriates when the latter ceased to exist in 1999.

*Vatan* was established in 1990 (registered in 1991) and is the largest of the organizations, although the degree to which it enjoys wide support among Meskhetian Turks is disputed. In some communities, *Vatan* is not even known. The organization has two main goals: the formal recognition of the unjust deportation of 1944 and official permission to return to the 'homeland'.<sup>40</sup> Its main office is based in Moscow with representations in Krasnodar Krai and Azerbaijan. It has been accused of advocating repatriation at the expense of overlooking more acute problems related to the integration of Meskhetian Turks into the societies where they currently live.<sup>41</sup> *Vatan* suffered maybe its most serious setback in June 2003 when its founder and director Yusuf Sarvarov passed away, putting the future of the organization, according to some accounts, in uncertainty.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Interviews with the chairman, Murtaza Hocaoglu, and members of Ahiska Refugee Turks' Cultural and Social Assistance Association in Bursa; the vice-chairman of The Federation of Ahiska Turks' Associations, Hamit Muzafferoğlu, and other committee members in 3.9.2003 in Bursa, Turkey; Interview with the chairman of Ahiska Türkleri Yardimlasma ve Dayanisma Dernegi (Ahiska Turks' Association for Assistance and Solidarity), Mevlüt Temindaroğlu in Bursa; Interview with the chairman of Ahiska Turks' Educational, Cultural and Social Assistance Association, Rüstem Mürseloğlu, in 1.9.2003 in Istanbul, Turkey. Yunusov, "Meskhetian Turks...", at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409933.html#i13>; Ali Gürlek, "Ahiska Türklüğü", at <http://moyarodina.sitemynet.com/ali/aliindex.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 41.

<sup>41</sup> Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 52.

<sup>42</sup> Correspondence with the vice-chairman of the International Society – *Vatan*, Fuad Pepinov in 17.7.2003. Correspondence with Alexander Osipov in 29.8.2003.

*Hsna*, which was founded in Kabardino-Balkaria (North Caucasus, Russia) in 1992 with the assistance of the Georgian government, mostly enjoyed support in Georgia until 1999 when it ceased to exist. It also maintained representatives in Krasnodar Krai. *Hsna* strongly advocated repatriation, not only to Samtskhe-Javakheti as *Vatan* does, but also to Georgia in general. Unlike *Vatan*, *Hsna* posed no demands for special cultural rights upon possible repatriation. *Hsna* held the view that Meskhetian Turks are ethnic Georgians who converted to Islam, while *Vatan* believes that Meskhetian Turks are essentially ethnic Turks. At present, the Union of Georgian Repatriates (UGR) based in Tbilisi, is the main Meskhetian Turkish NGO. It advocates repatriation and helps the few repatriates to adapt and promote their rights in Georgia. Its activities include conflict prevention and interethnic tolerance-promoting projects funded by the Council of Europe. It also organizes some legal assistance and Georgian language tuition for the returnees.<sup>43</sup>

*Vatan*, *Hsna* and UGR have agreed on the need for the Georgian government to introduce a legislative framework that could facilitate repatriation.<sup>44</sup> However, the dispute over the origins of the Meskhetian Turks as well as disagreement over the ethnopolitical status of the returnees have estranged the organizations and, therefore, considerably weakened their common cause. The lack of consensus on these key issues has also effectively deprived Meskhetian Turk communities of a united and effective vanguard to promote claims of repatriation and human rights.

Apart from *Vatan*, UGR and *Hsna* there are and have been other Meskhetian Turk organizations in Georgia. They are mostly active in promoting the Meskhetian Turks' cause in Georgia and assisting the local community in Georgia. Presently active organizations include *Union PATRIA* and *Youth Union of Deported Meskhetians 'Meskheti'* based in Tbilisi.<sup>45</sup> In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, local

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<sup>43</sup> Interview with Marat Baratashvili, the chairman of UGR, in Tbilisi, Georgia in 11.11.2003.

<sup>44</sup> FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 45.

<sup>45</sup> Correspondence with Marat Baratashvili – Chairman of UGR. See also Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 52.

Meskhetian Turks come together in the *Meskhetian Turks' Cultural Centre. Umit* ("Hope" in Turkish) was based in Krasnodar Krai in Southern Russia and endorsed migration of Meskhetian Turks to Turkey. However, it ceased to exist in 1999. Kyrgyzstan has two organizations, the *Association of Turks Residing in Kyrgyzstan* and the *International Federation of Ahiska Turks of the CIS Countries*. Like *Umit*, they support resettlement of Meskhetian Turks to Turkey.

Turkey has, according to some accounts, almost twenty Meskhetian Turkish organizations and associations, of which around fifteen are more active and influential. In August 2003, *Ahiska Türk Dernekleri Federasyon* (The Federation of Ahiska Turks' Associations) was founded by nine organizations in an attempt to consolidate the diversified Meskhetian Turks' organizational settings in Turkey. The Federation is based in Bursa, which hosts the bulk of the country's Meskhetian Turkish population. Bursa is also the home to Turkey's single biggest Meskhetian Turkish organization, *Ahiskali Göçmen Türkleri Kültür ve Sosyal Yardimlasma Derneği* (Ahiska Refugee Turks' Cultural and Social Assistance Association). The official line of most of the organizations is to consider themselves as 'özbeöz' ('genuine Turks'), who have returned to their 'homeland', i.e. Turkey/Anatolia. This discourse is challenged by some, including an Istanbul-based *Ahiska Türkleri Eğitim, Kültür ve Sosyal Yardimlasma Derneği* (Ahiska Turks' Educational, Cultural and Social Assistance Association) which maintains repatriation to southwest Georgia as its main goal. Apart from being maybe the most active Meskhetian Turkish publisher in the country – productions include a bi-annual journal and film production – the Association is particularly active in promoting higher-education among the Meskhetian Turkish youth in an attempt to foster an intelligentsia for the community, something that it has traditionally lacked.<sup>46</sup> Most of the organizations, including the Federation, work to assist newcomers in adaptation and practical matters.

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<sup>46</sup> Interviews on 1-3.9.2003 with the Chairman, Murtaza Hocaoglu, and members of Ahiska Refugee Turks' Cultural and Social Assistance Association in Bursa; the vice-chairman of the Federation of Ahiska Turks' Associations, Hamit Muzafferoğlu, and other committee members in Bursa; the chairman of Ahiska Turks' Association for Assistance and Solidarity, Mevlüt

In sum, the organizational setting of Meskhetian Turks is geographically dispersed and divided by different orientations. The primary problem of the Meskhetian Turk organizations is a lack of cohesiveness and co-operation. Well organized, a group of 270-335,000 people could potentially wield significant influence as an advocacy group. Although the goals of these organizations vary significantly, there is certainly common ground for them to work in closer co-operation, thus making more tangible progress on issues of concern to the Meskhetian Turks. While there seems to be consensus among the organizations on Georgia's need to establish a clear and functioning legal framework for the repatriation, the organizations exhibit very little concord or co-operation on almost all other issues.

#### **IV. The International Dimension of the Meskhetian Turkish Issue until 1998**

From the collapse of the Soviet Union through 1996, the issue of the Meskhetian Turks received almost no international attention, as the international community in this period focused on the violent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in the former Soviet Union. The May 1996 *“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”* (also known as the ‘CIS Conference’), organized jointly by OSCE, UNHCR and IOM (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and International Organization for Migration) write in full here if you want to, see below), however, addressed the problem of involuntarily displaced people, refugees and returnees in the countries of the CIS. The declaration of the Conference stated that

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Temindaroğlu in Bursa; the chairman of Ahiska Turks’ Educational, Cultural and Social Assistance Association, Rüstem Mürseloğlu, in Istanbul.

“(p)ersons belonging to formerly deported peoples have the right to voluntary return, including ensuring transit travel, uninhibited transportation of property which belongs to them and assistance in integrating in their historical homeland.”<sup>47</sup>

Hence, the international community formally recognized the Meskhetian Turk resettlement issue, and although it yielded few concrete results, it was the first step towards international involvement. In 1998, reports from IOM (you have already used it without explanation, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) brought wider international attention to the issue.<sup>48</sup>

### **1. The Hague and Vienna Meetings of 1998 and 1999**

On 7 to 10 September 1998, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (OSCE-HCNM), Max van der Stoep, in cooperation with UNHCR and the Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute (FMP-OSI) hosted consultations on issues relating to Meskhetian Turks. Representatives of the governments of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as representatives of Meskhetian Turks living in these countries and representatives of the international organization *Vatan* took part in the meeting. To a great extent the discussion was side-tracked by a heated debate on the issue of terminology. As a result of the meeting, however, the term “Meskhetian Turks” was adopted by

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<sup>47</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”, (CISCONF/1996/5 11 June 1996), (Geneva, 30 - 31 May 1996), at <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+rwwBmem8Z69wwwnwwwwwwwhFqA72ZR0gRfZNtFqrpGdBnqBAFqA72ZR0gRfZNCfQmgfMzmAwwwwwwDzmxwwwwww/opensdoc.htm>

<sup>48</sup> IOM, “Focus on the Meskhetians of the Former Soviet Union – the Deported People That History Has Forgotten”, *IOM News*(1998) No: 2 is a general report on the Meskhetian Turks recognizing that “relatively little is known about the Meskhetians in exile” Human Rights Watch, “Russian Federation: Ethnic Discrimination in Southern Russia”, (D1008); The report recognizes human rights violations and acts of violence against Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai., (August 1998), at <http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia/>. FUEN, “The Problem of the Repatriation of the Meskhets-Turks”, (Nov 1998); The FUEN publication is a more extensive report on Meskhetian Turks issue with regard to the repatriation.

all participants to be used in the meeting's end document. Although Georgian representatives preferred the term 'Meskhetians', referring to the alleged Georgian ethnicity of the population group, the delegates agreed on using the term 'Meskhetian Turks' for the purposes of the document only. Today, the term 'Meskhetians' is commonly used in Georgia, while in other countries of settlement in the FSU, the group is usually designated 'Meskhetian Turks'.

The meeting managed to address a number of additional issues, such as: exchanging more information on the situation of the Meskhetian Turks among all concerned parties; attracting the attention of the international community to the issue; emphasizing the importance of full political rehabilitation; respect for human rights; decreasing the number of stateless Meskhetian Turks; developing programs of ethnic tolerance in the regions of Meskhetian Turks' residence and the necessity to follow the principles laid down in the 1996 CIS Conference.<sup>49</sup> Another important goal was to set up a framework for future activities related to the issue. In its publication following the Hague consultations, the Open Society Institute called for extensive demographic research to be conducted in order to help define Meskhetian Turk communities, thereby avoiding policy-making based on vague estimates. Such research largely remains to be conducted.

A follow-up meeting to The Hague consultations took place the following year in Vienna. The second informal consultation (15 to 17 March 1999) were also hosted and organized by OSCE, UNHCR and FMP OSI. All the bodies that were represented in the Hague meeting were present in addition to government officials from Turkey, Ukraine, USA and the Council of Europe. The questions of rehabilitation, repatriation and regularization of Meskhetian Turks' status in their places of residence were brought up at the meeting.<sup>50</sup> However, the consultations did not result in any concrete measures. The delegation from the Russian

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<sup>49</sup> "Document of The Hague Meeting on the Issues Relating to the Meskhetian Turks" in FMP OSI, "Meskhetian Turks...", 66-70

<sup>50</sup> OSCE "Annual Report 1999 on OSCE Activities", (1 December 1998 - 31 October 1999), at <http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep99e.htm>



Federation refused any commitments with regard to the Meskhetian Turks' legal integration into Russian society. Moreover, it was argued by the same delegation that the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia should be the primary goal for all efforts. Nonetheless the meeting did not lead to any concrete action plan for the Russian Federation.<sup>51</sup>

Georgia's delegation pledged to solve the question of citizenship for returnees by the end of 1999 and announced the establishment of a State Committee, or Repatriation Service, in the near future to address issues relating to the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks. Although the committee indeed was established the following month, it can be argued that it had more to do with Georgia's aspirations to join the Council of Europe than a desire to effectively solve the issue of repatriation. It seems that obligations undertaken by the Georgian government routinely do not translate into action, and technicalities frequently inhibit implementation of laws in issues related to Meskhetian Turks. This has also been the case for returnees opting for Georgian citizenship.

Georgia applied for membership of the Council of Europe in 1996 and shortly after the Vienna consultations on the Meskhetian Turk issue, in April 1999, Georgia was accepted as the forty-first member of the organization. The Council of Europe's involvement at the Vienna consultations on the Meskhetian Turk issue was a part of its strategy to monitor and encourage Georgia to fulfill the stipulated obligations and conditions for its membership, i.e. conditionality.

The participants in the Vienna meeting welcomed invitations by Azerbaijan and Georgia to hold follow-up consultations in late 1999 and mid-2000 in Azerbaijan and Georgia respectively. However, these consultations never materialized. The policy window that had opened with the Hague consultations closed abruptly, as the international community's attention shifted to more pressing issues. The

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<sup>51</sup> Osipov, "The Situation and Legal Status...", 8.

beginning of the Kosovo crisis in the following month marked the suspension of further consultations and effectively meant a return to the pre-1998 situation.

Many of the steps forward that were taken on the issue can arguably be attributed to the initial efforts of the OSCE-HCNM, Max van der Stoep. With his retirement from the post in 2000, one of the most prominent advocates for a solution to the resettlement issue was lost. In the absence of further consultations, it was anticipated at the time that the Council of Europe would take a leading role in the issue.<sup>52</sup> However, it is evident today (August 2004) that since spring 1999, the overall impetus, attention and coordinated efforts by the international community on the issue have largely subsided.

## **2. Georgia's Entry to the Council of Europe**

Georgia's entry to the Council of Europe offered a window of opportunity for finding a durable solution to the issue of repatriation. The link between Georgia's full membership in Council of Europe and the progress made on Meskhetian Turks' repatriation to Georgia was officially confirmed by the Head of the State Repatriation Service in December 1998.<sup>53</sup> On 29 January the following year, a text adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated the organization's expectation for Georgia to adopt a legal framework to accommodate the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks, thus marking the Council of Europe's taking on a more active role on the issue.<sup>54</sup> In April 1999, the Council of Europe participated in the Vienna consultations.

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<sup>52</sup> Telephone interview with late Mr Arthur C. Helton, Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, and Senior Fellow, Refugee Studies and Preventive Action at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York (Former director of OSI FMP), on 25.7.2003.

<sup>53</sup> Liz Fuller (RFE \RL), "Georgian Repatriation Service Head Interviewed" at <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/1998/12/42-161298.html>

<sup>54</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, "Georgia's Application for Membership of the Council of Europe", text adopted by the Assembly on 27 January 1999, at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2Fdocuments%2Fadoption%2Ftext%2Fta99%2Fepi209.htm#1>

As a condition for accession to the Council of Europe, Georgia committed to adopt a legislative framework permitting repatriation and integration of Meskhetian Turks into Georgian society. In addition, it stipulated Meskhetian Turks' right to obtain Georgian citizenship.<sup>55</sup> The legal framework was to be accomplished within two years and the repatriation was to be facilitated within twelve years of Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe. Two draft laws were prepared: One by the Repatriation Service headed by a Georgian politician and human-rights activist, Guram Mamulia, along with five NGOs; the other by Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) on behalf of the Ministry for Refugee Issues. In the ensuing hearings by the National Security Council and the Parliamentary Committee on Civic Integration, the latter draft law was adopted as a basis for further elaborations. Both the Council of Europe and UNHCR provided consultations to Georgia with respect to the draft law. After a meeting of Georgian delegates and legal experts of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in March 2001, and subsequent changes, the draft law was passed to the Ministry of Justice in Tbilisi.<sup>56</sup>

The draft law stipulates, *inter alia*, that in order to acquire Georgian citizenship, a returnee has to provide documentation of having been deported in 1944. A returnee can apply for citizenship a year after entering Georgia. The current draft law does not provide Meskhetian Turks with legal rehabilitation as the Georgian government holds that it cannot take responsibility for the deportation as it was conducted by another state entity, namely the Soviet Union. However, with the enactment of the 1997 'Law on Recognizing Citizens of Georgia as Victims of Political Reprisals and Social Protection of the Repressed', Georgia rehabilitated other groups of people, including Armenians, Greeks and Georgians that were

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<sup>55</sup> CoE European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, "First Report on Georgia", (Adopted on 22 June 2001), at [http://www.coe.int/t/E/human\\_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country\\_approach/Georgia/CBC1-Georgia.asp#P184\\_30012](http://www.coe.int/t/E/human_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country_approach/Georgia/CBC1-Georgia.asp#P184_30012)

<sup>56</sup> Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 49-51; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Report, "Georgia: Meskhetian issue stirs society" on 25.5.2001 at <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2001/05/25052001125503.asp> .

deported. Through a simple legal procedure these people, accordingly, can restore their lost rights and obtain special social protection.

Many legal experts and various organizations that are concerned with the agenda of Meskhetian Turks have heavily criticized the draft law. As Georgian law does not recognize dual or multiple citizenship, many Meskhetian Turks consider a possible repatriation very risky. In practice, the law means that a repatriate has to relinquish his/her economic, social and political ties with the former place of residence and enter the country with uncertain prospects of acquiring Georgian citizenship. Moreover, almost six decades after the deportation it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide the local authorities with a document proving one's or one's ancestors' deportation.<sup>57</sup>

On the one hand, Georgia has agreed to establish a framework for repatriation in 1999 under strong pressure from the international community. On the other hand, repatriation remains almost impossible in practice, and visible efforts undertaken to prepare for repatriation seemingly serve mainly the purpose of pleasing the international community. The efforts of the Georgian Repatriation Service towards further repatriation suffered their biggest setback after the draft law it developed and duly submitted to the State Commission on the Deported Meskhetian Population was rejected without any explanation in early 2001 by the Georgian government.<sup>58</sup> As a result, Mamulia and his entire staff resigned on 23 February 2001, after which the Service was disbanded. In an interview before his resignation, Mamulia stated that "I say this to my shame, and the shame of my generation, that we were not at a sufficiently high level of humanity to resolve this problem independently", referring to Georgian government's refusal to

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<sup>57</sup> Sumbadze, "Muslim Population...", 49-51.

<sup>58</sup> Guram Mamulia, "Comments on the draft law on repatriation of Meskhetians" sent to MINELRES in Tue Jun 5, 2001 and posted at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/multiethnic/message/1398>.

commit itself in attempts to solve the issue, and the need for the international community to exert pressure on Georgia in order to make progress.<sup>59</sup>

In general, advocates of the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks are viewed with deep skepticism and mistrust within Georgian politics, and are at times even psychologically and physically harassed. The issue of repatriation is very sensitive and emotionally charged among the Georgian public. Georgia has been extremely reluctant in handling and trying to solve the issue. Any progress that has been made can be seen largely as a result of pressure exerted by the international community. Although many of Georgia's actions are not in accordance with its international commitments, however, it would be unbalanced to claim that the Georgian government's concerns are only populist or nationalist by nature. The republic has suffered severe socio-economic recession since it obtained independence. Largely due to the economic depression that followed independence, almost twenty percent, or one million of its citizens, left the republic during the 1990s. At the same time, the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia have left the country with an estimated 250,000 internally displaced persons,<sup>60</sup> while the conflict in Chechnya has brought at least four thousand refugees to Georgia since 1999.<sup>61</sup>

In 2001, the Council of Europe urged Georgia "to accelerate the work undertaken with the Council of Europe and the UNHCR on the question of the repatriation of the deported Meskhetian population" and "granting them the same status of rehabilitation as that has already given to deportees of other ethnicities who were

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<sup>59</sup> Liz Fuller (RFE \RL), "Georgian Repatriation Service Head Interviewed" at <http://www.rferl.org/caucasus-report/1998/12/42-161298.html>. Until his death in early 2003, Mamulia was the most outspoken advocate of repatriation in Georgian politics.

<sup>60</sup> "OCHA-Georgia Information Bulletin May 2003", 31 May 2003, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), at <http://www.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/6b59c0f65ae2ef4149256d410022dde6?OpenDocument>. A recent Georgian census, conducted in 2002, indicates that the total Georgian population has been reduced by almost 20%: from 5.5 million to 4.4 million people in the period from 1989 to 2002. The 2002 census did not, unlike the census of 1989, include the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. International observers and Georgian officials estimate these territories to be home to 160,000 people in Abkhazia and 70,000 people in South Ossetia.

<sup>61</sup> UNHCR Global Report 2002 – Georgia, 399.

repatriated to Georgia under the Soviet regime”.<sup>62</sup> Up to this point, the law has not been enacted and it remains in the State Ministry.

### **3. The Role of Other International Actors**

Since the 1996 CIS Conference, the OSCE-HCNM has actively participated in trying to resolve the question of Meskhetian Turks. The OSCE-HCNM largely prepared The Hague and Vienna consultations. In areas related to the Meskhetian Turkish issue, the organization mainly monitors the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti, reviews any developments and makes recommendations. The OSCE-HCNM works closely with the Council of Europe in Georgia. In 1999, the OSCE’s annual report stated that the “Meskhetian issue is receiving increased attention”.<sup>63</sup> A year later its mission to Georgia “expressed concern about the slow progress thus far made on implementation of repatriation measures.”<sup>64</sup> The 2001 annual report diplomatically concluded that “the planned repatriation of the Meskhetian population deported in 1944 continue to lag behind schedule.”<sup>65</sup> The only reference to the issue in the 2002 report points out the Meskhetian Turks’ prospective return to Samtskhe-Javakheti as complicating the situation further in the region. The 2003 report states that the OSCE-HCNM has “continued his work concerning the return of the Meskhetians” and has “encouraged dialogue between all interested parties including the Meskhetians themselves” in Georgia.<sup>66</sup>

CoE, UNHCR and OSCE-HCNM are among the most active international organizations dealing with the issue. Nevertheless, owing to the

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<sup>62</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1257 (2001), “Honouring of Obligations and commitments by Georgia”, at <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=http%3A%2F%2Fassembly.coe.int%2Fdocuments%2Fadptedtext%2Fta01%2Feres1257.htm>

<sup>63</sup> OSCE, “Annual Report 1999 on OSCE Activities” at <http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep99e.htm>

<sup>64</sup> OSCE, “Annual Report 2000 on OSCE Activities” at [http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep00e\\_activ.htm](http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep00e_activ.htm)

<sup>65</sup> OSCE, “Annual Report 2001 on OSCE Activities” at [http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep01e\\_activ.htm](http://www.osce.org/docs/english/misc/anrep01e_activ.htm)

<sup>66</sup> OSCE, “Annual Report 2003 on OSCE Activities” at [http://www.osce.org/documents/sg/2003/05/2677\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/sg/2003/05/2677_en.pdf)

intergovernmental nature of these organizations and due to the relatively weak enforcement mechanisms of their mandates, they have been unable to put sufficient pressure on relevant countries to undertake the obligations that have been agreed upon. In the case of Georgia, conditionality has been the most viable tool to accrue international pressure and make progress on the issue. Otherwise, having adopted rather inclusive principles in accepting new members, expulsion from the organization remains the main mechanism of sanction (of OSCE and CoE). However, this tool is unlikely and also liable to backfire against the initial goals.

The UNHCR is strongly in favor of finding a solution to the legal problems of the Meskhetian Turks within the framework of Russian law, i.e. acquisition of citizenship.<sup>67</sup> This view is backed by *Vatan*. Both parties emphasize that the first priority for Meskhetian Turks living in the Russian Federation should be to obtain citizenship, after which these people could, on an individual basis, seek asylum in the United States, Turkey or elsewhere. UNHCR is continuing its role in monitoring the legal and protection aspects of the issue, mainly in Russia, but also in Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Central Asian republics. Nevertheless, the organization's stance is very cautious, to avoid stirring up emotions, e.g. among Meskhetian Turks in the republics of Central Asia.<sup>68</sup> Overall, among the relevant international organizations the active role on the repatriation issue has been left exclusively to the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is increasingly putting pressure on Georgia to fulfill its international obligations and commitments on various issues, including human rights, while the repatriation issue, due to the lack of progress, has moved low on the Council of Europe's Georgian agenda.<sup>69</sup>

The Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute participated actively in The Hague and Vienna consultations. The Institute's publication on

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<sup>67</sup> Telephone interview with the UNHCR liaison office with the Strasbourg institutions, Strasbourg, 15.7.2003.

<sup>68</sup> Telephone interview with the Regional Bureau for Europe/Eastern Europe, UNHCR Geneva, 14 July 2003.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

“Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security” from 1998 is still a cornerstone in the English language literature on Meskhetian Turks. The Open Society Institute has also funded a number of projects on Meskhetian Turks. However, owing to a ‘strategic consolidation’ at OSI, namely the moving of its director Arthur C. Helton to the Council on Foreign Relations, the Forced Migration Projects ceased to exist in August 1999 and its project on Meskhetian Turks was thus terminated.<sup>70</sup>

Since 1998, the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), as a minority rights lobbying umbrella-organization, has contributed towards putting the Meskhetian Turk issue on the agenda of the international community. The organization conducted a fact-finding mission to Georgia in 1998, which resulted in its representatives’ meeting with representatives of *Vatan* and the president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze. The mission report was one of the first more detailed English language reports on the issue. The following year another mission was conducted to Azerbaijan and Russia in order to further study the situation of Meskhetian Turks. FUEN continues to monitor the situation and *Vatan* has become a member organization of the Union.

A new international actor has appeared on the international stage recently, as the United States has added Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan who are currently living in Krasnodar Krai to the list of peoples entitled to asylum in the USA.<sup>71</sup> In September 2002 officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, State Department and officials of the United States’ Embassy in Moscow conducted a fact-finding mission to Krasnodar Krai. Although it did not prompt an explicit change in the United States’ policies vis-à-vis the issue, the trip signaled the country’s interest in the issue, and subsequently incited speculations about the

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<sup>70</sup> Telephone interview with late Mr Arthur C. Helton, Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, and Senior Fellow, Refugee Studies and Preventive Action at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York (Former director of OSI FMP), on 25.7.2003.

<sup>71</sup> Telephone interview with the Immigration and Naturalization Service at the US Embassy in Moscow, 17.7.2003.



motives behind this interest, namely relieving pressure on Georgia.<sup>72</sup> In June 2003, a meeting concerning the issue of Meskhetian Turks was held in Moscow. The meeting, organized by UNHCR with representatives from OSCE, CoE, IOM, *Vatan*, the US embassy in Moscow and Russian government officials addressed the issue of the legal situation of the Meskhetian Turks in Russia.

In early 2004, the International Organization for Migration launched an information campaign in Krasnodar Krai in early 2004, commissioned by the US State Department, to prepare the grounds for a subsequent resettlement of possibly thousands of Meskhetian Turks from the region to the United States.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, between June 2004, when the resettlement started, and August, about one hundred Meskhetian Turks were resettled to Philadelphia, USA. According to IOM representative in Russia, Mark Brown, there is no quota and if there are 15,000 willing and qualified for the program all will be accepted.<sup>74</sup>

## V. Existing Literature and Its Shortcomings

Research-based academic texts published on Meskhetian Turks based on primary sources amount to only a handful of publications, and much of the literature is

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<sup>72</sup> The U.S. Refugee Admission Program for Fiscal Year 2004 urges the State Department to provide a priority two (P2) designation, i.e. asylum to the ‘persecuted and stateless Muslim religious minority, the Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai’ in order to ‘relieve the burden on Georgia and rescue the Meskhetians from continued persecution...This should, however, be done in tandem with diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis Russia to promote citizenship for those...who desire to and are entitled to it, and for Georgia to enact legislation facilitating the return of those...who have the desire to go back.’ “Recommendations of the Refugee Council USA - U.S. Refugee Admissions Program For Fiscal Year 2004”, at <http://www.refugeecouncilusa.org/rcusa2004doc.pdf>, 2,33; there are also suppositions that by designating the population group as P2 could bring about migration of other Meskhetian Turks to Krasnodar Krai; Telephone conference with late Arthur C. Helton, New York, 25.7.2003).

<sup>73</sup> Caucasian Knot (citing REGNUM News Agency) “10,000 Meskhetian Turks from Kuban region to get refugee status in US” (17 February 2004) at <http://eng.kavkaz.memo.ru/newstext/engnews/id/634171.html>.

<sup>74</sup> IOM Press Briefing Note, “Russia - Resettlement of Meskhetian Turks to the United States” at <http://www.iom.int/en/news/pbn100804.shtml#item3>; Mike Eckel, Associated Press, “Persecuted Russia Minorities Head to U.S.” at <http://www.thestate.com/mld/thestate/news/world/9208929.htm>

simply re-circulated. One of the first post-Soviet English language publications on the Meskhetian Turkish issue was the report by the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN): “The Problem of the Repatriation of the Meskhet-Turks” of November 1998<sup>75</sup>. The report briefly describes the issues and problems facing Meskhetian Turks in the former Soviet Union as well as accounts of Meskhetian Turks’ organizations and their demands. A good part of the report is devoted to issues related to repatriation. The reasons for Georgia’s reluctance to accept Meskhetian Turks’ repatriation are examined in detail.

Shortly after the publication of the FUEN’s report, the Open Society Institute (Forced Migration Projects) issued: “Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security” (1998), following the September 1998 Hague Summit.<sup>76</sup> It explores Meskhetian Turks’ contemporary conditions, including issues of repatriation, Meskhetian Turks’ organizations and recommendations. One of the books’ recommendations calls for a demographic survey to be conducted on Meskhetian Turks’ numbers and location. Although the book (72 pages) is based on research mainly in the Caucasus and Uzbekistan, its scientific scope is rather limited as its function seems to have been awareness-raising of the issue in general and problems faced by Meskhetian Turks. It includes the Hague consultations’ final document as an appendix.<sup>77</sup>

Alexander Osipov, a Russian academic and Program Manager at the Memorial Human Rights Center in Moscow, has published a range of reports on legal aspects, human rights violations and discrimination vis-à-vis the Meskhetian Turks in Southern Russia. His publications include the highly informative “The Violation of Forced Migrants and Ethnic Discrimination in Krasnodar Territory – the Situation of the Turks-Meskhetians” (“Naruzheniye prav Vynuzhdennih

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<sup>75</sup> Svetlana Chervonnaya (edited by the FUEN-Secretariat), “Appendix to the Fact-Finding Mission of the FUEN - Federal Union of European Nationalities delegation to Georgia”, November 1998, (FUEN/Flensburg, Germany, 1998).

<sup>76</sup> Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute, “Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security”, (the Open Society Institute, New York, 1998).

<sup>77</sup> Chairman’s Statement From Vienna Meeting on Meskhetian Turk Issues in 15-17 March 1999 can be found at <http://www.soros.org/fmp2/html/may1999.html>.

Migrantov i Etnicheskaya Diskriminatsiya v Krasnodarskom Krae”, 1996), “Rossiiskii opyt etnicheskoi chistki: Meskhetintsy v Krasnodarskom Krae” (1999) and “The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in the Russian Federation” (2003).<sup>78</sup> Another report on Meskhetian Turks is “Deported Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: The Case of Meskhetian Turks” (IOM) published by the United Nations in 1998.<sup>79</sup> It is mostly based on interviews of various key actors in Georgia and Azerbaijan. Apart from the history of the Meskhetian Turks and contemporary politics, and general legal and socio-economic aspects of the issue, it discusses the implications of Georgia’s proposed draft law and Georgia’s policy proposals for the future. The booklet makes recommendations to the governments of the different countries of Meskhetian Turkish residence, international organizations and NGOs.

Arif Yunusov’s “Meskhetinskie Turki: Dvazhdy Deportirovan Narod (Meskhetian Turks: Twice Deported People)” (2000) is a comprehensive study based on a variety of sources.<sup>80</sup> The book covers main aspects of the Meskhetian Turkish history and contemporary situation, namely origins, current conditions, Meskhetian Turks’ organizations and provides recommendations for different actors and the question of repatriation. Although it is a complex and thoroughly researched piece of work, its limitation for covering all aspects in different countries is the fact that it is mainly the result of a single author’s research and interviews. They were conducted mostly in the Caucasus, but also material from the author’s previous trips to Meskhetian Turk communities Russia, Ukraine and Central Asia are utilized in the book.

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<sup>78</sup> Alexander Osipov, “Naruzheniye prav Vynuzhdennih Migrantov I Etnicheskaya Diskriminatsiya v Krasnodarskom Krae”, (Memorial, Moscow, Russia, 1996); Osipov, “Rossiiskii opyt etnicheskoi chistki: Meskhetintsy v Krasnodarskom Krae”, (Memorial, Moscow, Russia, 1999); Osipov, “The Situation and Legal Status of Meskhetians in the Russian Federation”, Memorial, Commissioned by UNHCR, (Moscow, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> “IOM (prepared by Franz Laczko), “Deported Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: The Case of Meskhetian Turks”, (IOM/Geneva, Switzerland, 1998).”

<sup>80</sup> Yunusov, “Meskhetian Turks...”

A publication by the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, CIPDD (ed. Gia Nodia) on “Ethnic-Confessional Groups and Challenges to Civic Integration in Georgia” has a chapter on “Muslim Population of Southern Georgia: Challenges of Repatriation” (22 pages) by Nana Sumbadze.<sup>81</sup> Sumbadze’s study is a very informative and balanced view of various aspects of Meskhetian Turks’ repatriation to Georgia and the issue in general. The book also has a chapter on “The Armenian Community of Javakheti – Collective Memories and Current Concerns” by David Darchiashvili and another chapter on “The Social, Economic and Political Situation in Javakheti – People’s Concerns, the Report of the Sociological Survey” by Marina Elbakidze.

Sergei Ryazantsev’s unpublished report “Ethnic Migration and Condition of the Meskhetian Turks at the South of Russia” for UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council is a comprehensive, albeit mostly quantitative survey-based study on Meskhetian Turks in Stavropol Krai.<sup>82</sup> Due to difficulties with the local authorities the study was conducted in Stavropol, and not in Krasnodar Krai. Another quantitative country case-study is Olena Malinovska’s “Situation of the Refugee Turks-Meskhetins in Ukraine”.<sup>83</sup> It is based on a sociological survey, which was conducted among Meskhetian Turkish communities in different regions of Ukraine in 1998 with the help of UNHCR.

An unpublished PhD dissertation by British anthropologist Kathryn Tomlinson provides an insightful picture of the Meskhetian Turk community in Krasnodar Krai.<sup>84</sup> Based on one year of anthropological fieldwork in the region, Tomlinson gives an apolitical picture of the local Meskhetian Turk community. According to

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<sup>81</sup> Sumbadze, “Muslim Population ...”

<sup>82</sup> Sergei Ryazantsev, “Ethnic migration and condition of the Meskhetian Turks at the south of Russia”, a study commissioned by UNHCR and Danish Refugee Council, (Stavropol, 2000).

<sup>83</sup> Olena Malinovska (co-authors: T.Klinchenko, I. Mingazutdinov, O.Shamshur), “Situation of the Refugee Turks-Meskhetins in Ukraine”, UNHCR, (Kiev, 1999).

<sup>84</sup> Kathryn Gillian Tomlinson, “Coping as Kin: Responses to Suffering amongst Displaced Meskhetian Turks in post-Soviet Krasnodar, Russian Federation”, University College London Department of Anthropology, thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy May 2002 (unpublished).

her, the debate over possible repatriation is to a large extent promoted by 'unrepresentative' leaders of the community and the international community, which in her opinion could lead to even worse conditions in Krasnodar Krai, prompting an expulsion. During her fieldwork, Tomlinson observed a surprising absence of bitterness towards those responsible for their forced migration or those who failed to allocate them new land in the (former) Soviet Union. She points to the need for thinking about the concept of 'homeland' and Meskhetian Turks' perceptions of a territorialized homeland.

The idea and concept of home is further studied by Kakoli Ray in her PhD thesis "Displaced Populations: Re-shaping International Planning", which was partly based on comprehensive fieldwork among Meskhetian Turks in Azerbaijan. Ray questions repatriation as the optimal solution for refugees. Furthermore, in her article "Repatriation and De-territorialization: Meskhetian Turks' conception of Home", she argues that the conventional understanding and theories of the idea of home and the Meskhetian Turks' own perceptions of the idea do not match. She notes that Meskhetian Turks' social meaning of home is not fully fixed in time and space, and as a result of the particular circumstances, the identities of Meskhetian Turks have been de-territorialized. According to Ray, even the Meskhetian Turks living in Azerbaijan, let alone Russia and Uzbekistan, have not been securely integrated into the local society.

In a word, scholarly literature on Meskhetian Turks does exist, but is scarce. Many aspects are left uncovered. On the other hand, other topics are touched upon but not explored in depth, or studied in a certain country or region but not in a comparative way, such as issues of identity, popular attitudes among the populations adjacent to Meskhetian Turkish population groups, perceptions of home and homeland, migratory trends, levels of integration and Meskhetian Turks' social organizations. Ultimately, it is these matters that lie at the core of the issue, and will consequently decide the success of any attempt to find durable

solutions. These matters should thus be taken into account while formulating any serious attempts to address the issue in both national and international arenas.

As concluded above, much of the literature is reproduction of research of a few experts on the issue. Different advocates related to the issue have voiced the need for a comprehensive cross-country study on the population group in question, but to no avail. The conclusions of the Hague Consultations refer to the situation of the Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai as a priority issue, and call for the conduct of “[...] a survey to determine the precise number, needs and intentions of Meskhetian Turks throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union concerning resettlement [...].”<sup>85</sup> The joint UNHCR/OSCE-HCNM/OSI-FMP mission to Krasnodar Krai in December 1998, as well as the March 1999 follow-up consultations in Vienna has also emphasized the need for more research. In the chairman’s final statement of the Vienna meeting it was recognized that “attention should shift to the exploration of specific solutions that stress humane management of their problems,” thus calling for and encouraging more research to be done on the Meskhetian Turk issue.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, all participants agreed, under the auspices of the OSCE- HCNM, to establish a focal point that would “collect and act as depository for project proposals relating to the issues of the category of people in question.”<sup>87</sup> The OSCE-HCNM Max van der Stoel stated after the meeting that “We are at a critical stage of the process, a point at which the support of donor governments...could make an important difference... (s)olutions to Meskhetian Turk issues... are within reach.”<sup>88</sup> However, the planned project proposal depository that was should have been presented at the June 1999

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<sup>85</sup> “Document of The Hague meeting on the issues relating to the Meskhetian Turks”, The Hague 7-10 September 1998, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, The Hague.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> The Chairman’s Statement From Vienna Meeting on Meskhetian Turk Issues at <http://www.soros.org/fmp2/html/may1999.html#vienna>

<sup>88</sup> Open Society Institute’s Forced Migration Alert, ‘OSCE-HCNM Makes Meskhetian Turk Appeal’, 14.5.2003, at <http://www.soros.org/fmalert/0432.html>.

CIS Conference follow-up meeting never materialized, due to a shift of priorities and a resulting lack of donor interest in the issue.<sup>89</sup>

The publication of the Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute called for a demographic survey to be conducted on the number and location of Meskhetian Turks:

“[p]recise data on Meskhetian Turk, including their numbers and location, is insufficient. In many cases, experts, advocates, and government representatives are forced to rely on vague estimates when discussing the repatriation dilemma. Extensive demographic research is thus warranted to more clearly define Meskhetian Turk community, as well as ascertain the hopes and desires of Meskhetian Turks.”<sup>90</sup>

In 2000, a leading scholar on Meskhetian Turks wrote:

“International organizations must design special research to explore the demographic and social picture of the region where Meskhetian Turks are going to be repatriated [...] There is almost no information about exact size of the population of Meskhetian Turks and places of their dwelling, the information about their ethical beliefs, and social problems of Meskhetian Turks are also unknown, the question of how many of them actually want to return to their historic homeland is also left without the answer.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Telephone interview with (late) Arthur C. Helton, Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, Senior Fellow, Refugee Studies and Preventive Action at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York (Former director of OSI FMP), in 25.7.2003.

<sup>90</sup> FMP OSI, “Meskhetian Turks...”, 58.

<sup>91</sup> Yunusov, “Meskhetian Turks...”, at <http://kavkaz.memo.ru/bookstext/books/id/409936.html#i26>.

There are insightful and valuable reports from studies conducted in Krasnodar and Stavropol Krai (South Russia), Ukraine and Georgia, and research on legal aspects of the local Meskhetian Turks in the Northern Caucasus, while little is known about the Meskhetian Turk communities in Central Asia, notably in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as well as in Central Russia and Turkey. Moreover, most studies are focused on a particular region or country or on a specific issue, while a comparative study is yet to emerge. As the only group of deported peoples of the former Soviet Union that have neither been allowed to return to their homeland nor rehabilitated, and are in some localities living as a stateless population group, Meskhetian Turks are a living reminder of the atrocities committed during the Soviet Era. Given the international community's and the concerned countries' moral concerns and obligations to find durable solutions for this exceptionally notorious case of displacement, the relevance of the issue for contemporary regional politics and the potential of current and future conflict around the question, it is desirable and feasible that qualified research is generated. Most importantly, a comprehensive study of the above issues would provide the international community and its international organizations with a strong tool to seek durable solutions to the problems of the Meskhetian Turks.

## **VI. Towards a New Discourse?**

The problems of the Meskhetian Turks are substantially more complex than is commonly perceived. It is difficult to imagine any single solution that would deliver a framework, which could be approved by all stakeholders. It can be argued that any potential solution should be multi-dimensional, giving references to other possible solutions, rather than being single stranded. Repatriation, for example, should in principle be a given right, but should also be voluntary and not imperative. The issue of repatriation and the problems of the legal status of the Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar Krai are the most prominent features at present; paradoxically, these outcomes are ultimately placed at opposite ends of the spectrum of policy options.



One crucial question pertains to the likelihood of a large-scale repatriation. According to the most vocal Meskhetian Turk organizations, the majority of the Meskhetian Turkish population would resettle in Georgia, should a legislative framework without hindering bureaucratic obstacles come into being in the future. However, other actors, including some international experts, suggest that most Meskhetian Turks, e.g. in Russia's troubled Krasnodar Krai, may wish to remain there, should the political and legislative conditions become more accommodating. Even more so, this may be the case for Meskhetian Turks settled in countries in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, where the Meskhetian Turks appear to enjoy a much higher degree of socio-economic and cultural integration. Currently, these questions remain little researched and need studies to gain an understanding of potential migration trends and the Meskhetian Turks own perceptions of territorial identity and notions of belonging.

International organizations have met severe obstacles in defining the major directions of assistance for the Meskhetian Turks, both in addressing the issue of resettlement and in addressing the protection needs of the often vulnerable Meskhetian Turk population groups. Admittedly, the political problems for facilitating lasting solutions are immense, both with regard to the legal protection of Meskhetian Turks in Southern Russia and elsewhere, and with regard to resettlement in Georgia. However, the lack of concise knowledge of the numbers and locations of the Meskhetian Turks and perhaps even more importantly, the lack of comprehension of the Meskhetian Turks' own perceptions, desires and intentions concerning their future place of settlement, remain major unanswered questions for the implementation of more targeted plans of actions to address the Meskhetian Turk issue.

International actors, strongly encouraged by Meskhetian Turkish organizations such as *Vatan*, have long based their interventions on the *a priori* assumption that Meskhetian Turks wish to return to Georgia, and that a solution to the Meskhetian

Turk issue should be based on providing the necessary framework for this anticipated resettlement. This approach has resulted in some surveys designed to quantify the Meskhetian Turks and count the numbers of those who wish to resettle, through means of quantitative surveys conducted by use of questionnaires and an intention to conduct more surveys of a similar character. The contention here is that little can be obtained by ‘counting’ Meskhetian Turks and that quantitative surveys are inadequate to grasp the complex nature of identity, belonging, territorial anchoring and migration – issues that are inextricably linked to the issue of resettlement – and, therefore, that such approaches do not serve to provide answers to the question of whether Meskhetian Turks, in fact, wish to resettle in larger numbers.

Indeed, Meskhetian Turks face problems in many regions and countries, for the moment especially in Southern Russia. However, in still more countries, the continuous settlement of Meskhetian Turks does not necessarily pose a problem: Many Meskhetian Turk, e.g. in Ukraine or in certain regions of the Central Asian republics, are well integrated, and many among the younger generations, notably those born and brought up in their new countries of settlement, do not hold a desire to resettle in Georgia. In other words, the displacement of Meskhetian Turks does not in all cases, six decades after the initial deportation, constitute a problem for the people concerned. Here, the international efforts to assist the Meskhetian Turks, by focusing on the deportation-resettlement issue, may at times appear to be counter-productive and in incongruity with its own intentions. Or, in the words of Kathryn Tomlinson:

“[...] scholars who insist on the Meskhetian Turks’ right to repatriation [...] tell them stories about themselves which may raise unrealistic hopes if not actually force them to move.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Tomlinson, “Coping as Kin...”, 233.

International human rights practices hold that Meskhetian Turks' preferences should provide the guidelines for any policies and solutions in the future. But what are their preferences? Do Meskhetian Turks consider southwest Georgia as their homeland to which they wish to return; or do they feel more attached to their current places of current settlement in the post-Soviet space, or perhaps in Turkey? There are contradictory accounts of these questions. While Meskhetian Turks seem to emphasize the right to 'their land', some argue that this attitude is not necessarily fixed to a definite physical place.

In recent studies, some scholars have argued that Meskhetian Turks do not actually have sentimental ties to Georgia to the extent that would make them inclined to return to their native lands.<sup>93</sup> One expert on forced migration and Meskhetian Turks, Kakoli Ray, has argued that for Meskhetian Turks, Georgia represents merely a place that could guarantee security from a possible third forced migration, thus making the territory desirable. In other words, repatriation can offer legitimization and protection for Meskhetian Turks within citizenship structures and bring an end to the permanent feeling of insecurity and sense of being temporary residents or guests.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, against the commonly accepted discourse of repatriation as the optimal solution for involuntary displaced people, it is argued that a possible repatriation to Georgia, instead of securing Meskhetian Turks against a possible third forced replacement, could actually instigate it. Repatriation could legitimize the efforts of the Krasnodar Krai authorities to expel their Meskhetian Turks from the region.<sup>95</sup>

Inevitably, this leads to a discussion of the Meskhetian Turks' concepts of 'homeland' and 'rootedness', i.e. what are the Meskhetian Turks' perceptions of belonging to a homeland? Is the 'homeland', or the 'home' a place where Meskhetian Turks live with their extended families and relatives? Is it a place in

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.; and Kakoli Ray, "Repatriation and De-territorialization: Meskhetian Turks' Conception of Home", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 4, (2000), 391-414.

<sup>94</sup> Ray, "Repatriation and De-Territorialization...".

<sup>95</sup> Tomlinson cf. Ray (2000) in "Coping as Kin...", 233.

southwest Georgia? Or, is it a place where the people can live in accordance with their customs, without being pestered or harassed, perhaps unrelated to any particular territory? Moreover, what is the role of the post-Soviet space for Meskhetian Turks? Have these people adopted the former Soviet Union as “their territory”, and thus become nationals of a state that does not exist anymore? Some recent studies have concluded that Meskhetian Turks’ expectations and plans for the future are more often based on realities concerning the well-being of their families rather than sentimental ties and visions of the future, Meskhetian Turks thus being pragmatic rather than guided by ideals. Tomlinson notes that “Meskhetian Turks examine their options for the future in pragmatic terms, aware of their past residence in Georgia but primarily concerned with the safety and livelihood of their households and relatives, and only secondarily for the cohesion of their community.”<sup>96</sup>

Following this assertion, it is also tempting to examine the actual role and influence of Meskhetian Turks’ organizations among their widely dispersed and diversified communities; and study why a lack of group cohesion seems prevalent within the Meskhetian Turkish communities; whether the existing organizations in fact represent a larger segment of Meskhetian Turks, which some scholars question; and determine whether the absence of unifying political structures constitutes an undesirable obstacle for promoting durable solutions to the Meskhetian Turks’ problems (in a similar vein as the international policy makers on national minority issues seem to anticipate the lack of Roms’ socio-political organization as a hindrance for promotion of Roma human rights), or whether, in fact, the lack of political organization reflects an absence of a unifying ethnic or national consciousness.

An interesting point of reference for the efforts to find a solution to the issue of repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks is the case of the Crimean Tatars’ resettlement to the Crimea (Ukraine) since 1989. The Crimean Tatars, like the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 234.

Meskhethian Turks, were deported from their native lands, mainly to Central Asia, during World War II. With the assistance of the international community, however, an estimated 250,000 Crimean Tatars have repatriated to Ukraine. The scope of international involvement and financial support for the Crimean Tatars has, beyond any doubt, exceeded the international help for any other groups of people with a similar fate. Undoubtedly, the geopolitical, strategic and economic importance of Crimea has played a major role drawing more international attention to the issue of resettlement.<sup>97</sup> Although this is not the case with the efforts to promote Meskhethian Turks' repatriation, the successful identity retention and experiences of return of the Crimean Tatars can provide the international community with a valuable example to draw lessons in searching for a durable solution to the problems of the Meskhethian Turks.

Further research is needed to cast light on these complex questions, and the study of the Meskhethian Turks' discourses of identity, migration processes, 'homeland' and social organization could help to establish alternatives to the current discourse in the efforts of international actors to find sustainable solutions to the current problems faced by Meskhethian Turks.

The Georgian Government has so far almost categorically refused to grant Meskhethian Turks permission to resettle in their native territory in Samtskhe-Javakheti, while, in theory, returnees may settle in other parts of Georgia. The governing structures are worried that an influx of Meskhethian Turks into Samtskhe-Javakheti might trigger interethnic conflict with today's population of Georgians and Armenians. To be sure, the local population in Samtskhe-Javakheti is far from favorably disposed towards the Meskhethian Turks, but still, very little is known about the in-depth attitudes in the region, as most accounts rely on the widely circulated propositions on the high likelihood of tension, or conflict, should a wide-scale repatriation take place. Most certainly, any potential tension

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<sup>97</sup> Svetlana Chervonnaya, "Problemy vozvrascheniya i integratsii krimskiyh tatar v Krimu: 1990-e gody", Institut Etnologii i Antropologii Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, (Moscow 1997), 39-40.

should be addressed and dealt with accordingly. However extensive reproduction of assumptions and “threats” holds the danger of creating the very same predicament it claims to avert in the first place. Debate and efforts on the issue have generally focused on the need to find a solution for the population group’s repatriation to Georgia. Regardless of the Meskhetian Turks’ right to resettlement to their place of origin, six decades after the initial deportation one should not take the commonly accepted propositions for repatriation as the only possible, or even the optimal solution, at least before this unique case is explored in a manner that matches its complexity.