

An Attempt to Create an Ethnic Group: Identity Change Dynamics of Muslimized Meskhetians

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This paper presents a history of the process of identity formation of the population who lived in the territory of historical Meskheti,¹ in which the inhabitants were subject to political experiments over several centuries. These experiments, aimed at changing the ethnic identity of the inhabitants, were conducted by various political groups and for a variety of reasons. This population, which has regularly been subjected to violence as well as political and economic pressure, has twice been deported: first from Georgia in 1944 and then from Uzbekistan in 1991. Nowadays they are spread in Uzbekistan, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey and the USA. They are either referred to as “Turkish Meskhetians” or as “Meskhetian Turks.”

We focus on the history of those deportees who are faced with what can be described as an identity crisis. The paper is based on historical and oral sources, that is to say, the data on deported persons presented in publications and narratives as well as the account of persons still living in Samtskhe-Javakheti who witnessed the deportation in 1944. We do not aim to conduct a quantitative investigation.

The basic issues briefly examined in the paper are as follows:

- Identity as a complex of intertwined and mutually determined features
- Language shift and identity change through religious conversion that in turn was enforced by economic and other means
- Self-appraisal of the mother tongue as a reflection of embedded consciousness of the correlation between the mother tongue on the one hand and ethnic and national identity on the other.

Identity as a complex of intertwined and mutually determined features

It has often been stated that ethnic identity may be maintained even if some of its features are lost: “Just as ethnicity does not inevitably require language (or any other

¹ S Southwestern Georgia, including an area known as Samtskhe-Javakheti

specific feature) as a component, nor does nationalism” (Edwards 1994, 132). This statement implies the assumption that the core essence of ethnic identity is the memory and the awareness of one’s own ethnic belonging. Such important features of ethnic or national identity as territory and language may be lost, while the memory of ethnic belonging is retained, and adherence to the ancestral ethnic group is preserved. Some well-known examples of this include Irish identity, which has been preserved without retaining Irish as a mother tongue (Myhill 2006, 186); and Jewish identity, preserved without retaining any territorial attachment and without maintaining Hebrew as the mother tongue (Myhill 2006, 101). On the other hand, in cases where the development of ethnic identity is undertaken, we can clearly assume the revival of features that are lacking or, at least, the attempt to revive such features. Language planning in Ireland and in the EU for the revitalisation of Irish (Craith 2003, 74-81; Christ 2005, 257-308; Christ 2005, 309-312) as well as the creation of Israel and the revival of Hebrew in Israel (Craith 2003, 74; Myhill 2004, 73-97) is an obvious instance of such a development.

Incomplete, erratic identity status may cause instability in the group situation and in that of adjacent groups, while the desire to restore an entire complex of identity features on the collective level is a sign of group vitality. Often territorial and political claims comprise an essential part of the revival, sometimes at the expense of the rights of other groups. A traditionally formed cluster of features may be a determining factor for a group’s political orientation in different situations.

Another counter method of achieving a stable balanced identity may be to accept (or in some cases even to strive towards) the loss of the remaining features of the previous identity and, by merging into another *ethnos*, to obtain a new identity. Such a shift often starts with a change in one of the features, which usually induces a change in other features, and, in appropriate demographic and political circumstances, leads to a change of ethnic affiliation. Change of civic and national identities may occur within one generation, while change of ethnic belonging requires several hundreds of years of cultural and demographic interference. The Muslimised Meskhetians represent a clear case of such interference. That different political groups may strive towards a balanced identity in order to attain various goals is, however, another matter.

Varieties of linguistic and religious divergence of ethnic groups

It is well documented that the correlation between ethnic identity, religion, and mother tongue is not always simple (Fishman 1972; Fishman 2000, 1-22; Smith 1998, 112-115; 129-131). Various cases of divergent groups already formed as linguistic, confessional or political societies are attested:

- One language, different confessions - preserved consciousness of one ethnic belonging (Ossetians - Christians and Muslims). The lack of a state may be the reason for preserving a shared ethnic identity, uniting those strongly associated to either Christianity or Islam. The separatist struggle for territorial secession from Georgia and attachment to Russia also makes the religious aspect less important.
- One language, different confessions - consciousness of partially different ethnic belonging (Kurds and Yezids). The history and the context of the split played a role in the partial ethnic divergence between these two groups.
- Different languages, one confession - preserved consciousness of one ethnic belonging (Greek-speaking Greeks and Turkish-speaking Greeks in Georgia)
- Different languages, one confession - consciousness of different ethnic belonging - individual cases of Russified Georgians in Georgia.

There is one more explanation of group divergence: When a split is caused for non-linguistic reasons within linguistically closely related groups that are striving to break up and form their own national identities, it may subsequently be claimed that these groups are also linguistically discrete. Recently, this phenomenon has been observed concerning the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian languages (Busch 2004, 7-11). For this reason, with regard to the definition of regional or minority languages, the Explanatory Report to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages states the following:

This question depends not only on strictly linguistic considerations, but also on psycho-sociological and political phenomena which may produce a different answer in each case. Accordingly, it will be left to the authorities concerned within each state, in accordance with its own democratic processes, to determine at what point a form of expression constitutes a separate language. (Explanatory Report, p. 32)

As Fishman noted, “To abandon the language may be viewed as an abandonment not only of the traditional doings and knowings, but as an abandonment of personal ancestral kin and cultural ancestral heroes per se” (Fishman 2000, 5). Furthermore,

when the division into two groups has reached the stage where they differ in language, faith, and ethnic consciousness, to allude to the shared ethnic origin of these groups and attempts to “restore the historical truth” and “convert” the whole group to their “original abandoned” identity would be to fly in the face of reality. Such an expectation would be an illusion based on belief in ethnicity as a purely primordial and static phenomenon. The historical lesson of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia should be a sufficient warning against such beliefs:

Serbian and Croatian reactions to the Bosnian Moslems presented clear examples of how a cyclical view of time was represented... According to Serbians and Croatians, “Moslems had abandoned their “true” identity; they represented the historic Fall of both the Serb and Croat nations. Now, with the disintegration of Yugoslavia, both groups had a golden opportunity to right the wrongs of history, to join former national lands and people to an enlarged national state... Bosnian Moslems did consider themselves to be a defined national group. While they were willing to share power with Serbs and Croats within the country, they had no intention of being incorporated into an expanded Serbian or Croatian state. (Macdonald 2003, 223)

Along with other factors, this contradiction, emphasized by politicians as well as by academics and novelists, led the former Yugoslavia to war (Macdonald 2003, 233-244).

The core issue examined in our paper is the perception of the correlation between religion, mother tongue and ethnic identity by one group, namely, the Muslimized Meskhetians. We will now give a brief historical overview of this group.

Enforced confessional conversion by economic means

The fate of the Muslimized Meskhetians is a clear case of an experiment designed to construct a shared identity for different ethnic groups gathered in the border region of states competing for territory. The Muslimization of Meskhetians started in the 16-17th centuries, when this region of Georgia was under the control of the Ottoman Empire. This process may be seen as a next step following the dechristianization of Anatolia between the 11th and 15th centuries. The Ottoman Turks expanded their borders to the north and aimed to form a politically loyal population out of the local population (Georgians and, in particular, Meskhetians, who were Christians) and the immigrant Muslim population (Sunni Muslim Turks, Shia Muslim Kurds, and Shia Muslim Tarakamas) which immigrated to the territory of Meskheta from the 16th to the 18th

centuries: “Ottomans pursued policies of imperial nationalism in the same manner ... as other late European empires” (Meeker 2002, xv).

Confessional assimilation was considered to be the best instrument for achieving the aforementioned aim. The best tool for Islamization was economic measures, which Turkey used successfully. Only Muslims were allowed to serve in the army, and only those who served in the army were allowed to bear arms and own land. In addition, Muslims would pay lower payments than Christians (Lomsadze 1975, 293). Conversion to Islam was mainly brought about for practical reasons, and the Muslimized inhabitants of the region retained their old traditions; that is, they remained covert Christians. Nevertheless, the process had begun. The aristocracy became Muslim, at least officially. The Turkish and Georgian language domains were also clearly defined. According to historical sources, “Nobles spoke Georgian to their friends, while Turkish was spoken at the official banquets and meetings” (Vakhushti 1941, 12; Lomsadze 1975, 295-296). This was the first crack on the way to the final break.

Historical sources document the gradual development of the features unifying the Georgians and other groups in the Meskhети region: 1. Change of confession (encouraged by economic and other means); 2. Language shift (first within some domains and within high social classes and later in all domains and even among lower classes of the population); 3. Change of surnames; 4. New perception of individual identity (Lomsadze, 1975, 284-317; Beridze 2005, 18-26, 506-507). All these changes occurred as a protracted process over several centuries.

Name of the group

The name of a group as well as the name and surname of individuals has always been a powerful tool, not only for expressing an identity, but also for the creation or manipulation of that identity.

The name change of the Muslimized Meskhეთians has reflected the dynamics relating to the development of that group's identity: Georgians who remained Christians retained their name, Kartveli (*Georgian* in Georgian); Georgians who became Muslims in the 17-18th centuries were called Yerli or Binali (*local* in Turkish); and immigrant Muslims were called Tatars (Turks), Tarakamas or Kurds according to their ethnicity. Thus Muslimized Georgians distinguished themselves from Christian Georgians on the one hand, and from immigrant Muslims on the other. The use of the group name *local*

reflected social status and the path of the Muslimization: One who was local had the right to own land.

Conversion entailed other linguistic markers as well, in the form of alteration of proper names and surnames, which in turn strengthened the new identity. In a demographic and political situation in which surnames functioned as markers for ethnic and religious belonging, change of names and surnames implied an expectation (even a demand) of acquiring a new language associated with a certain *ethnos* and a certain religion. The reverse was also true: Conversion and language shift was followed by change of names and surnames. Georgians with “Muslim names” were marked as “others”, different from their Christian Georgian neighbours, and this different group had its own name: “local Muslims who own land.” Even brothers might have different surnames.

The next step was a unification of the Yerli (Muslimized Georgians) and Turks (immigrant Muslims) on confessional grounds, which led to these two groups being termed Tatars (or Muslim). Thus a name expressing a *confession* replaced a name expressing a *social status*. Georgia became a part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century. From the 19th century, the unifying name of these groups indicating confession (Tatars) was replaced in the Russian censuses by the unifying name indicating ethnicity (Turk), regardless of the fact that the ethnical composition of the "Turks" was diverse. In the 1870s the famous traveller and researcher Zagurski wrote, “It is difficult to say who gave them this name (Turk) attested in the accounts of the villages already in the 1830s” (qtd. in Lomsadze 1975, 309). To consider the population of Muslim faith, regardless of the ethnic origin, as ethnic Turks was in accordance with Pan-Turkish ideology.

Confession and ethnic identity

Intertwined and indivisible perception of religious and ethnic belonging was characteristic in regions where each ethnic group was associated with a specific confession. Under such circumstances, the change of religion (or ideology) was a first step on the way to a change of ethnic identity.

This concurrence of religious and ethnic identity was observable in Samtskhe-Javakheti as well. Among the common people, all Muslims were designated by the general name Tatar, which did not imply any other sense than Muslim, and first and

foremost Sunni Muslim; furthermore, the term Christian was equated with “Georgian,” “Gregorian” with “Armenian,” and “Catholic” with “Western European” or “French.” The Russian Empire retained this tradition in its census in the 19th century. At that time, Muslimized Georgians had partly preserved the memory of their ethnic origin, but this memory was considered to be an undesirable burden, being a reminder of ethnic belonging that was interpreted as mixed and impure.

In the 1870s, Zagurski wrote, “They dislike questions regarding their origin, they find especially insufferable any note indicating that their ancestors were Christians. I became convinced myself that in order to avoid conversation on these themes they accuse of ignorance of Georgian” (Lomsadze 1975, 306). Thus the step taken for practical purposes (to retain a right to own land) led to further consequences.

However, their transitional identity made its impact on the group: “They were always sad, gloomy and cheerless. They did not sing and dance... They were anguished for having abandoned their ancestors’ faith. They tried to avoid discussions on these themes, they tried to stay away from Christianity and Christian neighbours” (Kazbeki 1876, 33; Lomsadze 1975, 305). It is remarkable that some features of this portrayal, such as sadness and unwillingness to consider identity problems, coincide with the characteristics of immigrants in modern Europe described by European researchers. The trait of sadness is explained by the ambivalence regarding identity (Kristal-Andersson 2001, 214-227). It seems that transitional identity gives rise to similar features, irrespective of whether the distancing from inherited identity and cultural environment is caused by change of place, change of residence, change of confession, or loyalty to the ancestral community. Inner conflict in a person with a newly obtained identity who also bears the memory of a former identity can result in the desire to accomplish separation from the former identity by cutting all ties and by changing his or her name and surname, especially if these two identities are incompatible. In turn, perception of converts by others and by group members themselves affects the naming of proselytes as an entire group and works for the split and in favour of strengthening and redrawing the border within a divergent group. Extreme situations such as conflicts between adjacent states also worsen the polarisation within a split group.

Confession and language

It is noteworthy that when language-based identity is put to the test by a religious split, an ethnic break may occur. Incompatible relations of historical origin between the neighbouring national states associated with the religions concerned may be the decisive factor for such a break. At the same time, religious-based identity may be intertwined with linguistic identity. This phenomenon is especially characteristic for those areas where almost every ethnically (and linguistically) different group also differs in confession. Even the names of the confessions, such as Armenian Gregorian or Greek Orthodox, partially reflect the established connotations.

Religious conversion may imply the demand for linguistic unification in the name of religious unity; this actually promotes unification of an ethnically diverse population within a national or supra-national state. At the same time, this phenomenon indicates that ethnic (and national) identity is often seen as an entire complex of features. Lack of any feature historically associated with a certain identity can engender striving to “restore” the full complex of features. Such an attempt may arise either at the individual or the collective level. It may also take the form of a demand from “above,” that is to say in the shape of state political ambition. The “wrong” combination of the features within a certain national identity can cause conflicts at both collective and individual levels.

Groups resisting cultural integration also resist linguistic integration, and vice versa. It should also be noted that “the effect of religion on the language maintenance is clearly a highly complex one depending not only issues of language use specific to religion, but also on other factors such as cultural distance” (Klipp & Clyne 2003, 41).

The connection between ideology and a language has often been explicitly stated in both official sources and narratives. (Russian was often officially referred to as “the language of the Great October Revolution” or “the language of Lenin,” Arabic as “the language of the Koran,” etc.)

In certain circumstances even languages themselves associated to a certain nation and culture were considered as “Christian” or “Muslim” languages. Therefore, in Samtskhe-Javakheti, with the statehood weakened and intensive migration processes taking place, a change of confession led to the language shift essential to the conversion to the Muslim faith.

The reciprocally determined character of language and confession is indubitably confirmed by both historians and individual respondents. According to Dubois (1859, II, 300), one mullah managed to convert the inhabitants of Aspindza to Islam, taught them Turkish and forbade them to speak Georgian. A network of Islamic schools and houses for reading the *Koran* were of special importance for spreading Islam and the Turkish language in the area. It was forbidden to speak Georgian, a “Christian language,” in mosques and in Islamic schools in Samtskhe-Javakheti (Lomsadze 1975, 309-310; 312). To speak Georgian was considered an act of treachery towards the newly adopted Muslim faith. In the 19th century, according to the German traveller Karl Koch, Muslimized Georgians apologized for having Georgian as their spoken language. Koch’s informant in Klarjeti told him, “My grandfather was Christian. My father and I have been enlightened by Mohammed’s light; however, we still speak ancestors’ language. It is truth that it is a sin to speak the language of infidels, but what can we do, God gave us this language” (Lomsadze 1995, 82).

It is noteworthy that the term Muslim language (*mahmadianuri ena*) indicating the Turkish speech of Muslimized Meskhetians is attested in the relevant materials by Tchitchinadze too (Tchitchinadze 2004, 36)².

² Georgians who adopted Catholicism also faced the problem of the divergence between their spoken language and the liturgical language. This population was accustomed to the eastern Christian tradition, where the language of the Church and the mother tongue coincided and was a strong marker of national identity. Now these two elements appeared to be different: From the 19th century, the Georgian language was not approved as a language of liturgy by the Vatican. Therefore, the Armenian and Latin languages were employed in the Georgian Catholic churches. With a background of insufficient knowledge of Latin and a neighbouring Armenian population, the Armenian language gradually became the dominant language in the Georgian Catholic churches in Samtkhe-Javakheti. At baptisms, Armenian names and surnames were given to Georgian Catholics. The parish members with Armenian given names and surnames, belonging to the Armenian Catholic church, yet speaking Georgian and having a memory of their Georgian origin, could not be sure about their identity. In the end, Georgian Catholics themselves opposed this ambiguity (Lomsadze 1975, 501-502). However, in one village, Veli, the process resulted in a confusing situation: In the 18th century, they still used Georgian as a liturgical language in their Catholic church. At the same time, the Turkish influence was strong: A typical picture of subtractive bilingualism was attested in the village. Inhabitants used Turkish when they did not manage to express themselves in Georgian, and switched to Georgian when they did not find the word in Turkish. In the 19th century, when whole Armenian villages were brought from Turkey and settled around the village of Veli, the Armenian liturgy was canonised. Thus inhabitants had connections with the Georgian, Turkish, and Armenian languages and communities. In 1883-85 special committees were created in order to investigate and establish the ethnic identity of the inhabitants. The committees concluded that the inhabitants of Veli were Georgians by their ethnic origin and behaviour (Lomsadze 1975, 363-

At the beginning of the 20th century, Muslimized Meskhetians still identified themselves as Yerli and distinguished themselves from the immigrant Muslim groups – Turks, Tarakamas, and Kurds. “By this time they did not identify themselves any more as Georgians. A large number of Muslim Georgians knew the Georgian language; however, their native language was Turkish. Inhabitants of the region communicated with one another in Turkish, among them Armenians who had been resettled from Erzurum and knew the language” (Beridze 2005, 504-506).

Language name as an identity marker

As was mentioned above, a group may preserve its confession and be split linguistically, but maintain its ethnic identity and sense of belonging to its original *ethnos*. In such a case, the group members may claim that their mother tongue is the language spoken by their titular *ethnos* even when they do not speak it themselves. A certain number of respondents who do not speak Greek, Georgian, Armenian, or Ukrainian etc. but are of the respective ethnic origin declare that their mother tongue is the respective language: Greek, Armenian, Georgian, Ukrainian.... (Mikhailov 1994, Sikharulidze 1999, 6; Kobaidze 2001, 155). Reference to the mother tongue is equated with reference to one’s own ethnic/national belonging. The case of the Megrelians and Svans as well as the Tsova-Tush is a clear case of this phenomenon (Kobaidze 1997, 153-154). Attachment to the national mother tongue and ethnic identity may result in further consequences. The history of migration and language of the Greeks is particularly significant in this respect. After the Turkisation of Anatolia, some groups of Greeks preserved Christianity, but not the Greek language. Certain groups of Turkish speaking Greeks emigrated from Turkey to Georgia in the 18th-19th centuries. Along with Christianity they had preserved the consciousness of national belonging and considered Greek as their mother tongue even if they did not speak it (Mikhailov 1994, 3). This is a case when abandonment of the language occurred in reality, not on a symbolic level. That is why it did not imply abandonment of kinship. It is noteworthy that nowadays Turkish speaking Greeks study Greek and not Turkish and move from Georgia to Greece and not to Turkey; this indicates they prefer to return to the people to

365). This story is characteristic of the situation in Smatskhe-Javakheti, with its colourful ethnic, confessional and linguistic structure.

whom they belong according to their ethnic consciousness and not to the places where they lived before emigration.

The mother tongue of Muslimized Meskhetians has been renamed several times: Tatar, Turkish, and Azerbaijani. It is noteworthy that nowadays Muslim Meskhetians try to avoid the term Turkish to refer to the Turkish language they speak, regularly referring to it as "our language" instead. This choice of term seems to be a way of differentiating "our language," on the one hand, as a language obtained through the new confession and indicating confessional loyalty, and on the other hand the Turkish language that is spoken by Turks in Turkey as a part of their ethnic and national belonging. At the same time the term is a means of strengthening group identity and emphasises "our language" as a feature distinguishing this group from the Georgian speaking Georgians and Turkish speaking Turks. Recorded materials reveal the fact that respondents, when they are talking about everyday matters and need to refer to the language they speak, usually try to avoid the term Turkish and instead use other terms such as "our language," "the Muslim language," "our dialect" or "Meskhetian."

It seems that the group which detached itself from other Georgians because of its confession and use of the Turkish language is nowadays striving to distinguish itself from Turks by avoiding the term Turkish to refer to the mother tongue. Therefore, interesting and characteristic terms such as "our language" and "our dialect" have arisen (Comp. naming of Irish as "our own language;" Maguire 1991).

We cite some similar examples here:

Marta Kindiev, 61 years: "Inhabitants of Indusa spoke a mixed language. A half of it was Georgian and another half was our language... The little girl sitting there told her mother in our language" (Baratashvili 1997, 57).

Pazliat Janaeva, 56 years: "All the inhabitants in Indusa and Qamza spoke in Georgian. It was mostly men who spoke our dialect because the men had to go out and work; thus they learned it" (Baratashvili 1997, 57).

The same situation is attested in the memoirs of Nazira Vachnadze who was repatriated in 1956:

"In all villages where we lived (The villages in Adigeni district) people spoke in the same language that we spoke. Nobody has ever called it Turkish. It was called Muslim language as one can hear among any other people -- when you are explaining something

to anybody and you are saying for example: Don't you understand, I am talking in Russian to you; or: Don't you understand Georgian? And we say: "Ben sene mislimandzha ainadierim" - I am talking to you in Muslim". (Vachnadzde 2004, 29).

This short piece shows how difficult it is for the author to refer to her own language. First, she identifies it as "the language that we spoke" (cf., "our language", "our dialect"); then, when she has to mention its name, she introduces a new term, Muslim language, and explicitly points out that this is not the same as Turkish ("Nobody has ever called it Turkish").

The same author writes that both Muslims and Catholics lived in the village called Bolajuri, as well as in Ude. "Muslims spoke both in their language and in Georgian. Thus, they had not forgotten their language. Georgians also spoke the Muslim language, a new language, because the inhabitants communicated to each other... There were some villages where only Muslims lived and just surnames were Georgian and non-Georgian. In these villages people spoke in our language, although some Georgian words were also used, for instance, kliavi (plum), ak'vani (cradle)... the population of these villages did not have to speak any other language in order to communicate to others because everybody could speak our Yerli language" (Vachnadzde 2004, 130).

It is obvious that "our language" (the Yerli language) is being used here to refer to a language of the group which is Muslim and lives as one community. Some members of the community have Georgian surnames and some have non-Georgian surnames. Even in this case, the author did avoid the term Turkish as a definition for surnames that were not Georgian and identified them as "non-Georgian surnames."

The authors of a study conducted among a repatriated population also mention that respondents use the term Anatolian, "which should be interpreted as the Anatolian dialect of Turkish, but the latter term is rather avoided" (Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi).

The term Muslim language is attested in other materials too (Tchitchinadze 2004, 36).

Two further studies have been conducted among deported and repatriated persons, and they show that although the respondents claim that Georgian is their native language, the control questions reveal that actually it is Turkish. The respondents try to avoid this term and tend to refer to the language they speak as the "Meskhetian

language” (Janiashvili 2006, 85). “Mekhetian language” as a term indicating the mother tongue of Muslimized Meskhetians also occurs in a study conducted in the village of Ianeti among repatriated persons (Putkaradze 2005, 19). Thus the group that was trying to merge into the Turkish identity and separate themselves from the Georgian identity experiences a new stage of identity development: They are trying to distinguish themselves both from Georgians and from Turks. The evidence of their group identification is the use of the terms “our people” and “our language,” as well as the Muslim language and non-Georgian surnames.

In some cases reference to the spoken language as Meskhetian/our language/our dialect or any other term instead of Turkish may be the result of a desire to avoid an expression that might be disadvantageous to the repatriation of these groups. Even if this is the case, it shows an understanding of the importance of the mother tongue for ethnic and national identity and political loyalty. It is another matter that usage of the simple term Meskhetian for the version of Turkish spoken by the deported population can create further confusion, since this term has ordinarily indicated a dialect of the Georgian language spoken in this area by the local Meskhetian Christian population. A suggestion by the deported population that they should be referred to merely as “Meskhetians” also implies the same possibility of confusion because this denomination belongs to the local Georgian population as well, who have remained Christian.

The identity search of the deported population described above is reflected in the search for a group name and language name. Turkish is not a desired term because of the group’s endeavour to distinguish itself from Turks (for whatever reason). “Georgian” is not acceptable because it is associated with a language and culture that differs from that of the deported population. It is noteworthy that regardless of these steps, which indicate development towards the formation of a new “Meskhetian” identity, divergence among deportees according to the ethnic origin (Yerli, Kurd, Tatar...) is still preserved (Peuch 2001).

Religious faith and political orientation

The paradox is that Turkisation of this population, comprising Georgians, Turks, and Kurds was started by Turkey, continued by Russia in the 19th century, and successfully accomplished by the Soviet Union in the 20th century. Russia in the 19th century was interested in obtaining new free lands in Georgia. During and after the Russo-Turkish

war in 1828-29, the local Muslimized population was encouraged to leave for Turkey. Christian Armenians and Greeks from Turkey as well as Russian Duhobors from Russia were brought in and installed in the villages (Lomsadze 1975, 332-334, 336-341, 345-362).

From the 19th century, choosing between the Christian and Muslim confessions also became a matter of political orientation between Russia and Turkey. In the 20th century the element of a choice between two socio-economic systems was added: the right to retain private property or the right to join the new system where no religious faith and no private property was allowed to exist.

In 1917-19, Islamic rebels in Smtskhe-Javakheti sharpened the division between Christian Meskhetians and Muslim Meskhetians. Muslim Meskhetians fought for the expansion of Turkey into Georgian territory, while the Georgian army fought to retain this territory and, at the same time, to spread the new power in the state. The ex-Georgian designers of Osmanic globalisation fought with the same fanaticism and neglect for their homeland as did their equally ex-Georgian brothers under the flag of Russian internationalism: “If during the first rebellion (1917) the main slogan was cleansing the region from Armenians while staying loyal to the local (autochthonous) population of historic Meskheti, i.e. to Christian Georgians, this time (1919) another slogan was openly announced - either we or the Georgians should exist up to the south of Atsquri” (Beridze 2005, 510). After the disaster for both sides that accompanies any war, the Muslim rebels were defeated and a new power was established. Antagonism between Christian and Muslim inhabitants was preserved, but good relations on the individual level were also attested (Beridze 2005, 40-62, 507-513).

Political power changed one more time in Georgia in 1921 when the Russian Red Army entered Georgia; Soviet policy did not officially take into account problems of religious confession. Religious confession was replaced by political confession, and no diversity in ideology was accepted or allowed. Confessional differences were considered to have been eradicated since only one shared and sanctioned atheistic ideology - communism -enjoyed legal right in the state (even if the constitution of the state guaranteed freedom of faith). On the other hand, linguistic diversity within the Soviet republics was greatly encouraged; this deliberate attempt at fragmentation was designed to promote the Russian language as the sole means of interethnic

communication in the entire territory of the Soviet Union. At the same time, this policy was used to demonstrate the democratic linguistic policy of the new Soviet power as opposed to the strictly monolingual policy of the Russian empire (Lewis 1972, 66-71). In Samtskhe-Javakheti, the Muslimized population was encouraged to maintain Turkish as their language. At the same time, Soviet policy implied the removal of all connections to the outside world.

As a result of this twofold policy of the Soviet state, the term Turkish language was replaced with the term Azerbaijani. Schools with instruction in Azerbaijani were opened in Samtskhe-Javakheti, and teachers from Azerbaijan were invited to teach at schools in the area (Beridze 2005, 102). Representatives of the region applied to Tbilisi to retain Georgian schools, but their request was rejected. All these measures were aimed at cutting the ties connecting the local population to Turkey and, at the same time, at maintaining groups in the area that were as linguistically distinct as possible.

However, those inhabitants of Samtskhe-Javakheti whose spoken language (Turkish) had been renamed Azerbaijani continued to identify themselves as ethnically Turkish. The Soviet passport included two different categories: nationality in the sense of civil nationality or citizenship (thus, everybody who lived in the Soviet Union had Soviet citizenship) and ethnicity, which was a purely genetic (or primordial) term. “In the census carried out at the end of the 1930s, the population was specifically asked about their identity, and according to respondents, Muslim Meskhetians were offered the opportunity to register as Georgians. In fact this census did not examine ethnic identity but rather political orientation. At that time, the Muslims categorically refused to be designated as Georgians, which resulted in their subsequent terrible fate”(Beridze 2005, 116, 513). In 1939, a new census was conducted and they were named Azerbaijanis, along with all others who were designated as Turks in the 1926 and 1937 censuses.

During the Second World War, the Muslim population of Smatskhe-Javakheti was considered as “unreliable” by the same state that had done everything to maintain and encourage this group as a separate community. In November 1944, army units simultaneously entered all the villages. Several thousand families in the region were ordered to leave their houses within a few hours. They were brought to Borjomi, where special trains were waiting to bring them to remote Central Asia. Those deported from Georgia in 1944 had one shared feature: they were Muslims. They had “Turkish” as a

category indicating ethnicity in their passports, regardless of their ethnic origin. Along with them, Shia Muslims - Kurds and Tarakamas - were also deported.

The deportation in 1944 was crucially significant. It gave a shared history to this heterogeneous group, consisting of ethnic Georgians, Turks, Kurds, etc., in that each constituent element was isolated from any other originally related element. This situation was advantageous for strengthening intra-group ties and revealed this group to in fact be a homogeneous group known by different names (even if differences within the group are still preserved). That is why those who try to represent this population as an entire ethnic group usually take 1944 as their starting point, while any attempt to explore their history before the deportation is perceived as a sign of hostility. Nonetheless, different groups and different tendencies within this heterogeneous group are preserved.

A significant share of this population identifies itself as Turks and Kurds, while there remains one group who cannot define its own identity and is still undergoing an identity crisis: “We knew that we were Turks. Now we are being told that we are Georgians. Who are we actually?” (Baratashvili 1997, 4).

Group identity and future perspectives

As usual, supporters of different suggestions and recommendations concerning the Muslimized Meskhetians argue their position with reference to the different versions of the history of this group. The recommendations are often aimed at “rectifying history” instead of focusing on the real needs and desires of this population.

Some groups insist that these people have always been Turks and have lived in Meskheta since the 6th century (Chervonnaya 1998). According to another view, supported by historical sources and the narratives of witnesses, a large portion of deportees are Muslimized individuals who consider themselves as Turks and whose ancestors were Georgians. It would be a mistake to draw the conclusion on this basis that the reverse process on the collective level would be a simple process. However, individual cases of linguistic integration of repatriated persons in Georgia should not be ignored. There is a third position concerning the identity of the deportees: the group consists of Muslimized Georgians, Kurds, and other ethnic groups, but they have formed a new ethnic grouping, Meskhetian Turks. According to supporters of this idea, this newly formed group is striving to obtain a territorial home. However, a closer

scrutiny reveals no evidence that the deportees are striving for repatriation. Even supporters of repatriation mention that “obscurity of national identification can be seen as a major hindrance to the formation of a potent organisation and movement for repatriation, leaving Meskhetians at the mercy of politicians.” (Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi).

The lack of desire for a cohesive settlement has been observed by other researchers as well. The concept of home among deported Meskhetians has been studied by Kakoli Ray in her PhD thesis "Displaced Populations: Re-shaping International Planning," which was partly based on comprehensive fieldwork among Muslimised Meskhetians settled in Azerbaijan. Ray questions repatriation as the optimal solution for refugees” (Pentikainen & Trier 2004, 45). In another article, “Repatriation and De-territorialization: Meskhetian Turks’ conception of Home,” she concludes that traditional understanding and theories of the idea of home and the Muslimised Meskhetians’ own perceptions of this idea are quite different: “Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Azerbaijan presents evidence of the disjuncture between Meskhetian Turk refugees' idea of home as they articulate it, and the conventional understanding of the idea of home in much of the theory and policy about place, belonging and the nation. It is concluded that the Meskhetian Turk refugees possess an account of community that runs against the grain of the meta-narrative of nation which remains geographically bound’ ” (Ray 2000, 391-414).

Other fieldwork has shown that “the debate over possible repatriation is to a large extent promoted by unrepresentative leaders of the community and the international community”. The author of the research points to the need for considering the concept of homeland and the perceptions of Meskhetian Turks of a territorialized homeland (Tomlinson 2002). In another paper, she writes the following:

Meskhetian Turks present an interesting case of a group perceiving itself in terms of location-based metaphors with little relationship to the landscape from which these are derived. While their rightful place is seen – by national governments and international actors – to be Meskhetia in post-Soviet Georgia, I argue that the Meskhetian Turks ‘displaced’ across the former Soviet Union conceive of their homeland as a landless state rather than a geographical place. Moreover, although their key social groupings draw their names and members from villages in Meskhetia, Meskhetian Turks show little interest in the physicalities in question, and do not, as land-labourers, draw meaning from their relationship with the land. Political tensions have left many Meskhetian

Turks in southern Russia stateless and landless, but most do not use metaphors of place or land to attempt to resolve this plight. (Tomlinson 2004)

It seems that the idea to resettle in Georgia is promoted by various organisations, but it is not popular among the deported population:

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. (Pentikainen & Trier 2004, 49)

Panjikidze (2003, chapter VIII) examines Islam in Georgia and the problems of repatriation of Muslimized Meskhetians in the context of Islamic revival in the Caucasus. He points out that a cultural gap occurred between Muslimized Meskhetians and local Christian Meskhetians. He also states that Muslimized Georgians in Atchara preserved Georgian nationality and Georgian as a mother tongue. The problems of Wahabism in the Caucasus are also touched upon (Panjikidze 2003).

An attempt at a cohesive settlement of dispersed Meskhetian deportees in Samtskhe-Javakheti would contribute to a strengthening of group identity rather than national identity and thus deepen the identity crisis of this population. It would hardly contribute to an improvement in socio-economic conditions either. In this context, it would be reasonable to bear in mind all the possibilities for further development. Cultural and ethnic distancing, which started some hundred years ago, has been increased with distancing in space and time more than sixty years ago.

A more realistic approach would reveal different routes for different groups and individuals. A study of the needs and wishes of this population should be conducted before taking any measures. Otherwise, the repatriation of the descendants of deportees to an (for them) unknown country and culture may turn out to be a process similar to a new deportation.

Neither Muslimized Meskhetians nor any other ethnic group should be categorised by a single label or assigned one shared fate. A collective and imposed re-settlement

would hardly represent a resolution of the Meskhetian problem. Opportunities and measures for integration should be explored both among host communities and among those who would be willing to settle in Georgia.

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