

Repatriation and adaptation of Deported Meskhetians: Society and state in supra-national context

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Georgia, country in the South Caucasus which gained independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, is a natural lab for studying interethnic relations and problems, being a traumatically impoverished multinational country with complicated security conditions and recent experience of still unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts. As Georgia, after decades of enforced isolationism, is integrating both into global markets and the international community, global processes and trends are playing ever-increasing role. Democratic institutions, open society, rule of law, market economy are claimed targets of the transition process. However, even the most sensitive issues such as the repatriation of Meskhetians deported from Georgia back in 1944, are dealt by both the governments and the common people on the basis of irrational emotions and myths rather than pragmatic approach, conceptual thinking and verifiable facts. The process of repatriation is hence dependent on personalities of leaders, external pressures, popular attitudes and other random factors rather than solid social basis, democratic procedures and explicit group interests. The government has to deal with the complexity of introducing contemporary forms of inter-group relations into the transitional society with long soviet tradition of totalitarian, over-centralised governance and economy.

During World War II, about 120,000 Meskhetians were exiled from Georgia to Central Asia, as part of Stalin's policy toward "unreliable" ethnic groups. Today, many of the survivors and their descendants are seeking to return to their ancestral home. The Georgian government has undertaken the task of repatriation of deported Meskhetians over the next dozen of years, and there is as well serious international commitment to accelerate this process. Still, careful planning is required because this process involves a number of complicated real-world economic, political, social, and legal issues, as well as serious psychological challenges. Perceptions, fears and expectations of deported Meskhetians who want to return to Georgia and those of the indigenous population who will be their neighbours need to be understood and taken into account in the repatriation planning process. One should admit that while repatriation and rehabilitation of deported groups of population is a moral imperative and duty of the Georgian state, since there are currently many serious ethnic, territorial and economic problems in Georgia, every effort should be made not to inflame new tensions or conflicts. Preventive measures should be applied to promote a smooth process of repatriation for Meskhetians, equity and peaceful coexistence between them and their new neighbours.

Hence it becomes of utmost importance to understand the feelings and anxieties of those who seek repatriation and the population of the country where the relocation of Meskhetians will take place. Although there are many sensitive issues associated with the process national identity became a focal point for the debate over repatriation.

2. National identity

Repatriation of Meskhetians became a political issue, involving different parties in and outside Georgia, in Russia and Turkey. Confrontation and debate is already reflected in the labelling of deported Meskhetians made by different key players. They are referred to as Meskhetian Turks, Ahiska Turkleri, Muslim Meskhetians depending on the intent to present them as representatives of the one or the other nation. Obscurity of the ethnic background of deported people forms a fertile ground for different interpretations. Meskheti is a historical Georgian region, at the Turkish border well advanced until late middle-ages in politics and culture, but which due its geographical situation for centuries was a prey of its more powerful neighbours- Ottoman empire, Persia and Russia. From the end of XVII century Turkey's politics towards Meskhetia became extremely aggressive, inducing first the nobles and then peasantry to convert from Orthodox Christianity to Moslem religion, to follow Turkish social structure and behave according to Turkish customs and rules. Turkish became the language of education and communication for many, though a big portion of population managed to speak Georgian at home, to follow Georgian customs and to retain Georgian identity. During a long period of Turkish invasion the region became populated by a number of Turks, Khemshirs and Kurds. As a result today it is almost impossible to distinguish among deported Meskhetians ethnic Georgians from Turks, Khemshirs or Kurds. Although some claim their original Georgian names and remember the stories told by their ancestors on their forced islamization.

Belonging is a central human need. The need goes far beyond a small group like a family or kin, and spreads over a large unite of a nation, country or ethnicity. National identity is a face to confront the other nations, a means to locate oneself in a global human structure.

It seems that there is not a single country which considers deported Meskhetians as a part of their nationality and in fact there is not a country which expresses willingness to take responsibility for the fate of Meskhetians. Countries which could have such responsibilities are: Georgia, where deported lived until 1944 and to which a large part of deported is believed to be belong ethnically, Turkey whose language is a native language for almost all deported and to which a part of deported should belong ethnically, Uzbekistan where most of the young generation was born, brought up and which by them is considered it as a home and Azerbaijan, where a big part of deported people live for a long time.

In Georgian society there is a division on the policy of repatriation. The majority of population sees repatriation as a political, cultural, religious, economic and a demographic threat and thinks that only those with clear Georgian identity should be allowed to repatriate and live in small groups all over Georgia and the minority, who considers that deported person should be able to choose any place to live disregarding self-perceived ethnic identity.

Being fully aware of the power of national identity as a tool for monitoring repatriation process, deported Meskhetians seem to tailor their presentation of national belonging according to own interests or the interests of political forces, engaged in the process. For the Turkish oriented organization "Vatan" deported are Turks and should return to Georgia as Turks at the place from which they were deported, notwithstanding the fact that soon after deportation people from other parts of Georgia were relocated at the region. More extremist part of the organization claims that eventually the paths will be followed to form an autonomy and reunite with neighboring Turkey. On the opposite side is Georgian oriented organization "Khsna" who asks it members to regain their Georgian family names and give the obligation that their children will attend Georgian schools.

The studies which were carried out among the repatriated Meskhetians and their neighbors among other things aimed to assess self-presentation of repatriated in regard to national identity, to find out the factors hindering their adaptation to local communities, to measure attitude and perceptions of local population towards deported Meshketians.

3. Empirical study

3.1. Sample characteristics

3.1.1. Meskhetians

In all 154 (52% male and 48% female) repatriated Meskhetians were interviewed in Tbilisi, capital of Georgia (27.9%) and in two regions of Western Georgia, Guria (35.7%) were repatriates live in multi-ethnic surrounding and Imereti, where they have a compact settlement (36.4%).

Age of respondents ranged from 18 to 81 years olds ($M=35.3$, $SD=14.7$). Majority of respondents were born in Uzbekistan, where they were relocated initially after deportation.

39.6% of the sample had high education and 22.1% had 8 classes of education. 12.4% were students.

71.4% of respondents had Georgian, 12.2% Azerbaijanian and 0.7% Russian citizenship. 15.6% possessed no citizenship. Among respondents 14.3% have been deported themselves, however the majority - 67.5% were younger, in fact children of those who experienced deportation. The earliest date of arrival to Georgia of our respondents was 1966. The biggest share of arrivals falls on the period of 1982-

Graph1

Time of arrival of Meskhetian respondents to Georgia

1986. Respondents lived in Georgia on average for 13 years ($SD=6.5$). The latest arrivals are more frequent in Tbilisi –85.7% of interviewed in the capital live there less than 8 years ($M=6.3$; $SD=4.8$). These are mostly young people who came from Azerbaijan to get University education. In Guria respondents on average live for 16.9 years ($SD=5.1$) and Imereti, where they have a compact settlement for 14.5 years

($SD=4.6$). Almost half of the respondents arrived from Azerbaijan, 31.2% came from Uzbekistan, 14.3% from Russia, the rest from Kirgizia and Kazakhstan.

3.1.2. Local population

Among interviewed 441 respondents (55% female and 45% male) in the age range of 16-81 ($M=42.2$; $SD=15.1$) 69.2% had a personal contact with Meskhetians through living in neighborhood (34.2%), working or studying together (7%) or in other way (27.9%).

Interviews were taken in the same location as interviews with Meskhetians-50.5% in Tbilisi, 23.6% in Guria and 25.9% in Imereti.

3.2. Main results

3.2.1. National identity

77.4% of Meskhetian respondents consider themselves Georgians, more 12.3% think in much narrower than national or ethnic terms, of being Meskhetian, 4.8% cannot classify the self in regard of nationality, 3.4% perceive themselves as Turks and 2.1% name other nationality.

As for local population 42.6% of respondents consider Meskhetians as to be Georgians, 33.3% Turks and 24.1% others.

So Meskhetians perceive themselves much more as Georgians and less as Turks than are perceived by locals.

3.2.2. Social distance

To measure attitude of Meskhetians towards Georgians and Turks and of locals towards Meskhetians and Turks Bogardus Social Distance Scale was incorporated in the interviews. Respondents were asked to choose one from the seven presented options, whether respondent would accept representative of respective ethnic group as: related through marriage, a friend, a neighbour, co-worker, grant citizenship, or not allow in the country.

Meskhetians showed greater distance to Turks than to Georgians.

Graph 2

Social distance of Meskhetians towards Georgians and Turks demonstrated by Meskhetian respondents

As can be seen in Graphs 2 and 3 Meskhetians have considerably smaller social distance to Turks than local respondents (21.4% of Meskhetians and 6.5% of Georgians accept m. They also showed more positive attitude to Georgians than Georgians to them (62.7% of Meskhetians approve marriage of family member of Georgian, while only 20.8% OF Georgians are ready to accept marriage to Meskhetian).

Graph 3

Social distance to Meskhetians and Turks demonstrated by local respondents

3.2.3. Features characterizing Meskhetians, Georgians and Turks

Evaluation of Turks, Georgians and Meskhetians by local respondents

3.2.4. Values

When asked to choose three most important things in life, both local respondents and Meskhetians most often choose Health (88% of locals and 77.3% of Meskhetians) and Family life (52.7% of locals and 51% of Meskhetians) third most important thing for Georgians is Money (47.2%) and for Meskhetians Employment (43.8%). Employment is the next most often chosen value for locals (29.4%) and Money for Meskhetians (37.5%), while as the fifth most important for locals are Friends (24.2%) and for Meskhetians House (26.3%).

So pattern of values demonstrated by repatriated and locals is quite similar.

3.2.5. Command of Georgian

In general respondents do not have good command of Georgian language. 80.7% pointed that they encountered problems with language at the time of arrival. Now language still comprises a problem for 64.6% .

Less than a half of our respondents (46%) were able to answer our questions in Georgian. The majority (84.7%) of respondents did not know Georgian before arrival. Now 71% can talk Georgian. According to respondents' memories, the parents of 64% of them talked with children in, as they call it, Anatolian (which should be interpreted as Anatolian dialect of Turkish, but the latter term is rather avoided), and of 15% recall talking with their parents in Turkish. Majority of respondents (65.3%) continue to use the same Anatolian when talking with their spouses. While 47.9% of respondents continue to speak Anatolian to their children, the proportion of those who talk with their children in Georgian is obviously increasing and is significantly bigger than in case of the previous generation of respondents' parents- now 16% claim to talk with their children in Georgian, while only 6% of respondents remember to communicate with parents in their childhood in Georgian. More 24.4% talk with children on both Anatolian and Georgian. Naturally, most respondents claim to know what they call Anatolian best of all. The tendency of wider use and an improvement of the command of Georgian is evident, while importance of Turkish does not diminish.

Georgian as a source of problem of their adaptation to local community. 72.3% think that Meskhetians have the problems with Georgian and by the opinion of 81.1% returnees should get assistance in language acquisition.

3.2.6. Religion

Overwhelming majority of the respondents are Muslims (96.7%), only 2% is Christian and 1.3% is atheist. Among respondents 79.9% nearly always or sometimes practices religion.

Religion does not seem to be of great importance to our Meskhetian respondents. When asked to choose three most important values from the provided list of eleven, only 9.2% respondents choose religion. It was ranked as 8 among 11 values.

The situation is somewhat similar with local respondents. 73.5% of the respondents are Christians and 21.3% Muslim, 5.3% atheists. Religion is ranked as 7 among values by locals. 78.8% went at least some time to Church/Mosque and 80% nearly always or sometimes practiced religion.

3.2.7. Feelings associated with living in Georgia

It seems that Meskhetians are rather satisfied with their living in Georgia. Different indirect indicators, like the desired place of residence and advice to other Meskhetians to return, point to this. E.g. Majority of Meskhetian respondents pointed to Meskheti (57.8%) and other places (38.2%) in Georgia as desired place of residence. The biggest portion of respondents also wish that their children live in different parts of Georgia (42.8%) and more specifically in Meskheti (30.3%).

So the desire to live in Meskheti is prevalent, despite the fact that 53.9% of respondents have never been there but is less pronounced in regard with desired residence for children.

94.7% is willing to advise Meskhetians to return to Georgia.

3.2.7. Attitude of local population to repatriation

73.4% of local respondents think that Meskhetians should be repatriated. From them 46.4% names justice as the reason for repatriation.

Big portion of respondents is for imposing limitations on repatriation process. According to 56.4% knowledge of Georgian and/or Georgian self-identity should be a prerequisite for repatriation. 21.6% considers that returnees should not be allowed to live in Meskheti.

26.6% is against repatriation. Among them 61.1% names as a reason for their position probability of Meskhetians forming autonomy with a prospect of reunion with Turkey.

Local population associates with a repatriation a host of fears and concerns. The fears concern not only economics, e.g. decrease of economic opportunities through increased competition for employment (64.6%) and for plots (65.1%), but also politics, i.e. increase of Turkish influence (54.9%) and conflict (52.3%). It is worth noting that next to the threats population also considers possibilities of positive outcomes, as increase of international assistance (54.7%) and economic growth (54.8%).

4. Conclusions

Before the beginning of the study we were aware and our results confirmed our expectations that due to gains of demonstrating Georgian national identity not all the results of our study could be taken at their face value. Thoughts, feelings, attitudes and concerns manifested by our Meskhetian respondents more reflect the facade that they put out in their relationship with the surrounding and can be in a considerable degree assumed to depend on the features of this surrounding. Nevertheless study allowed us to unveil some concerns of repatriates and local population hindering adaptation of Meskhetians. The results allow for planning the process of repatriation in a way minimizing possible tensions and conflicts among returnees and locals, to identify spheres where Meskhetians need for assistance is more pressing and to find ways for the formation in population of a more positive attitude towards Meskhetians.

Many of the problems of adaptation and integration of the repatriated Meskhetians are linked to much debated controversy of their group identity. Whatever arguments might be used by supporters of one or another theory (dubious toponymic or similar arguments are applied in order to prove their dominant Turkic, or, respectively, Georgian origin), it is clear that both Georgian and Turkic elements played certain roles in formation of the group known today as Meskhetian Turks or Muslim Meskhetians or Ahiska Turkleri. However, controversy in perception of national identity, among Meskhetians themselves, the Georgian population at large, and international supporters of the case, continue to play important role in developing attitudes and policies. This controversy, juxtaposed over the gloomy experience of deportation and victimisation, makes it extremely difficult to measure in reasonable methodology not only the self-identification of Meskhetians, but also their attitude toward any issue even remotely related to such identity and perceived as having impact on the chances of repatriation and rehabilitation. In fact many respondents avoided answering questions concerning Turks and refused to express their attitude towards Turks. Results of the study give reliable evidence for closer links with Georgian than Turkish identity among the majority of respondents. This can be interpreted either to the existing before repatriation orientation or the effect of Georgian cultural surrounding. But still lack of clear cut national identity among deported is evident. The need of belonging prompts to find replacement to national identity. Labelling of deported people as Meskhetian or Ahiska Turks (Akhaltsikhe, name of town in Meskheta in Turkish) contributed to replacement national with a group identity based predominantly on narrow geographical location and in a lesser degree in combination with language, religion and collective memory of trauma. Obscurity of national identification can be seen as a major reason hindering to build potent organisation and movement for repatriation and a reason that makes Meskhetians prey of politicians.

Refusal of declaring Georgian identity by Meskhetians living outside Georgia seem to fuel the feeling of national humiliation of Georgian population which is intensified as a result of secession of autonomous entities of Oseti and Abkhazia. The fears of population of a possibility of a similar threat from Meskhetians cannot be considered irrational. Competition for land, accommodation and market, demographic and religious threats, increased influence of Turkey are still other issues that population associates with repatriation of Meskhetians. Problems being real, their scope is much inflated by politicians.

Our study demonstrated a need of deeper study of the problems of repatriation among local population and Meskhetians living in different countries. Results pointed to the possibilities of planning repatriation process in a way which can minimise possibilities of conflict and can increase the chances of effective adaptation of Meskhetians to the host culture.