Meskhetians: Homeward Bound...

Tom Trier
George Tarkhan-Mouravi
Forrest Kilimnik

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Foreword

Knut Vollebaek

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

Over the years a number of academic studies have been published on the issue of the Meskhetians: their tragic deportation from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944; their lives as deportees and émigrés in third countries; their later rehabilitation and resettlement, and, finally, their long-awaited repatriation to their homeland. As one of my predecessors, the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel, pointed out in his preface to a European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) study conducted in 2007 on the Meskhetians,[1] Stalin's forced resettlements "was a tragedy of enormous dimensions and the human sufferings resulting from the deportations, unfortunately, are still felt among former deportees and their descendants." Van der Stoel also noted that the Meskhetian problem is still a much overlooked issue. I hope that this new book, *Meskhetians: Homeward Bound...,* by Tom Trier, George Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrest Kilimnik, will help refocus attention on the Meskhetian issue, and position it at the center of internal and international repatriation and reintegration policy efforts in Georgia.

The authors of the 2007 study, *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?*, provided

an extensive academic examination of the situation facing the Meskhetians in the nine main countries of their current residence: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey and the USA. *Meskhetians: Homeward Bound...,* however, will be useful to the reader interested in the issue of the Soviet deportations of the 1940s in general, and the deportation of the Meskhetians and other communities (e.g. the Hemshins, Karapapakhs, Muslim Kurds) from Georgia in particular. As the authors point out, the Meskhetians, together with the Volga Germans and Crimean Tartars, remained on the Soviet 'blacklist' as ethnic communities even after Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, in which he announced that other deported communities such as the Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, and Karachais would be allowed to return to their homelands. I believe that many people deported by Stalin's regime agree with the authors' conclusions that the "desire to return to the land of their ancestors is astonishingly strong and unwavering." Only a few hundred Meskhetians of a total of some 100,000 persons deported managed to return to Georgia during Soviet times or after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some others managed to move closer to their homeland by settling in Azerbaijan or in the North Caucasus. Those who stayed in Central Asia remain vulnerable, facing pogroms in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in 1989 and being again targeted during the events of spring 2010 in Kyrgyzstan.

Indeed, this book is not only *about* the Meskhetians, it is also *for* them. At the same time, because this book provides a solid introduction to the Meskhetians' historical background,

their culture, language, religion and traditions as well as the ongoing challenges related to their repatriation to and eventual reintegration into Georgia, I believe it will be a highly valuable source of information for both local and international actors who are dealing with the Meskhetian issue on a daily basis. In contrast to previous studies, this book focuses more on Georgia and, therefore, its main audience could well be policy-makers and those in decision-making positions in the country as well as international organizations that assist the Georgian government in its endeavors. The authors use experiences from other parts of the former Soviet Union and Europe to provide valuable insights into how to tackle the complex issues of repatriation and reintegration.

Since its inception in 1992, the institution of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities has been actively engaged in the Meskhetian repatriation issue. Together with other international organizations, such as the Council of Europe (CoE), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Centre for Minority Issues, my predecessors and I have personally encouraged the Georgian government to adopt relevant legislation and allow sufficient time for the submission of applications by the Meskhetians. It is a positive sign that the Georgian government has extended the deadline for applications twice, in 2008 and 2009, and amended relevant laws accordingly in order to give the deported persons and/or their family members a fair chance to return to their homeland. My institution, together with the UNHCR and ECMI, has assisted in the processing of these applications throughout

2010, and continues to assist the Georgian government in fulfilling its 1999 Council of Europe commitments and obligations in relation to repatriation of deported peoples. While the current processing of applications may still take some time, I hope that at least some Meskhetian families will be granted repatriate status before the end of 2011.

It is clear that the repatriation process and the reintegration of the Meskhetians into Georgian society should be handled in a comprehensive and strategic manner in order to avoid renewed ethnic tensions and potential discord on the ground. Therefore, it is a welcome development that the Georgian government in March 2011 set up an interagency governmental council to deal with the Meskhetian repatriation process. In my opinion, one of the major challenges remaining is raising awareness within both the deported communities and the receiving—or host—community on all aspects of the repatriation and reintegration processes. ECMI has been a long-term and valuable partner to my institution and has extensive experience in this field throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Europe. This new book, *Meskhetians: Homeward Bound...*, represents an important contribution in this awareness raising as it fills the information gap and dispels misconceptions that some people may still have, in Georgia and beyond, about the deported Meskhetians and their fate.

The Hague, May 2011

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Introduction

From the 1920s to the early 1950s, the leaders of the Soviet Union routinely used forced migration as a repressive measure to control and intimidate the populations of the multiethnic state. Historians estimate that some six million people were deported from their native lands during this period, including eight entire ethnic groups who were exiled to Central Asia, Siberia and Russia's Far East. Germans from the Volga region as well as Balkars, Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars and Meskhetians from the Caucasus and the Black Sea regions fell victim to these collective deportations, either because of alleged collaboration with the German forces or, in the case of the Meskhetians, out of Stalin's fear that they might sympathize with Turkey in the event of a war with the country. Indeed, the deportations also affected other groups. In addition, over these years, hundreds of thousands of persons were subject to severe oppression, particularly where dissent was apparent or where Stalin's fears of opposition prompted tyrannical submission, such as in the South Caucasus, the Baltic states and elsewhere throughout the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Particularly in the second part of the 1930s and during World War II, swift executions and deportations took place in insurmountable numbers, affecting not only ethnic minorities but also majority populations.

After Stalin's death, Khrushchev denounced the late dictator's purges and opened an era of less repressive

policies. Many of the deported persons and population groups could now return to their native lands, prompting large numbers to move away from their areas of exile in the years that followed. While Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais could return to their places of origin from the late 1950s onwards, a ban on repatriation remained in force for the deported Crimean Tatars, Germans and Meskhetians. It was only decades later, with the demise of the Soviet Union, that these groups could finally seek to return to their homelands. Hence, in 1989, thousands of Crimean Tatars began returning to Crimea. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, a policy of repatriation support for Germans living abroad allowed most of the deported Volga Germans and their descendants to return to Germany rather than to the Volga region from where they had been originally expelled. While many Meskhetians opted for returning to their ancestral lands in southern Georgia, they were prevented from doing so due to the tumultuous situation and the conflicts that raged across the country surrounding the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing years of fragile independence.

In spite of the fact that deportations were not unique to the Soviet practice of ethno-political engineering, it is indeed exceptional that almost an entire population group, the Meskhetians, still remains in exile. Today, 67 years after they were banished and 20 years after the end of the Soviet era, the Meskhetians continue to be a deported population. Most recently, fortunately, the issue of their displacement is now being addressed in Georgia, although almost seven decades have elapsed since they were first uprooted. With the passing of the Law on Repatriation in 2007, a legal framework is

now in place for the repatriation of Meskhetians, and in the past few years the Georgian government and society have begun preparing for the actual repatriation, which is expected to begin in the second half of 2011.

This book on the Meskhetians aims at introducing the deported communities, their background, and their current situations into a broader context. Chapter 1 provides a brief introduction to the history of the Meskhetians and discusses issues relating to their origin and identity. Chapter 2 offers a condensed outline of the Meskhetian communities today, their common patterns of settlement, language, culture, and customs, as well as matters of political, economic and social integration in their countries of current settlement. With this book, several points are highlighted that are central to the discussion of repatriation, which need to be considered prior to, during and after the return of Meskhetians to Georgia. Chapter 3, suitably, is formulated as a catalogue of issues to be addressed as the repatriation process is set in motion. In seeking to outline the beginning of a conceptual framework for repatriation and integration of the Meskhetians, this chapter discusses the objectives and goals that should underpin repatriation while reviewing a number of issues and obstacles that will be necessary to tackle alongside the repatriation and integration processes.

Chapters 1 and 2 draw heavily on our earlier research on Meskhetian issues, in particular the chapters in the volume *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?*, which was developed from a large scale research project conducted from 2004 to 2006 in the countries of current settlement.[1] Other important sources for these chapters have been the useful overview of the group entitled

Meskhetian Turks: An Introduction to their History, Culture and Resettlement Experience,[2] as well as a number of sources on the deportation of peoples in the Soviet Union. While this short book does not claim to be a scholarly study of the group in question, while drawing almost exclusively on secondary sources, it does nonetheless provide endnote references to the main sources used for preparing the text.

A note on nomenclature is necessary for any book on this subject. As will be apparent in this book, the ethnonymic designation of the group under discussion is controversial and strongly disputed both by members of the group and amongst scholars. We would like to stress that the use of the term 'Meskhetian' throughout this book in no way indicates any sympathies towards any ethno-national orientation or theory of origin. The authors of this book remain completely neutral on the issue of ethnic identity and orientation, while adding that the discussion of the origins of Meskhetians is not the subject of this volume.

We hope this book can be of particular use as a reference material, especially in Georgia, where the issue of repatriation over the recent years has increasingly become a reality. The volume is published concurrently in English, Georgian and Russian, and is intended to stimulate the debate and undertakings among the Georgian government and civil society stakeholders as the country and local communities are preparing for the repatriation and integration of those deported Meskhetians who are homeward bound.

Tom Trier, George Tarkhan-Mouravi and Forrest Kilimnik

Tbilisi, March 2011

Chapter 1: History of the Deported Communities

1.1 Introduction

Just as the Meskhetian people are called by many names—Meskhetian Turks, Muslim Meskhetians, Ahıska Turks (Akhaltsikhe Turks) to mention the most commonly used—so is their history one of oscillating circumstances. Originally from the historical region of Meskheti, which today is divided between Turkey and Georgia, the northern part of which constitutes a part of the administrative territory of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Meskhetians have found themselves at the crossroads of interwoven political and cultural influences. For almost 500 years of shared history within the Ottoman and Russian Empires, the Soviet Union and the Republic of Georgia, the Meskhetian communities have been confronted with shifting borders and civilizations that have given rise to both assimilation and segregation of the people living in the region. From these historical changes, the inhabitants of Meskheti have faced both acceptance and rejection within their fluctuating political and social circumstances. The collective deportation of the Meskhetian communities in 1944 signaled a culmination of their suffering, a memory of which would follow them into their exile over the coming decades.

1.2 Identity

The history of the Meskhetian people is one strongly rooted in the fluctuating identities of the community, which at times has been internally conceived and at others has been externally imposed. Together these have formed a multifaceted social identification between 'us' and 'them' according to the surrounding societies in which the Meskhetians have found themselves. The experiences of the Meskhetians, despite the fact that they have been encountered and dealt with differently by each community, have become laden with interpretations of the events, which together create a collective mythico-history, i.e. a history that records both myth and reality. While the Meskhetian communities have each developed their own understanding and sense of belonging, the events surrounding their deportation and permanent exile has reinforced a mythico-history fixed upon a pan-communal identity. As a result, a collective memory based upon victimhood, survival and dispersion has created a group narrative reinforced by the different, yet corresponding, experiences of the Meskhetian communities.

Linked with this identity are the ethnic, religious, linguistic and geographical affiliations of the Meskhetians. These identifiers, owing to internal perceptions and external impositions, have influenced the Meskhetians' sense of self in relation to other populations, particularly concerning ethnicity. Together with these identifying factors, which are subject to the fluctuating political, economic and social environments as well as time periods, is the understanding of home and homeland. As a result of their deportation, a collective homesickness has taken root amongst the

Meskhetian communities that is maintained through a group narrative retold generation after generation. However, while some Meskhetians adhere to this sense of belonging, others claim deviation from the collective mythico-history and identity. In this manner, leaders of different Meskhetian organizations have utilized the shifting interpretations of the communities, home and history to support separate agendas concerning repatriation, which in turn has furthered divergent identities, explicitly ethnic affiliation. Additionally, non-Meskhetian populations, state governments and the international community also maintain their own histories and interpretations of who the Meskhetians are. While sometimes these coincide, most often they contradict the other. Consequently, together these factors of internal creation and external force have produced an identity that both strengthens and weakens collective belonging, which hinges on the mythico-history of the Meskhetian communities.[1]

1.3 Origins

The origin of the Meskhetians is disputed among scholars, including in particular Georgian and Turkish historians. Georgian scholars largely maintain that the Muslim population of Meskheti was originally Christian from a Georgian tribe called *Meskhs*. According to this point of view, the Ottoman conquest of the region in 1578 brought about a period of severe Turkification and Islamization. While this cultural transformation took centuries, the majority of the population of Meskheti had become Muslim and were speaking an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish—although

sometimes in parallel with Georgian—by the time the region was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1828. Turkish scholars, together with some Meskhetian leaders, in contrast, usually assert that the predominant population of Meskheti originally was ethnically Turkish, albeit influenced by Georgian cultural customs. Turkish scholars emphasize that there is no evidence of any significant ethnic differences when comparing the Muslim population of Meskheti with Turks across the border in Turkey in Eastern Anatolia.

While the origin of the Meskhetians is disputed, historians generally agree that a considerable part of the indigenous population of the region remained Muslim throughout the era of the Russian Empire. After 1828, the Russian administration pursued policies aimed at expelling the Muslim population across the border to the Ottoman Empire, rather than assimilating them and converting them to Christianity. Consequently, a large number of local Muslims emigrated or were forced to move to the Ottoman Empire, while ethnic Armenians from across the border in turn were resettled throughout the region.[2] In this way, a process of homogenization along religious lines took place, which resulted in the population within Meskheti that was under Russian control to increasingly become Christian, while more and more inhabitants of the Ottoman ruled Meskheti adopted Islam. In a census carried out by the imperial Russian authorities in 1897 in the districts of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, which coincide approximately with today's Samtskhe-Javakheti region (excluding the Borjomi district), 31–35% of the population spoke Turkish; 48% were Armenians; 12% were Christian Georgians; 5% were Russians; and 2% were Kurds.[3]

1.4 Soviet Classification

Following the end of World War I, the multiethnic Russian and Ottoman Empires found themselves on the verge of dismemberment by internal processes and fracturing as well as external circumstances and seizure. As a result, Georgia proclaimed its independence from the Russian Empire in May 1918 while leading a campaign to secure its new borders against the Ottoman Empire, after the dissolving of the short-lived Transcaucasian Federative Democratic Republic. As troops advanced from both sides on Georgia's southern territories, including the region of Meskheti, several Muslim communities allied with the Ottoman Empire and established a Provisional National Government of the Southwestern Caucasus from December 1918 to April 1919 and even declared independence, although this was merely a nominal act. With the Ottoman army invading Georgia's border regions, conflict erupted between the Muslim and Christian communities residing there. As a result, accounts relate atrocities by both sides in what would become a collective memory of distrust and discord reflecting upon the return of Meskhetians up until today. In this way, power politics drew a wedge between the different populations in the region, especially along the Christian-Muslim divide, although the small Catholic community of the region largely avoided being involved in the conflict. In February 1921, the brief independence of the Democratic Republic of Georgia came to an end with its forced incorporation into the Soviet Union. In the same year the Treaty of Kars was signed by representatives of revolutionary Soviet leader Vladimir Ilych Lenin and first president of Turkey

Mustafa Atatürk, splitting Meskheti respectively between the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Georgian SSR) and the soon established Republic of Turkey.[4]

From this point forward, Meskhetians living in the Georgian SSR became subject to the fluctuating Soviet policies of ethnic labeling, which produced divergent interpretations according to a Turkification or Azerbaijanization of the group's identity. At this time, most Meskhetians did not adhere to any strict ethnic identity, rather preserving a group affiliation based on religion and language. Initially Soviet officials upheld policies of Turkification, allowing Meskhetians to continue to learn Turkish at school. From 1926 to 1935, policy shifting motivated by Soviet ethno-federalism branded many members of the group as 'Turks' in attempts to place Meskhetians within a pan-nation that included all Turkic ethnic groups of the Caucasus. In 1935, Soviet officials adopted the label of 'Azerbaijanis,' which linked the Meskhetians to the majority ethnic group of Azerbaijan. To this end, Azerbaijani Turkish became the language of instruction in Meskhetian schools. Correspondingly, this process of Azerbaijanization reflected in the Soviet internal classification of ethnic groups, which designated Meskhetians as 'Azerbaijanis' in both their passports and the 1939 census. Just years later, though, the label of 'Turks' was utilized again despite the fact that many Meskhetians were still recorded as 'Azerbaijanis.'[5] Accordingly, while the rationale behind this oscillating ethnic labeling of the Meskhetians in Georgia can be understood as a determined external strategy to 'divide and rule' the groups making up the Soviet society, it may also be explained by the relatively

weak internal ethnic identification held by the group during this time. As a by-product of the Soviet policies, though, Meskhetians began to cultivate a group identity, with ethnic undertones, that would become gradually fixed upon their collective repression following their deportation.[6]

1.5 Deportation

With World War II raging on the Eastern Front, Joseph Stalin set in motion a campaign to deport peoples accused of treason and collaboration with the enemy or regarded as untrustworthy due to ties with ethnic kin in states bordering the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Although Soviet deportations of populations based on ethnicity had started as early as the 1920s, the World War II period saw hitherto unprecedented measures to deport entire ethnic groups. To this end, in 1941 the Volga German population living in central Russia were collectively deported. Two years later, two additional groups from the North Caucasus—the Kalmyks and Karachais—were deported. In 1944, the Balkars, Chechens, Crimean Tatars and Ingush from the North Caucasus and Black Sea regions were also expelled. Persons belonging to these groups were also deported from other parts of the Transcaucasian republics, including 4,146 Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais from the Georgian SSR.[7] At this time, plans were secretly drawn up by the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR, Candide Charkviani, and the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Valerian Bakradze, to relocate the Muslim population of Meskheti to the eastern regions of the

republic. In March 1944, some 3,240 persons, largely Azeris and Kurds who had migrated without official permission to urban areas, were involuntarily resettled to southeastern Georgia (today's Kvemo Kartli region).[8] By summer, though, the resettlement location for the larger Meskhetian population was changed to areas throughout the Central Asian Soviet republics. By the end of the year Lavrenti Beria, the head of the Soviet secret service NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) and Stalin's right-hand man who executed the ethnic deportations during the 1940s, prepared to expel thousands of Muslims from southern Georgia.[9]

Hence, from 15 to 17 November the entire Muslim population in Meskheti—including Meskhetians along with smaller groups of nomadic Karapapakhs, Kurds, Roms ('Gypsies') and Turks—were forced out of their homes into cattle cars to be transported to Central Asia. An additional deportation took place in neighboring Adjara weeks later, on 25-26 November, where Muslim groups including Hemshins, Kurds, Meskhetians and Turks were deported. In total, according to official figures, 94,955 persons were sent into exile from the two regions in November 1944.[10] Later, perhaps as many as 10,000 soldiers of the Soviet army and belonging to these banished groups were also expelled as they returned to their villages in the Georgian SSR from the front lines. In the following years, several hundred persons that had escaped or had otherwise been overlooked during the main deportation were also detained and sent to Central Asia. Consequently, the total number of deportees reached above 100,000 persons that were exiled to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In 1945, some

30,000 Georgian Christians were forcibly resettled from other parts of Georgia to the homes of the now deported Muslims of Meskheti.[11] By chance, the predominantly Muslim Georgian population of Adjara was spared from being deported, although parts of the Laz community living in villages on the border with Turkey were banished as well to Central Asia. Unlike the other deported communities, the Laz are ethnically related to Georgians and are usually understood to be a sub-national Georgian population group. For whatever reason that may have prompted the initial decision for their deportation, the Soviet authorities reversed their actions and undertook significant efforts in the months following to find the Laz families in Central Asia and secure their return to Adjara.[12]

However, for those that were expelled from Georgia and remained in exile, the acts of deportation were atrocious in character. With their few possessions seized by soldiers, 90 individuals were packed into each cattle car to be sent on a fatal journey that lasted between 18 and 22 days, and left around 3,000 dead from cold, hunger and illness. Owing to the confined space of the freight cars, upon their arrival to their new unknown environments those who had survived the perilous passage were tormented by starvation and disease, which would continue to afflict the deported people for several years. In this cruel fashion, in but a few days the Soviet government had removed the entire population of Meskhetians as well as the associated smaller Muslim communities from their homeland with ruthless efficiency and sent them into an exile, an event that would come to define their lives and identities for decades to come.[13]

According to official numbers, of the 92,307 deportees that arrived in Central Asia—excluding the deported soldiers and others that followed later—53,163 were sent to Uzbekistan; 28,598 to Kazakhstan; and 10,546 to Kyrgyzstan.[14] Strewn across 18 districts of the Central Asian republics, the survivors were forced to inhabit special settlement areas where they worked as agricultural laborers, all the time facing severe hardships. The Meskhetians were forbidden to leave their new settlements without permission from the local governing official, under the threat of punishment by 15 to 20 years of hard labor in the Gulag camps. This regulation prohibited families from visiting kin in other areas without special permission; thus, isolating family members from one another for the coming twelve years. Furthermore, heads of families were required to inform the authorities of any changes in the family due to birth, death or runaway. Linked to this constant surveillance were the poor living conditions in the region that were exacerbated by the climatic differences of Central Asia compared to that of their homeland, which resulted in the death of thousands of the deportees in the initial years of resettlement. Despite this unabating adversity brought about by discrimination and hostility from the local populations, many Meskhetians attempted at rebuilding their lives over the 1950s through hard work, by farming their lands and constructing their houses.[15] Thus, from 1944 Meskhetians endured the first years of their forced deportation until 1956, which signaled an upturn in the situation of several deported peoples throughout the Soviet Union with the lifting of some of the strictest regulations, just as it marked the prolongation of exile of the Meskhetians.

Karapapakhs

Karapapakhs, who are also known as Terekeme, are semi-nomadic tribal Turkic groups, predominantly of the Sunni Muslim faith. While the Karapapakh/Terekeme do not constitute a single or uniform ethnic group, the colloquial label was used in the 19th and early 20th centuries for almost all semi-nomadic Turkic groups in the Caucasus. These Turkic semi-nomads have historically lived throughout vast territories in the Caucasus region, stretching from today's northeastern Turkey and northwestern Armenia to southern Georgia and western Azerbaijan and from southern Dagestan to northwestern Iran. Today, Karapapakhs can mostly be found in northeastern Turkey, in northwestern Iran and in Dagestan. Karapapakh means 'black hat,' a name derived from their traditional black head scarfs. The name Terekeme is derived from the name 'Turkmen.' Both terms are sometimes used by Turkish historians as generic names for Turkic people in Georgia, together with designations that also include *Ahıska Türkleri* (Meskhetian Turks) and *Borçali Türkleri* (Turks from Borchalo, today's eastern Kvemo Kartli region, that identify themselves as Azeris). In the 19th century, Russian ethnographers—and later Soviet scholars—described Karapapakhs as a distinct tribal group, although closely related with Turks, and until the Soviet census of 1926 they were recorded separately. Linguistically, the Karapapakhs speak a

vernacular closely related to the Eastern Anatolian Turkish dialects spoken by the Meskhetians, and usually their language is classified by linguists as being related to Azeri but influenced by different Turkish dialects.

With Russia's expansion into the South Caucasus in the early 19th century, and especially after the end of the 1826–28 war with Iran and the 1828–29 war with the Ottoman Empire, the vast majority of Karapapakhs that had come under Russian rule—which had up until that time been mostly settled in the Borchalo region—emigrated to the Ottoman Empire or northern Iran along with significant parts of the Turkic population groups as well as non-Turkic Muslims. In these years, a mass exchange between the Muslim population from territories conquered by the Russian Empire and the Christian population from Turkey and Iran took place. At this time, Karapapakhs from Kazakh (now in western Azerbaijan) and from the Borchalo region were resettled to Ottoman Turkey. Further migrations took place as a result of the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War, when Russia conquered Kars, Ardahan and other regions in Eastern Anatolia, resulting in many Karapapakhs and other Muslim groups to flee westwards. In 1904, yet another migration to Turkey took place when Karapapakhs resettled from Russian-controlled Georgian territories after obtaining official permission from both the Russian and Turkish authorities.

However, some Karapapakhs remained in Russian-controlled territories in the Kars and Ardahan regions after the war, and by the end of the 19th century many of the nomadic Karapapakhs again moved to the Russian-controlled territories of northern Armenia and southern Georgia, which had been abandoned by the group half a century earlier. In 1910, a Russian scholar found 99 Karapapakh settlements in the Russian-controlled parts of Eastern Anatolia (Kars region), however, population numbers were not recorded. During early Soviet rule, the Karapapakhs in some parts of the Caucasus were considered a separate nationality. While in the Soviet census of 1926, 6,311 persons in Armenia were recorded as such—most of them living in the Shirak region bordering Georgia and Turkey—Turkic semi-nomadic groups in other parts of Soviet Transcaucasus were not counted as members of this group. No Karapapakhs were recorded in Georgia, where most likely they were counted as 'Turks' or 'Azerbaijanis' like the Meskhetians. In the 1940s, Karapapakhs in Georgia lived mostly in Meskheti, and with the deportations in 1944 they together with other smaller Muslim groups in Meskheti and Javakheti were also banished. Today, most Karapapakhs have assumed Meskhetian or Azeri identities, although small groups maintain distinct Karapapakh identities, particularly in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region.

1.6 Banishment & Resettlement

Three years following Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev, as First Secretary of the Communist Party and new leader of the Soviet Union, lifted several of the restrictions placed on the deportees in a move to call attention to crimes committed by Stalin. In his 1956 speech to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress, Khrushchev allowed five of the eight deported peoples—Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais—to return to their places of origin. In spite of this reconsideration, the remaining groups—the Volga Germans, Crimean Tartars and Meskhetians—together with other smaller deported communities were not permitted to repatriate. For the Meskhetians, with the onset of the Cold War their homeland along the southern border of the USSR had become a geopolitically strategic territory owing to its frontier to Turkey and thus the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bloc. The Soviet authorities employed the mandatory system of *propiska* (residence permit), which not only tied an individual to a single place, but also lead to a loss of legal status if registration could not be, or was not allowed to be, certified in another settlement. As a result, many Meskhetians found themselves fettered to their new homes in Central Asia with the fear of being legally and socially excluded if they resettled.

Moreover, some members of the Georgian political elite resisted repatriation on account of the Christian Georgian communities now living in Meskheti and the possibility of instability caused by mass repatriation. While forbidden to return home, months later the constraints of the special settlement zones were lifted for the deportees. With this

limited improvement, many Meskhetians prepared to move to the Azerbaijani SSR with the support of Azeri Soviet officials. For most Meskhetians this move was seen only as a temporary step before finally returning to their homeland in the Georgian SSR.

The number of Meskhetians opting for return, though, swelled following October 1957 when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR signed a decree that allowed Azerbaijanis deported from the Georgian SSR to Central Asia in the 1940s to resettle in the Azerbaijani SSR. For several Meskhetian communities, Azerbaijan was seen as a more attractive alternative to Central Asia and one step closer to their ancestral lands in Georgia. With many Meskhetians still being labeled as 'Azerbaijani' in their passports, together with those who were able to obtain permission to resettle to Azerbaijan, some 25,000 Meskhetians moved to the country during the period from 1958 until the end of the 1960s in hope of eventually returning to Georgia. In contrast, those labeled as 'Turks' in their official identification documents predominantly had to remain in Central Asia, although small numbers of Meskhetians from Central Asia resettled elsewhere in the Soviet Union, including to Russia's North Caucasus.[16] Hence, while the easing of restrictions allowed the Meskhetians to come together as a community, and for many to resettle closer to Georgia, thousands of others remained in the Central Asian republics yearning to be homeward bound.

Muslim Kurds

The Kurdish minority in Georgia has historically consisted of people belonging to two religious denominations: Islam and Yezidism. Although Muslim Kurds were the first to settle in the South Caucasus, Muslim Kurdish communities in the region are today found almost exclusively in Azerbaijan, mainly due to mass expulsions of Muslim Kurds from Georgia in the Stalin era and from Armenia during the recent Karabakh conflict. Muslim Kurds settlement to Georgia largely took place in the second half of the 19th century, where they came as nomads from Turkey and settled particularly in the southern regions of Georgia. According to the census of 1926, there were 7,955 Kurds and 2,262 Yezids in Georgia—recorded as separate entities totaling 10,217—while in the following census of 1939, there were 12,915 Kurds now registered as one group. Of this number, 3,858 mostly Muslim Kurds were settled in the Meskheti region with an additional 2,898 living in Adjara, predominantly in Batumi, the village of Zaza and around the Shavi Tba (Black Lake). The remaining Kurds, numbering roughly 6,000 in 1939 and presumed to mostly have been Yezidis, were primarily settled in the major urban centers of Georgia.

With the incorporation of Georgia and the South Caucasus region into the USSR, the Muslim Kurds living in the frontier regions along the external

borders with Turkey were regarded with suspicion by the Soviet authorities, who—like later with the Meskhetians—feared that the Muslim Kurds could form a fifth column in case of war with Turkey. In July 1937, some 2,000 Kurds were deported from the external border regions in the South Caucasus to Central Asia, including several hundred from Georgia, specifically those who did not hold Soviet passports. Another deportation in March 1944 led to a total of 3,240 Azeris and Yezidi Kurds being resettled within Georgia. Recorded as having left their *kolkhozes* (collective farms) without permission and therefore considered to be living and working illegally, the communities were internally relocated to regions in southeastern Georgia (today's Kvemo Kartli region). Ultimately, towards the end of the World War II, in November 1944, the Soviet authorities decided to deport practically all remaining Muslim Kurds—numbering some 7,000 to 8,000 people—to Central Asia along with the Meskhetians and other Muslim groups in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara. This last action effectively removed almost all Muslim Kurds from Georgia and, as a result, to this day only a few remaining families live in the country.

1.7 Petition & Dissidents

Owing to this longing, coupled with the easing of restrictions and the return of other deported groups, Meskhetians started

selecting representatives to petition the Soviet government to allow for their return. Despite these efforts, the Meskhetian call for repatriation was ignored in favor of their partial resettlement to Azerbaijan. While denied return to Georgia, as a consequence of the lasting collective suffering and discrimination, many Meskhetians began to regard themselves as a community. Interlinked with this identity building was the strong tendency for inter-group marriage as well as close-knit living patterns, which often reflected the composition of villages left behind in Meskheti.[17] The lifting of restrictions and combined lobbying allowed the Meskhetians to ultimately unite as a community to advocate for their return, although based on different claims and demands. In a similar manner, the smaller deported groups such as Hemshins, Karapapakhs and Muslim Kurds, although at times preserving their own distinct group identities, would also unite around the aim of repatriation that was promoted by Meskhetian leaders.

The first groups lobbying for repatriation emerged from 1956 to 1957, under the leadership of historian Enver Mushur-oglu Odabashev (Khozrevanidze) (1917–1993), which composed letters requesting the right to return addressed to party and state organs of the USSR and the Georgian SSR. With these campaigning efforts, Meskhetians adhered to their emerging sense of community, although according to three distinct orientations. According to one view, Meskhetians were Turks with a separate regional identity. Another closely related view saw the Meskhetians as being no different from Turks at large. The third orientation perceived the group as Georgians that in the course of history were compelled to adopt Islam. These split orientations and identities reflected in the agenda of the

growing Meskhetian organizations. While before the early 1960s Meskhetian organizations had shared the same aims, by the end of the decade separate demands had emerged. On the one hand, the Georgian alignment promoted their return to the country in general and acculturation to the Georgian society. On the other hand, whereas the regional Turkish affiliation advocated resettlement to their homeland of Meskheti, other leaders proposed resettlement to Turkey. Despite each side claiming to represent the majority of the Meskhetian people, over the coming years each camp both gained and lost popularity among its members. Furthermore, even though aversion was expressed towards the other, at times the groups worked together. With these fluctuating orientations, as based upon opposing identities and at times for tactical reasons, Meskhetians campaigned—for the most part in vain—for their right to return. Despite these failed attempts, during the 1970s until the late 1980s Georgian dissidents and intellectuals would openly advocate and support the right of Meskhetians to return.[18]

In June 1968, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a decree that acknowledged the right of all Soviet citizens, particularly concerning deported peoples, to live anywhere in the USSR. In contradiction, though, according to the law Meskhetians had permanently settled outside of Georgia. In this dualistic fashion, the Soviet government, while officially lifting all restrictions in 1974, still employed the system of *propiska* and therefore hampered their free movement. Despite this policy by the Soviet authorities, from the late 1960s to early 1980s several hundred deported Meskhetians families returned to Georgia, largely from their most recent settlements in Azerbaijan and Kabardino-Balkaria, Russia.

Hemshins

The Hemshins are a relatively unknown group that have ethnic Armenian origins but are named after the region of Hamshen in northeastern Turkey. While originally adherents of the Armenian Apostolic faith, the Hemshins from the mid-17th century were increasingly exposed to pressure from the Ottoman Turks, leading to the gradual Sunni Islamization of one part of the population, while another part of the Hemshins left their mountainous homeland and settled further north to avoid Muslim religious influences. As the confrontation between Christian Orthodox Russia and Muslim Ottoman Turkey escalated during the 19th century, Hemshins, both Muslim and Christian, were particularly ill affected by the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 that raged across their lands. As a result, many, especially Muslim Hemshins, migrated to northwestern Anatolia along with much larger numbers of Laz and Muslim Georgians from the territories that had been conquered by Russia. From the 1850s onwards, there was also a significant economically motivated migration to the Russian Empire by Christian Hemshins. However, the Bolshevik Revolution and the incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union put an end to this labor migration, and while many Hemshins returned to Turkey, others settled permanently in Abkhazia or Russia. In addition, Christian Hemshin and Armenian refugees from northwestern Anatolia arrived in

Abkhazia and Russia's Kuban region in large numbers during World War I. In the villages of Adjara just north of Turkey several hundred Muslim Hemshins, which were cut off from their kin across the border, lived until their deportation in 1944. According to the Soviet census of 1926, there were 526 Hemshins in Georgia, all settled in Adjara.

Little material has been published on the lives of the deported Hemshins in Central Asia, although there are several distinct Hemshin communities living there. It is estimated that there are today between 3,000–5,000 Muslim Hemshins in the post-Soviet space. Several hundred Hemshins moved to Krasnodar *krai* after the anti-Meskhetian pogrom in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in 1989, with many settling in Apsheronsk and Belorechensk districts. According to the 2002 Russian census, there were 1,019 Hemshins in Krasnodar *krai*, out of a total 1,542 persons throughout the whole country. These figures, though, should be critically interpreted since Hemshins may have been recorded as Turks or Armenians in the census. While the deported Hemshins are Muslim, unlike the traditionally Christian Hemshin of Abkhazia and Krasnodar *krai*, there is little interaction between the two communities. Like the Meskhetians, the Muslim Hemshins have faced significant difficulties over the past two decades in Krasnodar *krai*, and there are numerous reported cases of discrimination, harassment and violation of their human rights.

Some families resettled to western Georgia in the early 1960s, but were expelled again by governmental officials. In 1969, around 250 Meskhetian households were resettled to the Achigvara farm settlement of the Gali district in Abkhazia. Again in 1977, a group of nine families settled in Nasakirali in western Georgia. In spite of the fact that they were settled throughout various locations in Georgia, the Meskhetian communities were still denied the right to return to Meskheti. Moreover, following this return, many that had resettled in Georgia were coerced to leave again owing to harassment and intimidation by officials.[19] With the events leading to the fall of the Soviet Union, by the end of the 1980s the ethnic environment in Georgia as well as throughout the rest of the Soviet Union—which was reeling from independence movements that had adopted nationalist agendas—became less and less accommodating of non-titular groups. In turn, these emerging circumstances adversely impacted the attitudes toward Meskhetians in the Georgian society as well as ethnic minorities residing throughout the country.

1.8 Fergana Valley & Ethnic Nationalism

With Mikheil Gorbachev's reformist policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, changes rippled across the soon collapsed Soviet Union; changes that once again threatened the safety and security of the Meskhetians, in particular those residing in the Uzbek SSR. At the end of 1988, ethnic conflicts had already broken out in the cities of Tashkent and Andizhan with the local population assaulting Russians, Tatars and other non-Uzbek groups. Over the spring of 1989, ethnic

violence began to rise in the Fergana Valley. By 3 June, hostilities erupted with Uzbek youth assailing Meskhetian communities living throughout the region, resulting in the deaths of dozens. With riots raging throughout several cities, thousands of Meskhetians tried to escape the ensuing violence. Responding to the pogrom, the Soviet military gathered some 17,000 Meskhetians into a military compound where they were quickly after evacuated by air, from 9 to 18 June, to six regions in central Russia.

While the conflict had abated a week later, according to information from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, 103 people had died, of whom 52 were Meskhetian and 36 were Uzbek; 1,011 had been wounded; and hundreds of homes had been destroyed. The pogrom and evacuation triggered a domino effect, compelling many Meskhetians to leave the country on their own. By September, nearly 50,000 Meskhetians had left Uzbekistan, not only from Fergana but also from other parts of Uzbekistan. In February 1990 an almost duplicate set of violent circumstances in the Bukin region of the Tashkent *oblast* led to another evacuation of numerous groups of Meskhetians. In total, some 90,000—including those evacuated by the Soviet army from the Fergana Valley—left Uzbekistan, most resettling in Azerbaijan and Russia, with others moving to Ukraine as well as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Most Meskhetians who departed on their own moved to countries neighboring Georgia. In Azerbaijan alone, almost 52,000 refugees from Uzbekistan had been registered by 1992.[20]

While it is uncertain what specific circumstances precipitated the pogroms in Uzbekistan, some consider that

the relative economic success of the Meskhetians compared to the local population, coupled with the rising nationalism among the titular community, may have led to the hostile environment in which the massacres took place. There are also other interpretations that highlight the criminal activity in the region as well as the anti-governmental motives of the Uzbek nationalists. Whatever the reasoning, the events of the Fergana Valley pogroms led to another great dispersal of Meskhetians, coined by some as their second deportation, due to the violence directed at them and the involuntary evacuation of 17,000 Meskhetians from the region.[21]

For the thousands that left Uzbekistan, Georgia—which years earlier had begun to receive repatriates through the help of Georgian intellectuals—had become increasingly antagonistic to the idea of return. Among the Georgian dissidents that were sympathetic to the Meskhetian cause was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who had changed his supportive stance with Georgia's coming independence and his popular rise to power, and the well-liked Georgian philologist Akaki Bakradze, who now spoke out against repatriation. Other dissident and public figures, however, continued to support the idea of Meskhetian repatriation—including Merab Kostava, Tamar Chkheidze and writer Naira Gelashvili—despite the negative attitudes across the country. From the late 1980s, Georgia's independence movement took on ever more nationalistic proclamations and designs that threatened the multiethnic composition of the country. With the flood of Meskhetians leaving Uzbekistan, a few thousand also found their way to Georgia despite the fact that the nationalist leaders saw the return of repatriates as a threat to Georgia's future stability, as well as a ploy by the Soviet government to

derail the country's call for independence.[22] Owing to these events of ethnic antagonism and nationalist movements throughout the USSR, thousands of Meskhetians were displaced yet again both from Uzbekistan and Georgia. As a result of the turbulence in the terminal years of the Soviet Union, Meskhetians found themselves scattered across seven of the soon-to-be post-Soviet republics.

Ethnic Unrest in Kyrgyzstan

In April, and again in June 2010, riots broke out first in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek and subsequently in the cities of Osh and Jalal-Abad in the southern part of the country. Owing to a power vacuum after the overthrow on 7 April of the discredited Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev, coupled with weakened rule of law within the country, criminal gangs and mobs instigated riots that particularly affected minority communities. It is well known that in June these riots led to the flight of over 100,000 ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan's southern provinces and the death of at least 2,000 people. While the vast majority of the refugees returned within weeks, the security of the Uzbek community remains fragile and thousands remain internally displaced. Less known, however, is that during the riots in April Meskhetians were also targeted. The unrest started on 19 April in the Bishkek district of Leninskoye, where Meskhetians were brutally beaten by angry mobs. Later that day,

hundreds of young Kyrgyz men—mostly comprising poor migrants from rural areas—armed with sticks and metal bars attacked the multiethnic village of Mayevka on the outskirts of Bishkek, where they looted the houses of Meskhetian and Russian inhabitants while attempting to take over their farmland. According to eye witnesses, the marauders were yelling: "Go away Turks—this is our land!" Although the interim government managed to regain control the same day, the pogrom resulted in five deaths and at least 28 injured. Without doubt, the event, and also the subsequent unrest in Kyrgyzstan's south has left many Meskhetians in Kyrgyzstan with a renewed sense of apprehension and vulnerability that mirrors the difficult circumstances experienced over their nearly seven decades in exile.

1.9 Ethno-Political Conflict & Emergence of Meskhetian Organizations

By 1991, Georgia had secured its external independence from the Soviet Union only to find its internal sovereignty restricted by the secessionist movements in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. With ethnic tensions running high, coupled with the government's explicitly nationalist agenda, violent ethno-political conflict raged from late 1990 to 1992 in South Ossetia and from 1992 to 1993 in Abkhazia. As a result, some 250,000 persons from Abkhazia—including almost the entire ethnic Georgian population in the region—

were displaced along with thousands of Georgians from South Ossetia. Between 60,000 and 100,000 Ossetians were also displaced from Georgia and South Ossetia, mainly to Russia. With internally displaced persons (IDPs) dispersed throughout Georgia from the two ethno-political conflicts, politicians and the local population took on hardened and unwelcoming views towards Georgia's multiethnic society. Furthermore, the resulting instability of the state, together with a failing economy, only added tension to the already threatening environment. For this reason, the majority of the nearly 2,000 Meskhetians who had already resettled in Georgia were compelled to leave again. Alongside these ever worsening circumstances, discussions of repatriation were commonly rejected, with some politicians viewing an anti-repatriation stance as generating political popularity, particularly in Samtskhe-Javakheti.[23] Among the region's large Georgian and Armenian populations, particularly among the latter, both historical and contemporary concerns persisted in prolonging any undertakings regarding the Meskhetians' return.[24] To this effect, repatriation continued to be opposed and hindered by the Georgian society, which remained incapacitated both politically and economically for the coming years.

Against this negative backdrop, though, many Meskhetians—mainly those residing outside of Georgia—tried advancing repatriation through several different organizations. To this end, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were established during the 1990s to promote Meskhetian repatriation, yet according to different demands and positions. The first was *Vatan* (homeland in Turkish), founded in 1990, which was, and still is, considered

to be the largest of the organizations. In addition to its main office in Moscow, the organization has representations in Azerbaijan as well as in Ukraine and some regions of Russia, though the branches act quite independently. In recent years, the organization has also had a representation in Georgia. The members of *Vatan* regard Meskhetians as ethnic Turks and demand official rehabilitation from the 1944 deportation as well as consent from the Georgian government to return to Meskheti (today Samtskhe-Javakheti), the ancestral region of the Meskhetians. Although claiming to safeguard the cultural rights of the Meskhetian communities residing in the countries of its coverage, *Vatan* has prioritized the overarching demands for return and rehabilitation, while often neglecting the problems faced by the Meskhetians in their places of current residence.[25]

Promoting the pro-Georgian orientation among Meskhetians was the organization *Hsna* (salvation in Georgian), which endorsed return to all of Georgia and not just their historical homeland, while disregarding the promotion of cultural rights as *Vatan* does. Founded in 1992 in Kabardino-Balkaria in Russia's North Caucasus with support from the Georgian government, *Hsna* considered Meskhetians to be ethnic Georgians that throughout history converted to Islam. The Union of Georgian Repatriates, which was founded in Tbilisi in 1999 as a successor organization to *Hsna*, campaigns on behalf of Meskhetians for repatriation, while aiding and supporting the rights of those that have already managed to resettle in Georgia. While each organization has advocated for the repatriation of the Meskhetian people, return has been argued for on separate terms by the respective organizations. As a result,

Meskhetian family, Aspindza, Georgian SSR, 1937.
Photo courtesy of Alexandre Begiashvili.

Meskhetian folklore group, Location unknown, early 20th century.
Photo courtesy of Zurab Iskandirov.

Meskhetian teachers, Atskuri secondary school, Georgian SSR, 1927.
Photo courtesy of Alexandre Begiashvili.

The family of Aladin Ulfanov, Almaty, Kazakh SSR, 1960.
Photo courtesy of Sona Ulfanova.

Group of Meskhetians in Moscow commemorating the day of Meskhetian deportation, 15 November 1967.
Photo courtesy of Zurab Iskandirov.

Displaced Meskhetians in Fergana Valley after the pogrom, Uzkbek SSR, 1989.
Photo courtesy of Alexandre Begiashvili.

these organizations—together with others established in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Russia—have been relatively ineffective at promoting return due to their underlying debate and disagreement concerning the origins of Meskhetians, the ethno-political status of repatriates, and the country for return.[26] In this way, the aggressive environment surrounding Georgia's independence, compounded by the country's instability caused by internal ethno-territorial conflicts, and the unsuccessful collective organization until recently left the majority of Meskhetians no better off than they were before the collapse of the USSR (for more on Meskhetian organizations today, see section 2.4.1 Political Integration and Civil Activism).

1.10 Council of Europe & Commitments

As the country's political turmoil gradually subsided with Eduard Shevardnadze coming to power in 1992 and being elected Georgia's second president in 1995, the situation surrounding the Meskhetians began to look up. While Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, was not generally supportive of the idea of repatriation, Georgia's course to join the international community brought their plight out into the open. In May 1996 the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) conference, a large-scale regional conference addressing the acute problems faced by refugees and displaced persons of the former Soviet Union, was jointly organized by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) with support from the Open Society Institute (OSI). Participants of the CIS Conference, including all CIS member states, proclaimed that "(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."[27] While not bringing about any significant changes, the Meskhetian cause was for the first time taken note of by the international community.[28]

As a result, in September 1998 in The Hague, Max van der Stoel, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (OSCE HCNM) with assistance from the UNHCR and the Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute (FMP OSI) held a roundtable meeting concerning the Meskhetians. In attendance were governmental officials from Georgia, Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation as well as Meskhetians representatives from each respective country and leaders of *Vatan*. From the start, the main goal of the meeting was to open the discussion and identify main problems rather than to find practical and lasting solutions.[29] Despite any tangible progress, several issues were discussed that emphasized the need for political rehabilitation and decreasing the number of stateless members, as well as respect for human rights and initiation of ethnic tolerance programs in regions where Meskhetians live.

In a follow-up meeting in Vienna in March 1999, which was again hosted by the OSCE, UNHCR, and FMP OSI, governmental officials were included from Turkey, Ukraine, the United States of America as well as representatives of the

Council of Europe (CoE) and the International Organization for Migration. Concerns about Meskhetian rehabilitation, repatriation and regularization in their places of residence were expanded upon but to no avail, as arguments over an acceptable term for the community sidelined efforts. Moreover, the Russian Federation denied any obligation to integrate Meskhetians while claiming that the only agenda should be the repatriation of the community to Georgia. Accordingly, with a Repatriation Service already created in 1994, the Georgian representatives promised that a State Commission on the Repatriation and Rehabilitation of the Population Deported from Southern Georgia would soon be established to manage Meskhetian issues, while problems of citizenship for returning persons would be resolved by the end of the year.[30]

In general, the advancement of the Meskhetian cause correlated more to the country's aspirations to join the Council of Europe, of which Georgia became a member in April 1999. While during the 1990s Georgia had maintained the opinion that the deportation of the Meskhetians was committed by the USSR, thus absolving the country from having to repatriate the community, with Georgia being admitted to the Council of Europe as its 41st member, the issue of Meskhetian repatriation became an official obligation and commitment of the government. Accordingly, Georgia became responsible for formulating a legal framework in which Meskhetians could return to and integrate into the society, while also being able to gain full citizenship. To this end, Georgia was required to adopt a law in two years, commence the repatriation in three years and complete the program in twelve years.[31] Two draft laws

were drawn up, one by the Georgian Repatriation Service, together with five non-governmental organizations, and the other by the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) with support from the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees (MRA). Both draft laws, which had been advised upon by the Council of Europe and UNHCR, were debated by the National Security Council and the Parliamentary Committee on Civic Integration, resulting in the latter being selected. However, owing to Georgia's internal circumstances, repatriation of the entire community to their homeland was argued to be unacceptable, given the considerable size of the community—approximately 425,000—together with the political and economic problems of the country.

Accordingly, fulfilling the obligations stipulated by Georgia's membership to the Council of Europe was impeded at every turn by political and social concerns. As a result, with a crippled economy, fear of ethnic hostilities and secessionist trends, as well as hundreds of thousands of IDPs spread throughout Georgia—with some 9,000 Chechen refugees also arriving from 1999 to 2000—the efforts to promote Meskhetian repatriation have been greatly restricted.[32] Hence, in spite of the initiation of the repatriation process and the ensuing discussions concerning Meskhetians, the draft law was never passed by the Georgian parliament. In the following years, few efforts were made to advance the process, resulting in the issue being neglected by the Georgian government despite its obligations to the Council of Europe, while the latter could provide little incentives to motivate the government to readdress Meskhetian repatriation.

1.11 Rose Revolution & Law on Repatriation

Following the Rose Revolution in November 2003, a new, decidedly pro-European and reform oriented political elite rose to power under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili. The change of government paved the way for resetting the relations between Georgia and the Euro-Atlantic institutions, including the Council of Europe. In January 2005, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), after consultations with the Georgian government, adopted Resolution 1415, which set new deadlines for the yet unfulfilled commitments and obligations. In regard to the Meskhetians, the CoE required that Georgia "create, without any further delay, legal, administrative and political conditions for the start of the process of their repatriation with a view to its completion by 2011."[33] Subsequently, Resolution 1428 (March 2005) was adopted solely on "The situation of the deported Meskhetian population," while Resolutions 1477 (January 2006) and 1603 (January 2008) encouraged the Georgian government to speed up the process and seek international assistance to fulfill these aims.[34]

In November 2004, a State Commission was established to address the issue of repatriation, and following a conference on the Meskhetian question organized by the State Minister for Conflict Resolution Issues (later renamed the State Minister for Reintegration) and the European Centre for Minority Issues in June 2005, an interagency expert working group was established for drafting a new law on repatriation. The draft law went through three rounds of consultations with experts from the Council of Europe. However, with the replacement of governmental officials responsible for the

issue, the process was interrupted in July 2006. As a result, few developments took place until the spring of 2007 when an entirely new draft law was presented by Georgian legislators to the Georgian parliament for consideration without prior consultation with the Council of Europe. The ensuing debate in parliament called new public attention in Georgia to the Meskhetian repatriation issue. While the members of the ruling party, the United National Movement, favored passing the legislation, as a means of fulfilling Georgia's international commitments, some opposition leaders spoke out against the law. Despite criticism, on 11 July 2007, the Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Resettled from Georgia by the Former Soviet Union in the 40s of the 20th Century was adopted (hereinafter referred to as the Law on Repatriation).[35]

1.12 Preparation of Repatriation Process

Notwithstanding its adoption finally by the Georgian parliament, the law was criticized by Meskhetian leaders for being too restrictive and posing a barrier for repatriation. Furthermore, it was regarded as establishing cumbersome provisions for the preparation of application materials, while providing a very limited time period for submitting applications to the Georgian authorities. Moreover, the law was considered to be ambiguous, leaving a great deal of room for interpretation by governmental officials, which if applied strictly could be used to limit the number of persons granted repatriation status. For this reason, international organizations have expressed concerns about the limitations of the legal framework in assisting the repatriation of

Meskhetians. Following the adoption of the law, several consultations have been held between the Georgian government and numerous international organizations, in particular the Council of Europe, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, the European Union, the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus, the International Organization for Migration and the European Centre for Minority Issues. After these initial meetings, these international organizations have continued to consult the government on the implementation of the law, while the Council of Europe conducts specific monitoring on the commitments and obligations of Georgia in undertaking the repatriation process. As a result, concerns have also been raised in regard to the procedures for obtaining citizenship by repatriates, which may take up to five years after having been granted repatriation status.

While initially a time frame of one year, during 2008, was set for deported persons and their descendants to apply for repatriation status, the deadline was subsequently postponed to the end of 2009 by two parliamentary amendments to the law. However, as to the legal provisions concerning the documents required from the applicants, many Meskhetians found the demands insurmountable. Also perceived as an obstacle was the fact that the law required the submission of documents in either Georgian or English, and not in the languages most commonly spoken by the group: Russian or Turkish. Consequently, this required significant funds to be raised for the translation and notarization of the application documents. By the end of the application deadline, 1 January 2010, a total of 5,841 families had applied for repatriation to Georgia.

Applications by Current Citizenship	
Azerbaijan	5,389
Kyrgyzstan	173
Turkey	144
Russia	64
Uzbekistan	25
Kazakhstan	16
Ukraine	9
Stateless Persons	21
Total	**5,841**

Each adult had to submit an application by him- or herself, while underage children were included in one of their parents' applications. In total, the applications cover 8,900 persons. The relatively low number of applications received can be attributed to a number of reasons. First, Meskhetians in many countries have had inadequate and limited information about the application procedures and living conditions in Georgia. The Georgian authorities have done little to disseminate information about the repatriation option, and while efforts by Meskhetian organizations have been relatively successful in Azerbaijan, they have failed to assist potential applicants in Russia and elsewhere. In this regard, international organizations have focused mostly on supporting awareness campaigns of the application process in Azerbaijan. Moreover, many potential repatriates have been unable to pay the fees for collecting the required

documents and having them translated into Georgian or English. At the same time, the degree to which the Meskhetians are integrated in the numerous countries of their settlement varies. Meskhetians in Central Asia are relatively well integrated, which can be attributed in part to the comparatively longer period of Meskhetian settlement in these countries, and hence the number of people here desiring to resettle to Georgia is presumably lower. Moreover, the leadership of Meskhetian organizations in Central Asia does not support the idea of repatriation to Georgia, which also seems to have affected the submission of applications. In contrast, a few Meskhetian organizations that support repatriation, notably *Vatan* in Azerbaijan, have carried out campaigns to assist potential repatriates in complying with the formal requirements.

Nonetheless, now that the number of potential repatriates that can be expected is known, Georgian state actors can begin planning the actual repatriation process. While the government has been concerned that the number of applicants might be much higher, there are now less than 9,000 Meskhetian that can be expected to repatriate to Georgia, at least in the next several years. Indeed, the number of actual repatriates may be lower, as it is likely that many have applied within the two-year application period just to be sure not to miss the opportunity to submit an application, while many may not have yet made up their minds on whether to repatriate when it comes to the actual decision. Furthermore, there are still a number of procedures that have to be completed before the physical repatriation can start. The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees, the state body

responsible for the repatriation, by July 2010 has completed the initial recording of the application information into a central database. In the next phase, the MRA will inform the applicants about possible missing application materials and provide them with a four-month period to submit the absent data. Hence, the actual repatriation process is expected to start only sometime in the second part of 2011.

Many Meskhetians, eager to return after almost seven decades in exile, are frustrated with the slow pace of establishing and effectuating a framework for an organized return as well as Georgia's hesitation to facilitate their repatriation. When the Law on Repatriation was adopted in 2007, there was initially moderate optimism that repatriation could finally take place. However, the optimism in the first months after the law was passed was soon replaced by disappointment. Among many Meskhetians, the application procedures were perceived as upholding unnecessarily complicated formalities, while the legal framework was regarded as posing obstacles rather than genuinely facilitating a return. For these reasons, over the past few years, some 150–180 Meskhetians, primarily from Azerbaijan, have resettled to Georgia on their own, mainly to the Akhaltsikhe and Adigeni districts. While this independent repatriation is strongly discouraged by the authorities, who are understandably interested in ensuring that the return occurs according to the legal framework, many of these returnees have nevertheless managed to legalize their presence in Georgia. Other Meskhetians, however, especially since late 2009, have been barred from moving freely across the Azerbaijani-Georgian border. In several cases, Meskhetians have been unable to acquire property

in Samtskhe-Javakheti, even though Georgian legislation allows foreign citizens to officially purchase property.

It seems clear that the majority of those Meskhetians who wish to repatriate to Georgia desire to return to their ancestral homeland—the territories in Samtskhe-Javakheti from where they, or their ancestors, were deported—particularly the districts of Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni and Aspindza. Government officials and experts in Georgia have expressed concerns that a large-scale influx of Meskhetians to this region may provoke tension between the repatriates and local communities. A significant part of the inhabitants in these districts are themselves persons, or the descendants of persons, who were involuntarily resettled to the region from other parts of Georgia in order to repopulate the area after the deportation of the Meskhetians in the 1940s, and many live in houses formerly belonging to the deported peoples. Although according to the Law on Repatriation the repatriates are not entitled to the restitution of property, there are concerns in Samtskhe-Javakheti that returnees may seek to reclaim their former houses and lands. At the same time, the region is home to a large population of ethnic Armenians, many of whom originated from Turkey, who carry painful memories of the mass killings in Turkey from 1915 to 1923 and the ethnic conflicts in Samtskhe-Javakheti from 1917 to 1919. In spite of these concerns, the Georgian authorities lack legal tools to regulate the process of resettlement. There are no provisions in the law—for example, support measures such as loans for buying property—that may encourage repatriates to settle elsewhere in Georgia. As the physical repatriation begins, there is a need to consider, together with the assistance

of the international community, how such incentives can be provided to promote repatriates to settle not only in Samtskhe-Javakheti but also in other parts of the country (see also Chapter 3).

1.13 Concluding Remarks

Eleven years into the 21st century, 67 years after their deportation, the Meskhetian community has undergone a severe transformation. The tragic and turbulent history of Meskhetians has led not only to the deportation of the entire population to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1944, but also to their further displacement to Azerbaijan, Russia and Ukraine, resulting from shifting Soviet policies during the 1950–60s together with the Fergana pogrom in 1989. Moreover, specifically in the early 1990s, thousands of Meskhetians opted to emigrate to Turkey, today hosting around 35,000 Meskhetians, while a much smaller group managed to return to Georgia against all odds. Most recently, thousands of Meskhetians were once again resettled, this time as refugees to the USA, after suffering from the discriminatory policies and government sanctioned harassment in Russia's Krasnodar *krai*. As a result, some 11,500 Meskhetians left for the USA from 2004 to 2006. Due to these developments, the Meskhetians have become a truly transnational population, today settled across nine countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey and the USA. Indeed, many of them have integrated well in their countries of current settlement, especially those who have remained in the Central Asian republics, where they have now lived for several generations.

In spite of the crucial role the deportation plays in defining Meskhetian identity, with all the feelings of injustice this landmark event in their history creates, the younger generations express little desire to start their lives anew in what may seem a foreign environment. However, in other countries, especially in Azerbaijan, there seem to be a greater desire to return to their places of origin. Hence, the solution to the tragic deportation of and the crime committed against the Meskhetian people cannot be a return of the entire population to Georgia; time has made this impossible. While the vast number of deported Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais returned when their banishment was lifted 12 years after their deportation, the Meskhetians will be able to return to their ancestral land only several decades later. Owing to the multitude of desires, aims and capacities of the Meskhetian communities, in the future many Meskhetians will continue to live dispersed throughout many countries. Be that as it may, if only a small part of the Meskhetian communities finally return to Georgia, their repatriation is not only a moral victory and a strong contribution to undoing the wrongs of the brutal repression of the Stalinist era, but also a signal that Georgia is ready to act as a responsible state, capable of realizing its ambitions of becoming a Western-style democracy.

The Longing for Return

The collective deportation of the Meskhetians in 1944 was a tragedy of dimensions that are difficult to comprehend. Not only did the deportations affect over 100,000 persons, who were ruthlessly transported in cattle wagons to Central Asia, but also led to the deaths of some 3,000 individuals on the way into exile. Additionally, thousands more died in the first years after their arrival to the harsh conditions and unfamiliar environments in Central Asia. Not surprisingly, this landmark event in the history of the community has had a strong impact on the way Meskhetian perceive themselves in the societies where they live. The sense of vulnerability has only been exacerbated by more recent events of injustice towards Meskhetian communities, such as the pogrom in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley in 1989, or the governmental imposed discrimination towards the group in Russia's Krasnodar *krai* during the 1990s and early 2000s. Hence, victimization, the fear of being forced to move again, and the consciousness of belonging to a people deprived of their homeland are cornerstones of the Meskhetians' collective identity.

In the history produced and promoted by many Meskhetian leaders, the Meskhetian communities dispersed across the world are compelled to repatriate to Georgia. For a majority of Meskhetians, this construction of history nourishes a strong desire

to return to their historic homeland of Meskheti. Nevertheless, in reality the situation is much more complex. Today, Meskheti has changed from what it was in the 1940s, although it continues to exist in the imagination of many Meskhetians who know of their homeland mainly from the stories told by their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Moreover, Meskhetians are well integrated into many of the local societies where they live today, both politically and socioeconomically. So while at one level, many Meskhetians proclaim that they wish to return to their ancestral lands, at another level the number of persons who are likely to make the decision to repatriate is much lower.

Also influencing this ultimate decision are all the practical obstacles a potential repatriate faces: including the moving costs, which are to be covered by the individual families; the costs related to the application process; the legal obstacles when applying for repatriation status; the unknown living conditions in Georgia; and the uncertain possibilities for finding employment or other means of making a decent living. Most certainly, there are numerous factors that would make choosing the life changing decision of repatriating to Georgia unlikely. Therefore, the number of Meskhetians that eventually will want to return to Georgia is in all probability only a small number of the total population of Meskhetian communities residing around the world.

Chapter 2: The Deported Communities Today

2.1 Introduction

While Meskhetians are globally dispersed amongst nine countries, the people as a whole still shares many traditions and experiences as based upon their collective culture and history. Accordingly, Meskhetians adhere to many communal customs and traits that are distinct to their group identity. Without doubt, during their exile the Meskhetian communities, across the societies they have settled in, have faced shifting, yet somewhat similar, circumstances and obstacles that have created shared experiences and enforced a sense of common belonging. For this reason, this cross-section overview illustrates those characteristic traits and affairs common to the Meskhetians as a whole, although in practice many of these customs have been molded by the local environments in which the individual deported communities have found themselves.

2.2 Migration & Demography

The migration flows of Meskhetian communities have comprised both forced and voluntary movements since the time of their deportation from Georgia. Owing to political, economic and social circumstances, many Meskhetians

have been resettled both near and far as they continue to endure their permanent exile. These migration patterns fall within six main periods, which at times overlap, ranging from 1944 up until today. Interlinked with their deportation and resettlements, Meskhetians have also migrated for employment and education, both temporarily as well as long term.

After being deported in 1944 from Georgia to Central Asia, the initial over 100,000 Meskhetians and their descendants resided in the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan until 1956 when a shift in Soviet policies after Stalin's death allowed many Meskhetians to resettle, although not legally to Meskheti. For this reason, following two years of preparation, from 1958 to 1971 some 25,000 Meskhetians—presumably mainly those who were registered in their identity documents as 'Azerbaijani'—moved to Azerbaijan as well as to the Russian Federation, although in smaller numbers, in hopes of later returning to Georgia. To this end, from 1969 to 1990, some hundreds of Meskhetians managed to settle semiofficially or unofficially in Georgia. While some started their lives again in Georgia, albeit in other regions than their ancestral lands of Meskheti, others were forced to leave again owing to government imposed harassment or animosity from the host population.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, hostile treatment of Meskhetians manifested itself in a pogrom in 1989 in Uzbekistan, leading to the resettlement of nearly 90,000 individuals from 1989 to 1991 mainly to Azerbaijan, Russia, and Ukraine as well as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, new opportunities for emigration also arose with

the collapse of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, following requests from Meskhetians, the Turkish government adopted several legal acts from 1992 to 2005 that allowed for the resettlement of some 35,000 persons to Turkey. Following this trend, most recently, an additional some 11,500 Meskhetians moved to the USA from Russia's Krasnodar *krai* from 2004 to 2006. In this way, since their deportation, the Meskhetian communities have migrated, either due to force or hope of a better life, across the USSR and its successor states as well as to Turkey and the USA.[1]

With their deportation from Georgia in 1944, and following their numerous resettlements over the next nearly seven decades, the Meskhetian communities currently live in nine countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey, and the USA. Owing to the fact that the Meskhetian communities, since before its deportation and up until today, have been labeled with different names, census data in both Soviet and post-Soviet records has proven to be unreliable and difficult to interpret. Coupled with this problem is the varying counting measures used by governmental authorities and civil society organizations to calculate the total number of Meskhetians residing in each country, resulting in wide-ranging population figures. Despite this demographic dilemma, the researchers that contributed with their detailed fieldwork to the volume *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?* have estimated a global total of about 425,000 Meskhetians living within the nine aforementioned countries.[2]

In Kazakhstan, the Meskhetian population, numbering some 137,000, lives mainly in three *oblasts*: Almatinskaya,

Yuzhno-Kazakhstanskaya and Jambulskaya.[3] In Azerbaijan, the approximate 100,000 Meskhetians have settled in the districts of Saatli, Sabirabad, Khachmaz, Beylagan and Baku.[4] Throughout Russia, nearly 75,000 are settled in the Central Federal and South Federal *okrugs*. In the former region, the Meskhetians live mainly in the *oblasts* of Belgorod, Voronezh, Kursk, Orlov, Smolensk, Ryazan' and Tula, while in the latter they live in the Rostov *oblast*, Krasnodar *krai*, Kabardino-Balkaria, Stavropol *krai*, Volgograd *oblast*, Kalmykia, North Ossetia, Astrakhan *oblast* and the Karachai-Cherkess Republic.[5] Turkey is home to some 35,000 Meskhetians who are residing predominantly in the cities of Bursa, Antalya and Istanbul.[6] The Meskhetians settled in Kyrgyzstan, totaling around 33,000 persons, are split amongst the Osh *oblast* in the south and the Chui *oblast* in the north.[7] Within Uzbekistan, after the Fergana Valley pogrom there remains an estimated 22,500 Meskhetians living in the Tashkent, Syrdarin, Samarkand, Kashkadarin, Navoi, Jizak and Bukhara *oblasts* as well as the cities of Samarkand, Karshi and Bukhara.[8] Most recently, the USA has become home to more than 11,500 Meskhetians, who reside throughout 66 cities and 32 states.[9] Across Ukraine's southern *oblasts* of Kherson, Donetsk and Mykolayiv as well as the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, live a majority of the country's almost 10,000 Meskhetians.[10] In Georgia, there live some 1,000 Meskhetians, mostly settled in the western regions of Guria and Imereti as well as Samtskhe-Javakheti and the capital Tbilisi.[11] While these figures provide only estimated totals, in general they illustrate the expansive dispersal of the Meskhetian communities since their deportation in 1944.

Global Distribution of Meskhetians
By Country of Current Settlement
(Total Population Estimates)

Kazakhstan	137,000
Azerbaijan	100,000
Russia	75,000
Turkey	35,000
Kyrgyzstan	33,000
Uzbekistan	22,500
USA	11,500
Ukraine	10,000
Georgia	1,000
Total	**425,000**

2.3 Culture & Traditions

2.3.1 Homeland

The historical homeland of the Meskhetians, known as Meskheti, lies in the southern region of Georgia along the Turkish border, between the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and the region of Kvemo Kartli, and is now part of the administrative region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. The region consists today of six districts—Adigeni, Aspindza, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda (formerly Bogdanovka), and Borjomi—totaling nearly 6,413 square

kilometers. Of these districts, Meskhetians used to live in the former five, particularly concentrated in the Adigeni, Aspindza and Akhaltsikhe districts. Set in a valley of the Mtkvari (Kura) River, Meskheti is encircled by mountains ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 meters high. The region is subject to a dry and cold climate, with relatively warmer weather in the west where dense forests can be found. The primary agricultural products produced are corn, wheat, barley, potatoes, and apples, with livestock also being raised in the region, which was previously known for its vineyards and gardens grown with the use of a sophisticated system of terraces created on the mountain slopes.[12]

Linked with the physical location and attributes of their historical homeland, many Meskhetians on the one hand—following their deportation and lingering exile—have come to see Meskheti as a place of origin. Through frequent idealization, Meskheti is regarded as the most desirable point of collective return, while offering a haven against discrimination and expulsion where they could finally feel at home. On the other hand, birthplace and generational differences coupled with feelings of home and homeland have led to alternating attachments within the Meskhetian communities. Concerning place of origin, homeland is linked to where one is born, which for the older generation is southern Georgia, and the feeling of wanting to return to one's roots. While some younger Meskhetians regard the birthplace of their ancestors as their homeland, many associate their own origins to Central Asia as a substitute or secondary home.[13] Following the riots that arose in the Fergana Valley, the desire to have a safe environment to live in became all too real. However, with the difficulties

of returning to Georgia, both historical and contemporary, some people doubt the safety with which the government can provide the Meskhetians. Linked with this fear of dispersal is the desire to have all Meskhetians under one roof, so to say, and to realize the—perhaps unrealistic—dream of living again in a close-knit community. In this manner, the homeland represents a place where traditions can be maintained and promoted by all members of the community.[14]

Sometimes home is seen as the equivalent of a nation-state, which explains why some Meskhetians consider Georgia their home country, while others see Turkey as the homeland of all Turks. Nevertheless, feelings of unease at the possibility and security of returning, Meskhetians—specifically the younger generations—have come to see a difference between homeland and home. While the historic homeland remains bound to Meskheti as an imagined place of belonging, the reality of having a home in the countries of current settlement have taken on more precedence, particularly in the post-Soviet period. Accordingly, the latter is a place where a life can be made, such as raising a family and finding employment, which outweighs—mostly for the Meskhetian youth—the need to return to their ancestral origins. Notwithstanding these dualistic views, the idea of Meskheti as the historic homeland of the Meskhetians still creates a strong bond between the dispersed communities and continues to be longed for owing to the collective memories of deportation and the desire to have a place of permanence.[15]

2.3.2 Language

The shared language of Meskhetians is an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish, which is also spoken in the northeastern regions of Turkey, and that is in many ways similar to Azerbaijani. For this reason, for general vocabulary, such as those words relating to the Meskhetians' predominantly rural lifestyle, the dialect utilizes mainly Turkish words. Owing to the Meskhetians exposure to different languages—during both the era of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union—the dialect has also taken on words from Georgian, Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek as well as other languages spoken in the many societies where Meskhetians live and have lived. In this fashion of adjusting to the sociocultural circumstances of their surroundings, the Meskhetian Turkish dialect has also been subject to influences of other languages, especially in Azerbaijan due to the linguistic proximity of the languages.[16]

Meskhetians' linguistic knowledge and exposure has also shifted over the years. While before their deportation many Meskhetians had mastered Georgian, at least as a second language, over their long years of exile this knowledge was gradually lost. Having been resettled in Central Asia, Meskhetians had practically no opportunities to use Georgian. With younger generations being born in their countries of current settlement, command of Georgian remained solely with the elderly, who still have knowledge of the language.[17] However, with the deportation having taken place almost 70 years ago, the number of Georgian-speaking Meskhetians in exile is quickly dying out.

In relation to Turkish, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkish government funded language courses to teach the country's standardized Turkish to Meskhetians residing in the major cities of the Central Asian republics. With increased contact between the Meskhetian dialect and standardized Turkish, the latter has become ever more important for those traveling to Turkey for business or education. In this manner, as a result of the Meskhetians' many resettlements—with their different linguistic environments—many members have become multilingual and usually speak the state language of the countries in which they live. Indeed, Russian also became a second language for those generations that grew up in the last three to four decades of the Soviet era and for many born after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Hence, the vast majority of Meskhetians today still retain knowledge of the Russian language.

Despite this necessity to adopt new languages, the Meskhetian dialect remains a point of loyalty within the community, while acting as a vital channel to express and retain their culture. With this connection, Meskhetians consider other community members' loyalty to their culture according to the degree of language knowledge and use. Accordingly, while many Meskhetians have learned the languages of their countries of current settlement, with the often discriminative environments of their new home countries Meskhetians have repeatedly used their language to distinguish themselves from the majority society as well as a way to maintain the ethnic boundaries of their communities and refrain from assimilation. Owing to the particular importance of the language, together with other

distinct identity features, the Meskhetians have continued to nurture their distinct dialect and culture over their nearly seven decades of exile.[18]

2.3.3 Religion

The religion practiced by the majority of Meskhetians is Islam as based upon the Hanafite rite of the Sunni denomination of the faith. Accordingly, religiously observant Meskhetians follow several traditions and religious prohibitions, such as not eating pork and fasting during religious holidays. Owing to the fact that mullahs, men trained in the teachings of the Koran, are respected for their ceremonial functions in the Meskhetian community, they are normally invited to circumcisions, marriages and funerals. Among the important religious holidays, many Meskhetians celebrate two major festivals that are observed by the entire Muslim world: Ramazan Bayram and Kurban Bayram.[19] In addition to these Islamic traditions, some Meskhetians practice old Christian customs—such as a bride using honey to draw a cross on the door of her husband's house or placing a pair of scissors in the shape of a cross over the heart of a recently deceased person—that arise from Christian influences while living in Meskheti. This acceptance of Christian influences and remnants of their past traditions stems from their generally very tolerant and accommodating approach to other religions. Within the community, while there is an overall respect for Meskhetians' religious upbringing, the practices can differ significantly: in some communities Sunni Islamic practices are strictly observed, whereas in others, Muslim customs are not largely adhered to.[20]

In this regard, although religion has always remained an important aspect of Meskhetian culture and traditions, it has been subject to the different political and social environments Meskhetians have found themselves in over the years. As was the case throughout the Soviet Union, religion was repressed. Many Meskhetians, however, continued to practice secretly. Furthermore, when living as a closed community in Meskheti, their identity as Muslims was relatively strong compared to their ethnic identification. With their deportation, the fluctuating ethnic identities of the people were remolded and strengthened, with some Meskhetians for the first time becoming aware of their sense of a shared community. However, as their feelings of community affiliation were strengthened, their religious attachment became somewhat overshadowed and secondary to their ethnic identity, which in turn was more often highlighted in a discriminatory manner. Nonetheless, Meskhetians shared the fact that they and the local populations were both Muslims, specifically in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, which permitted them to integrate at a religious level into the general society. Following the collapse of the USSR, religion experienced a revival throughout the post-Soviet states, which had a significant impact upon the titular populations as well as Meskhetians. As a result, Meskhetians began attending the same mosques as that of the local populations despite different practices. Religion, thus, has remained an important aspect of Meskhetians' identity since before their deportation and continues to help the community associate themselves with the societies of traditionally Muslim countries of current settlement, as well as preserve their identity in different confessional environments.[21]

2.3.4 Kinship

Following the lifting of the special settlement restrictions in 1956 (see Chapter 1), many Meskhetians resettled to be closer to family members. These moves were seen as ways not only to be together but also as essential strategies to survive against the adversity the Meskhetians faced in their resettled homes, both during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. As a result, the social organization of many of the communities have taken on the same composition of the villages left behind, which commonly consisted of family members. These village associations are based upon ancestral origins in Georgia—known as a *küv*—and create a social environment that both generates and reinforces kin relationships.[22] In some cases in Central Asia, after the lifting of the resettlement restrictions, some villages were made up in part by members from the same *küv* as those in Meskheti before the deportation. Owing to this close-knit network, Meskhetians are ordinarily informed about their relatives, which includes the entire extended family of grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandchildren and more. While this information flow is easiest in the current places of settlement, the range of family knowledge—including those living abroad—knows no boundaries, and is strengthened by visits between members. Furthermore, with a strong connection to their historical homeland and kinship, despite being expelled nearly seven decades before, Meskhetians still know the name of the village their family came from as well as the genealogy of their ancestors. As a result, many Meskhetians, comparably to other Muslim communities, can trace their lineage back several generations.[23] With the

family acting as a centralizing factor to social organization, the maintenance of shared living and support becomes a matter of fact. Commonly, a husband and wife will have two to three children nowadays. Customarily, an adult son—even after marriage—will generally live with his parents in the same house or plot of land, which is often shared together with other family members. When daughters marry, usually outside of the village or even outside of the country as it happens today, she is often either married in a place where a male relative is already living or a sister is married in the same place as her. In this way, the family, as an essential component of Meskhetian social order, acts as a support network both near and far.[24]

Meskhetians find security within this support network and being surrounded by family, who share their resources and assets amongst the members. This assistance is never withheld from one another, except for when someone has disregarded the traditions of the community. In this way, relatives are indispensable for finding accommodation and employment as well as starting business ventures and obtaining general material support. Within some Meskhetian communities throughout the post-Soviet space, family members also send money to those relatives having financial problems or invite the children to find work, often seasonally, away from their villages. Additionally, the family networks offer moral support, particularly at births, marriages and funerals. While in most cases the family acts as a lifeline for Meskhetians, in recent years changes in living standards and habits are leading to the restructuring of this social organization. As more young family members move abroad, despite the maintained information networks and occasional

visits, the traditional lifestyles come under pressure from the distance and desire of some Meskhetians to be independent from their relatives.[25] In spite of these changes to the kinship organization, the family still remains the foundation of most Meskhetian communities' social interactions and belonging.

2.3.5 Family Life

The gender roles held in Meskhetian families as well as society are predominantly conservative and fixed in their divisions. Customarily, the oldest man heads the family with the wife subordinate to her father, husband and brothers. In this tradition, some Meskhetian families still continue to partition homes into male and female accommodations, which is also reflected in the separate sitting sections at weddings and funerals as well as during meals. This secondary status is also found in the employment and education many of Meskhetian women, which are bound to the male-dominated society. However, women often still retain a specified social status that allows them to decide upon domestic matters, such as family expenses and invitations to the house. On occasion these strict gender roles are disregarded, particularly if the husband is deceased and the wife heads the family. This equality between husband and wife can also be seen in urban living, versus rural areas, as well as with higher levels of education, although to ensure community acceptance male superiority is often still displayed outside of the home.[26]

With the father typically acting as the 'breadwinner,' the mother takes on the role of 'hearth keeper' within the home together with the responsibility for the education of the children. Just as with their parent's division, sons and

daughters are also commonly subject to a two-tier structure in their upbringing, which hinges on obedience to their father.[27] Consequently, boys usually enjoy greater freedom than girls, with the former being allowed to leave the house and socialize while the latter remain at home where they learn how to cook, sew, knit and other domestic skills. In this way, daughters are traditionally supposed to prepare themselves for married life and how to run a household. This can be observed with a daughter-in-law, who upon moving in with her husband, often in her parents-in-law's home, is expected to take on the household chores.[28] Accordingly, girls are compelled to be obedient not only to their father and husband but also to other family members, such as grandparents, uncles and aunts. Notwithstanding this subordination, sons are in some ways disciplined more than daughters, who are considered guests in their parent's home and thus are more pampered than their brothers. While shifts in treatment and upbringing of children can be seen in more educated and urban families, divided gender roles still prevail in a majority of the Meskhetian communities due to the traditional lifestyle of rural settlements.[29] To this end, the family life of Meskhetians, although changes can be seen owing to specific affairs of family members and the countries of current settlement, mirrors the social arrangement of the larger community, which is ordinarily stratified by established gender roles.

2.3.6 Leadership & Social Roles

Within the Meskhetian communities living throughout the nine countries of current settlement, leaders occupy different

roles that are influenced by varying social characteristics, ranging from age and wealth to professional and civic expertise. While leadership roles are subject to separate circumstances of the countries of current settlement, which have their own distinct social stratification, the overall division of Meskhetian communities comprises a hierarchy according to commonly held interpretations of authority, power and elite status. Furthermore, these social positions can be regarded as holding authority within the family or the communal spheres, or both. Although the embodied responsibilities are predominantly held by separate individuals within the community, overlap does occur owing to the dual nature of some leadership roles.[30]

Accordingly, leaders fall into eight general categories. The first is a respected male elder, whose traditional role encompasses the extended family while he acts as a keeper of the ethical norms of the Meskhetian community. His authority arises from his own moral standing and generally extends to the entire village. The second is the male head of the extended family. This position, which is occupied by several men throughout the community, is not only a traditional role but also one based on economic power. Although authority remains only in the extended family, it is highly important when deciding matters concerning employment and finances as well as marriage and moving. The third category concerns an elderly woman within the extended family or nuclear family. This standing held by several elderly women throughout the Meskhetian community is limited to her own family and oversees mainly domestic concerns, such as marriage choices and the upbringing of children as well as maintaining kinship

relations. Religious leaders fall under the fourth grouping. These ceremonial posts, often held by a mullah or other religious men knowledgeable of the Koran, concerns social events including circumcisions, marriages and funerals. In a similar manner, the fifth classification includes elderly women with spiritual powers of sorcery and clairvoyance. This status is held by women skilled in reading the Koran and is bound to spiritual matters of the community, as well as on occasion to other local populations, even non-Meskhetians, living nearby. The sixth relates to the social position held by the man presiding over social gatherings, similar to the Georgian tradition of a *tamada*, who is invited to communal festivities like circumcisions and marriages, and often insures that celebrations proceed smoothly and without complications. Members of the community that hold professional, scholarly or business positions comprise the seventh category. These roles, which are held by those few members that are employed outside of the Meskhetian society, generate an internal respect reflecting the individual's external authority and prestige. The eighth grouping consists of public leaders of official organizations. This formal function, while occupied by leaders promoting Meskhetian concerns outside of the community through meetings with governmental officials and human rights activists, do not typically hold much social influence within the population.[31]

With these eight classifications, there are several variables that affect the respect and authority exercised by Meskhetian leaders. Age is regarded throughout all Meskhetian communities as a marker of reverence and has great influence on a leader's role in society. While younger men

have achieved success inside and outside of the community, respect for elders known as *aksakals* (white beards) takes precedence in both formal and informal settings. Gender is another aspect that relates to the acceptance of a leader. With marked positions for men and women within the Meskhetian society, traditions keep leaders split customarily between the domains of the family and community, although occasionally women do become locally or even regionally active. Religion, while generally reserved for mullahs who are held in high opinion throughout the community, does not necessarily correlate into power in the everyday matters of the community. Nevertheless, sometimes roles are merged between an *aksakal* and mullah, whose dual respect allows him to administer non-religious affairs. Another feature of a leader's standing is wealth, although respect and influence comes only when the individual contributes to the welfare of the community. In this manner of communal assistance, a professional career within the general society of the country, or membership in an official organization, is only prestigious when one aids the Meskhetian community. Concerning professionals, social advancement outside of the community generally only generates symbolic respect from its members. Regarding NGO leaders, many are not considered to truly represent the Meskhetians' concerns. Lastly, governmental partnership with a leader affects the status in the community, although in general respect fluctuates with the success of the individual in resolving Meskhetian issues. Consequently, the diverse roles held by Meskhetian leaders in both the private and public spheres create a power structure that is based upon the practices and needs of the community.[32]

2.3.7 Births, Marriages & Funerals

Throughout Meskhetian communities the life events of births, marriages and funerals are generally celebrated according to traditions held by members of the family as well as the community. While some of the customs held by Meskhetians are specific to each group and the different societies, many are a mixture of Muslim rituals together with practices from Russia and the Caucasus in general, which in turn are blended with the local traditions prevalent in the host communities where Meskhetians have settled most recently. Concerning circumcisions and births, a mullah is traditionally invited to perform the ritual, although more recently surgical procedures are regularly employed for the former. Following a circumcision, guests of family and friends partake in a *sünnet toy* (a large party) to celebrate the occasion. At the festivities, gifts are usually presented to the boy and his family by the *kirve* (comparable to a godfather) and his relatives. While the *kirve* does not have to be related to the boy, he is respected by the family, and after the circumcision there is a strong link between both families.[33] On the other hand, the birth of a girl is often met with disappointment—especially if she is a second or third daughter—which at times is publicly criticized, although this can be considered usually as a communal facade.[34]

Marriages have traditionally been ceremonious events for Meskhetians and their family. Today there is not a uniform marriage ritual throughout the many countries where Meskhetians live, as local customs and practices often have been incorporated into traditional Meskhetian ceremonial practices. However, marriages continue to be significantly

supervised by the parents, In traditional custom, a formal proposal (sometimes called a *toy*), must be offered before the wedding to the family of the bride in which the groom's family presents the girl with gold jewelry. Two to four weeks later, an engagement party (*nişan*) is held with both families attending, where they toast with a sweet drink (*şerbet*) to acknowledge the marriage as well as exchange gifts. While the duration of the engagement can last up to a year, sometimes longer, generally the period is a month. The wedding, which lasts one to two days, begins with the groom-led procession of family, friends and respected members of the community to the bride's home. After collecting his wife-to-be, the procession together with the bride's relatives returns to the groom's home greeted by music.[35]

After the mullah reads the prayers, coins and candy are showered down on the procession, while the bride prepares to enter the groom's home. In turn, she breaks one or two plates as well as marks the door with honey in the shape of a cross before entering, which is to bring happiness to the newlyweds. Being led into the house, the bride takes a seat in the corner, where she silently acknowledges the praise of the invited guests while she holds a baby to ensure that she will have children. Following a symbolic payment for the bride, she changes into her wedding dress and returns to the house with a handkerchief around her face. According to tradition—only when her tongue has been symbolically cut out, she has been given gold by her father, and the groom's friend has popped balloons hanging over the bride—can she speak and remove the handkerchief. Following these marriage customs, the wedding reception is held with a banquet as guests present the couple with gifts. During

the dinner, dancing begins, with the newlyweds ending the celebration with a final dance.[36] While these traditions once were more prevalent, in recent years, many elements of these ceremonial practices have faded.

Early marriage from the age of 15 onwards is typically observed owing to fears of not being able to find a good spouse. Traditionally, the main aim of Meskhetian daughters is to get married, whether they are educated or not. Meskhetian sons are supposed to choose a wife that is good at performing domestic chores, particularly the youngest boy since he will move in with the parents to take care of them as they get older. While marriage between relatives is forbidden on the basis that five to seven generations must separate husband and wife, cousins are known to wed albeit infrequently. Marriages are often still arranged by parents, with the son's mother having the final say on who he weds. Furthermore, parents usually even decide the wedding date owing to the fact that they provide the newlyweds with everything to start a life together as well as a place to live, which traditionally is with the husband's parents. Upon joining her new family, the wife takes on the house chores and remains subordinate to her parents-in-law.[37] While most marriages are planned, in some cases abduction of the daughter occurs, for example, owing to disapproval by the parents for the couple to marry or refusal by the girl to marry the suitor. While polygamy is generally not accepted by Meskhetians, a 'second' wife is not entirely uncommon. Despite the fact that this other marriage is not legal, wealthy men are known to have an 'official' wife and a 'second' wife, with the former tending to the household and the latter for the husband's pleasure.[38] Regardless of

the 'official' wife's dissatisfaction, this 'second' relationship is not considered grounds for divorce, unlike addiction to alcohol or drugs, which are regarded as justifiable reasons. Separation is further complicated because the husband's family traditionally has the right to decide when to end the marriage.[39]

Marriages for the most part are between only Meskhetians, although occasionally inter-communal unions do occur. In such cases, it is predominantly Meskhetian men that marry non-Meskhetian women, which is more acceptable owing to the fact that a wife is supposed to adopt the culture and family of her husband. Sometimes families agree to a marriage between their daughter and a non-Meskhetian—usually an Azerbaijani—because of similar traditions and language, although these are still infrequent.[40] By and large, marriages are seen as ways to bind the Meskhetian community closer together, while promoting their customs and the traditional roles of the husband and wife.

For most Meskhetians, a funeral, just as with births and marriages, is an important ceremony that bring members of the family and community together to mourn the dead. With guests coming from both near and far, funerals can be made up of hundreds of visitors. At the house, men remain outside while women grieve for the deceased inside. Concerning the funeral traditions, which commence no later than a day after the death, the body is washed by either men or women depending on the gender of the deceased. With men reading a prayer (*cenaze namazı*), the body is wrapped in a white shroud together with a green cloth. After praying, the body is carried to the car, which is then removed again once the procession has neared the cemetery. The body is

then carried to the cemetery, which follows the tradition of *sabab*, supposedly blessing those transporting the deceased. The burial is commonly attended only by men. With the grave facing Mecca, according to Islamic tradition, the body is placed in a fetal position wrapped only in the white shroud. After prayers are read and coins (*fitka*) are handed out to 61 persons—which amounts to the price of a kilogram of bread from the last Ramazan Bayrami (the three day feast that marks the end of the Ramadan fasting month)—the funeral procession returns to the house of the deceased where they partake in a funeral meal (*heyrat*). During the next 40 days a prayer is read every day, with a special funeral meal being held on the 40th day.[41] In this way, with all three life events of births, marriages and funerals, Meskhetians adhere to a multitude of traditions, which have often been influenced by country specific customs, and at the same time encourage a sense of belonging between both the family and community.

2.3.8 Cuisine, Dress & Folklore

Together with their traditions, Meskhetians usually continue to uphold a distinct culture as based upon their cuisine, dress and folklore, which due to local habits have shifted with time and place. Regarding cuisine, Meskhetians share dishes which can be found in both South Caucasian and Central Asian cooking. Commonly consumed foods include potatoes, rice and other assorted vegetables as well as meat, eggs, cheese, sour cream and honey. In general, Meskhetian meals can be split into breakfast, lunch and dinner. At breakfast, homemade bread, cheese and sour cream are

eaten together with scrambled or boiled eggs. Lunch and dinner comprise similar dishes that include cabbage or beet soup, rice with meat (*pilav*), stewed potatoes with lamb (*çorba*), and stuffed cabbage or grapevine leaves (*dolma*). In addition to everyday eating, Meskhetians also have specific cuisine for weddings and funerals. Weddings dishes comprise a wide variety of cultural foods: Russian beet salad (*vinegret*), sweet pastries (*pakhlava*), Georgian dumplings (*khinkali*), *çorba*, *pilav*, flat bread, jellied meat, cookies and perhaps vodka. The dishes prepared for funerals are more basic, which consists of *çorba*, bread, cheese and tomatoes as well as mineral water, sodas and tea but no alcohol.

Whereas Meskhetian cuisine has combined present-day dishes, traditional dress and handicraft have been nearly replaced by modern fashion and the circumstances of resettlement to new societies. As a result, shawls, silver belts and headdresses (*katha*), which were worn by married women, have nearly disappeared from everyday life. While some married women can be found wearing head scarves and older religious men donning Muslim caps, for younger generations contemporary trends have become predominant. Notwithstanding the changes in dress, Meskhetian folklore—which encompasses proverbs, riddles, legends, folk songs, ceremonial chants and prayers—has lasted throughout their many decades of exile. Traditional wedding music shares many similarities to those styles of the South Caucasus and Central Asia with such instruments as the clarinet, oboe, tambourine and a stringed instrument known as a *saz*, although recently electric guitars, keyboards and drums have become more commonplace. Consequently, traditional aspects of the Meskhetian culture have shifted with the

fluctuating existences of their bearers, which at times have allowed some customs to adapt and others to be lost.[42]

2.4 Integration

While return to Georgia and Meskheti, whether real or imagined, remains a desire of many Meskhetians, their numerous resettlements following their deportation have resulted in their dispersal across nine countries (see Chapter 1). With the shifting political, economic, and social environments of the Soviet and post-Soviet era, both host states and local populations have taken on alternating positive and negative attitudes toward Meskhetians. Within the Meskhetian communities as well, relationships with their new environments and integration into society have been met with relief as well as doubt. Accordingly, participation in the social institutions of the host states—whether it be through political activism, employment or educational advancement—faces many obstacles.[43]

In this regard, there are five general factors affecting the Meskhetians' integration into society. The first concerns the nation-building processes of the post-Soviet republics, which have led to pro-titular policies and anti-minority stances throughout the countries. The second stems from the host states' weak economies that have caused high unemployment for both Meskhetians and the local populations. The short periods of settlement, particularly in regard to those Meskhetians resettled after the Fergana Valley pogrom in 1989, represents the third complication for integration. The fourth factor is the lack of governmental policies to aid the incorporation of the

communities into the general society. The last concerns the internal attitudes of many Meskhetians, which regard their settlement as being only temporary, whether it be due to fear of being expelled again or hope of returning to Georgia. Despite these many difficulties, in some instances Meskhetians have adapted well to their countries of current settlement, where they have become active members of society. Accordingly, Meskhetians have faced integration dilemmas in both the pre- and post-independent environments of the Soviet republics as well as in Turkey and the USA. Consequently, while the policies of the USSR were the cause of their deportation, its collapse signaled another turning point in the Meskhetian narrative, which hinged on new societal circumstances of integration and marginalization.[44]

2.4.1 Political Integration & Civil Activism

The political integration of Meskhetians can be divided between engagement within governmental structures or membership of an elected decision-making body on the one hand, and civil society organizations on the other. Concerning the former, a few Meskhetians are employed in the municipal or regional administrations in areas where they are substantially settled and occasionally in the parliament of the country. Regarding the latter, some have become political activists in local, regional or international civil society organizations. While some members of the Meskhetian community are involved in either domain, sometimes both, integration suffers from an underlying weak participation by Meskhetians in formulating political

agenda and a lack of engagement with the current state structures. Furthermore, despite attempts to lobby for their return from the 1950s to the 1980s, during the Soviet Union Meskhetians were not very politically oriented as the majority of the people focused their efforts on surviving in their new homes. In turn, the dismemberment of the USSR gave rise to different state and social environments that were both positive and negative for Meskhetians' political integration. Accordingly, Meskhetians enjoyed new political possibilities with more contacts both in the country and abroad, while being faced with distinctly nationalist policies from the state governments. Coupled with this situation is the fact that whereas kin relationships and communal authority are important for Meskhetians, formal leadership is not held in the same high regard. This being the case, only those civil or political activists that utilize their positions for the good of the community receive the respect allotted to Meskhetians' social leaders. Despite this limited activism, a few Meskhetians have been engaged with the government or civil society organizations.[45]

Concerning state structures, Meskhetians hold very few top governmental positions. In general, Meskhetians have excelled in the public service sector as teachers, lawyers or doctors, positions held commonly during and after the Soviet era. Despite succeeding in careers—ranging from school principals to deans of university faculties and from clerks in a ministry to officials in a village administration—for many there is a 'ceiling' that restricts Meskhetians from reaching higher positions. The fact that there are few politically active members of the Meskhetian communities stems from two interconnected circumstances. Owing to the fact that politics

largely are controlled by the elite of the titular societies, together with the circumstances associated with their long exile, in turn Meskhetians avoid becoming politically active. The interests of the titular population have taken dominance within the state apparatuses and throughout the countries of current settlement. Although Meskhetians are not explicitly denied access to politics, except in the case of Russia, a political indifference has become commonplace amongst the Meskhetian communities.[46] Another problem arises with attaining citizenship, which owing to constant resettlements, legal requirements, and state policies have led to the marginalization of many Meskhetians, particularly in Turkey and Uzbekistan as well as to some extent in Ukraine. However, once a Meskhetian achieves a position of authority, no matter how limited, the individual is usually expected to make use of the acquired status to benefit the community. While some Meskhetians use their post, often in public services, to resolve community problems, others choose to dissociate themselves from their people, which in turn is criticized.[47] With these underlying difficulties for advancement in the state structures, coupled with the political passivity of the communities, Meskhetians lack a strong voice in their current societies.

While integration within governmental structures largely has failed in representing Meskhetians' interests, activism through civil society organizations has resulted in some community concerns to be addressed while others ignored. The civil society organizations that formed following the end of the Soviet Union can generally be separated between those supporting Meskhetian resettlement and those promoting Meskhetian issues in their country of current

settlement. As for the first group, while some Meskhetians lobbied throughout the 1950–1960s as well as the late 1970–1980s for the right to return—to the most extent ignored by state officials—it was not until the post-Soviet period that civil engagement was once again pursued. While during the Soviet Union groups were divided, although not entirely, between pro-Turkish and pro-Georgian orientations, from the 1990s onwards the main emerging civil society organizations maintained one of three competing ideologies concerning the Meskhetians' identities, which were used in promoting separate agendas.[48]

Adhering to the first orientation is the International Society of Meskhetian Turks *Vatan* (homeland in Turkish), which advances the idea that Meskhetians are Turks that should be allowed to repatriate to their historical homeland. Since its creation in 1990, *Vatan* has become the most recognized NGO both amongst the Meskhetian communities and the international community. The organization promotes itself as an advocate for Meskhetian culture and language while encouraging respect for human and minority rights in the countries where *Vatan* is active, although overall repatriation remains the main focus of *Vatan*. Together with a fixed membership, the leadership of *Vatan* is based upon a centralized international structure with a head office in Moscow. However, *Vatan*'s organizational operations are limited only to Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Furthermore, owing to personal animosities, the NGO split in late 2007, as the former chairman, Mr. Suleyman Barbakadze, refused to accept the authority of the new chairman of the international organization, Mr.

Tashtan Aslanov. With the split of *Vatan*, Mr. Barbakadze maintained, for a time, his own structure that has enjoyed the support of some *Vatan* branches, particularly in Azerbaijan and in Russia's Rostov region. In Georgia, the splinter faction has been represented by the Foundation for Repatriation Support established in 2007. Since 2009, the official *Vatan* has been affiliated with the International Union of Deported and Repatriated Young Meskhetians based in Tbilisi. Following the arrest in Georgia of Mr. Barbakadze in July 2010, the splinter faction of *Vatan* seems to have ceased its activities. Generally, since *Vatan* maintains a focus on repatriation, at the expense of issues related to the problems of the Meskhetian communities in their current countries of settlement, and at the same time is afflicted by personal rivalry between its leaders, the organization has received much criticism in the recent years for its management and activities.

Upholding a second, although somewhat related perspective on Meskhetian identity, are several NGOs based in the Central Asia republics, with several others in Turkey and a few in Azerbaijan. The most important of these are the Kazakhstan National Centre of Ahiska Turks, the Ahiska Union in Kazakhstan, the Ahiska Union in Kyrgyzstan and the Ahiska Union in Turkey. These organizations, including the organizations of *Türkiye* (Turkey) in Kazakhstan, *Osmanlı Türkleri* (Ottoman Turks) in Kyrgyzstan and the Ahıska Turks Cultural Centre in Azerbaijan, hold the view that Meskhetians are Turks that were originally resettled to the region of Meskheti. However, unlike propagating return to Georgia as *Vatan*, they believe that Meskhetians should emigrate to Turkey rather than seek repatriation to Georgia.

In an attempt to join forces and establish a strong transnational association of organizations adhering to the Turkish orientation, the World Union of Ahiska Turks was established in late 2008 with its headquarter in Ankara, Turkey. The World Union united 42 organizations from all the nine countries of Meskhetian settlement, including most prominently *Vatan* and the Ahiska Unions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey. The World Union of Ahiska Turks is chaired by the influential businessman and head of the Kazakhstan National Centre of Ahiska Turks, Mr. Ziaddin Gazanov.

Yet another trend among Meskhetian organizations is made up by followers of the view that Meskhetians essentially are Georgians who historically were forced to convert to Islam. These organizations advocate resettlement to Georgia and assimilation into the wider society. *Hsna* (salvation in Georgian) was an early organization adhering to this pro-Georgian orientation, which more recently is represented in Georgia by the Union of Georgian Repatriates and Khalil Gozalishvili's World Congress of Meskhetians. These organizations, however, have limited, if any, support outside of Georgia where the vast majority of Meskhetians consider themselves to be ethnic Turks. These Georgian-based organizations have continued advocating for repatriation, mainly with the Georgian government, and have also implemented projects for the eventual return of Meskhetians and the integration of the few Meskhetian communities living in Georgia. To this end, a new organization was established in Georgia in September 2010, the Youth Union Meskhetians of Georgia, which declares that its main aim is to support the integration and

language learning of Meskhetians in Georgia and by other means facilitate the repatriation process. Although some of the young activists come from the Khalil Gozalishvili's World Congress of Meskhetians, the Youth Union has so far, wisely, chosen to de-emphasize the ethnicity question rather than putting this sensitive issue in the foreground of their activities.

Undoubtedly, the division between different competing organizations based on contrasting identities and orientations has affected the efficiency of the Meskhetian NGOs. However, in addition to the contrasting ethnic and ideological orientations and agendas of the organizations, there are also several factors that influence the effectiveness of the organizations. Of major concern is the constant need for funding, which most often comes from private donations and is thus extremely unpredictable. Another problem, as highlighted by the splitting of *Vatan* and the lack of cohesiveness even among the Georgian-based organizations, is the changes and internal disputes within the leadership of these NGOs. As a result, unsteady collaboration and personal ambitions have led in some cases to poorly realized projects. In turn, these problems relate to the last component affecting the effectiveness of the NGOs: trust from the Meskhetian communities. For the most part, Meskhetians are critical of the organizations, expecting the leaders and associations to look after the concerns of the community. Consequently, these issues concerning civil society organizations, coupled with the limited governmental engagement, have led to a weak political integration of Meskhetians both inside and outside of their countries of current settlement.[49]

Russia's Krasnodar *krai*

For the Meskhetians living in the Krasnodar *krai*, the majority of which were resettled after the Fergana pogrom, the environment encouraged by the local communities and authorities has been one of both discriminatory practices and xenophobic attitudes. While an estimated 3,000 Meskhetian Turks had arrived before 1989, following the hostile events throughout Uzbekistan some 13,000 relocated to the Krasnodar *krai*. Upon their arrival, though, the regional government denied the Meskhetians' legal rights to settle in the area by refusing to grant a *propiska* (residence registration) to them. Denied this legal status, a remnant of the Soviet system, the Meskhetians were unable to receive new Russian passports, thereby making them *de facto* stateless persons and in turn depriving them of their fundamental civil and human rights. Coupled with this denial by the government to recognize Meskhetians as citizens, thereby contradicting the national laws, the officials continued to require them to reregister as "guests" throughout the Krasnodar *krai* every 45 days. In this unjust manner, the local police undertook searches of Meskhetians, while imposing fines upon those without proper identification required by the authorities.[50] With the local authorities disregarding the Russian Constitution and federal citizenship laws—which effectively granted Meskhetians all rights shared by

other citizens of the country—the Meskhetians lost their right to employment, social benefits, health care, property ownership, higher education and legal marriage. In addition to being denied the right to rent land or sell products in the local market, schools were also segregated between Meskhetians and the local children.[51]

In addition to these discriminatory practices, the regional government has perpetuated xenophobic feelings amongst the local population. Using the media, the authorities have depicted Meskhetians, as well as other minorities, as illegal migrants that endanger the ethnic and demographic position of the local population. Ideas of the incompatibility of Slavic and Turkic communities to reside together peacefully is supported by some scholars who encourage Soviet thinking on ethnic division and superiority, while propagating opinions that multiethnic societies lead to conflict.[52] Consequently, in the beginning of the 1990s, Krasnodar politicians, while taking advantage of hostile sentiments towards non-Slavic groups in the region, put into a practice laws that segregated Meskhetians within the society. With this hostile environment, Meskhetians have faced vigilante persecution and assaults from local Cossack organizations, which consider themselves to be defenders of the Slavic people throughout the region. While within the Krasnodar *krai* these policies and standpoints have become manifested, throughout other regions of

Russia where Meskhetians are living there is relative acceptance of and good relationships with the minority. During the early 1990s, *Vatan*—the main Russia-based Meskhetian organization—had a network of activists in the region that worked together with human rights NGOs to bring regional and national attention to the discrimination of the Meskhetians. Despite lobbying efforts, both the Russian regional and national governments continued to neglect the issues faced by the Meskhetian communities.[53] All in all, with these discriminatory practices and xenophobic expressions many Meskhetians found themselves re-experiencing in the Krasnodar *krai* some of the hardships they had faced in the first years following their deportation to Central Asia.

2.4.2 Economic Integration & Employment

Meskhetian's economic integration is based both on internal choices of the community as well as external affairs of the general society. Correspondingly, it is not only Meskhetians that affect their integration, but also the attitudes of the local population towards their economic status. In this regard, economic integration includes employment, business ventures and financial expenditures. Concerning the first category, Meskhetians are overwhelmingly involved in agricultural production in their countries of current settlement, including farming and livestock breeding as well as floriculture and horticulture. Although in many

cases Meskhetians are employed less than the surrounding populations, which are also generally engaged in agriculture, they often are more successful owing to the fact that they pool their resources and land amongst family members. While in the Soviet Union, the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* (collective and state-owned farms) had provided supplies for cultivation, with the privatization of land the habit of sharing plots and assets has become crucial to Meskhetians' livelihood. For this reason, by working together the family members sell their array of products, either through wholesale or retail, to the local markets. Despite this relative success, it is not without its difficulties to attain. In several countries of current settlement—particularly in Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan—access to the bazars is hindered by local competitors, businessmen and officials.[54]

Connected with their often profitable outcome is their underlying strong work ethic that impels them to utilize every asset for financial reward, even if this means taking on a job considered to be less prestigious. For this reason, the local populations generally regard Meskhetians as being hardworking and relatively prosperous in their economic undertakings. In addition to agriculture, many Meskhetians are professional drivers, either for transportation of products or passengers, which stems from side jobs taken up during the Soviet period. Other employment also includes seasonal work in urban centers as well as in other post-Soviet states or Turkey, which many young Meskhetians travel with the help of relatives residing there. Owing to the fact that Meskhetian communities are predominantly male-dominated, women are traditionally not allowed to work outside of the households. While in urban centers

this tradition is generally disregarded, in rural areas this trend remains relatively unchallenged. This being the case, women act as housewives, helping to tend vegetable gardens or livestock in order to increase the subsistence of the family.[55] Employment, thus, is to a great part based on agriculture as well as self-employment, with most success coming from the family networks involved.

While the shift from a command economy of the USSR to the market economies of the post-Soviet states caused great difficulties, the chances and resources of starting a business became more available and accessible. Accordingly, on the one hand family connections have allowed Meskhetians to undertake enterprises, while on the other their limited business interaction with the local population has prevented greater economic outcome. On a smaller scale, shops and bars have been opened in villages, although these business ventures are not often successful owing to the lack of networks outside of the family. Nevertheless, many Meskhetians have succeeded in investing in different enterprises—such as food production, appliances and manufacturing, and transportation—with financial support from their relatives. The most affluent Meskhetians, the economic elite, are those that have been able to combine both family networks and connections with members of the local society. Restricting most attempts at building a business, though, is the poor economic conditions throughout their countries of current settlement, which in turn negatively affect both Meskhetians and the local populations.[56] Consequently, while a few Meskhetians have been prosperous in their investments, the overall aforementioned difficulties have limited those trying their hands at business ventures.

The last aspect of Meskhetians' economic integration is their financial expenditures, which are primarily based upon socially prestigious goods. In this way, after enough money has been saved Meskhetians purchase a house and a car, a trend that mirrors their consumption patterns from the Soviet Union. Although income is spent on individual necessities, it is customary to collect money from each working family member and then to spend it on an item that has social value and benefits for everyone. In general this type of consumption can be found in rural settlements. In spite of this social spending, Meskhetians also have habits of saving money in case of troubles in the future, which stems from their many resettlements since their deportation as well as their desire to visit relatives or to pay for their children's schooling. For these reasons, often the local populations regard the Meskhetians as being wealthy, which in comparison to the general society they are generally better off than. While at times this has led to envy from the titular community, for the most part there has not been considerable confrontation resulting from these feelings.[57] Notwithstanding their many years of resettlement, Meskhetians have overall integrated themselves into the economies of their countries of current settlement with the help of their family networks and hardworking attitudes.

2.4.3 Social Integration & Education

Within their current homes, social integration of Meskhetians is dependent mainly upon their ability to receive an education, which allows those who attend university to often find better employment in the society,

to become involved in politics within the state, or to become involved with a civil society organization. For these reasons, education is seen as a prestigious asset for both the individual and family, which allows Meskhetians to participate in the social institutions of the country as well as affairs beyond the Meskhetian community. Despite this increased status amongst members, in terms of higher education, Meskhetians are generally less educated than the local population, which stems from many internal choices of the family as well as the external circumstances of the society. Concerning the former, opinions on gender and employment affects how educated an individual is, if at all. Relating to family issues, knowledge of the local language and the ability to afford schooling is fundamental in receiving an education. For these reasons, higher education of Meskhetians, in spite of facilitating social integration, remains a matter of interlinked determinants, which in turn has generally limited the number of members attending university and other educational institutions.

Relating to family issues, attitude towards gender is extremely influential on the level of education an individual can achieve. Owing to the male-dominated structure of the communities, Meskhetian men are often more educated than women. This trend is commonly found throughout all countries of current settlement, which also have higher percentages of educated women amongst the local populations. This situation is due to the traditional practice of early marriages for Meskhetian girls, often before schooling has even ended. Linked with marriage is the belief that the husband will provide for the family, while the wife will remain at home taking care of domestic

affairs, a trait found most commonly in rural settlements. In spite of these customs, though, some women have remained unmarried and have continued studying or have wed and gone back to school with the encouragement of their husband. Most often this is the case when the woman moves to or the couple lives in the urban centers of the countries. In this fashion, for those children who have educated parents, often living in cities, both the boys and girls are sent to university and other educational institutions. In the villages, however, the parents who lack an education tend to follow the restrictive customs placed on women receiving an education. Consequently, commonly held attitudes towards gender generally supports men attaining a higher education while discouraging women to go to university.[58]

In addition to gender are the commonly held opinions of Meskhetians on employment and education. As a result of the changes occurring in the period of transition from the Soviet era to post-independence, a divergent view of education has formed. Following their deportation and subsequent resettlements, securing a livelihood became increasingly more important than attaining a higher education. While some of the arriving Meskhetians had specialized training before being expelled from Georgia, upon arriving in Central Asia their skills and expertise were neglected in their search for work. Accordingly, employment in agriculture, which requires little formal education, was seen as guaranteeing a source of income. Moreover, while during the USSR higher education was regarded as necessary for career development, following its collapse and the ensuing economic alteration of the post-Soviet societies, schooling was considered less important in

finding a profession. Notwithstanding that many younger Meskhetians are nowadays going to university, some follow the same line of thought of their elders that employment is more important, and lucrative, than education. Despite this overall situation, in those regions of the post-Soviet Union where the economy has modernized, schooling is considered essential in securing an occupation. As a result of the Soviet and post-Soviet circumstances, many older Meskhetians who are highly educated do not use their professional knowledge, while the youth, out of respect for their elders' advice, take on a job rather than going to school.[59] While education has great social value for Meskhetians, the concern of potential employment following university greatly influences the decision whether to study or to work.

Also affecting the chances of being educated are the external circumstances of the country of current settlement. One crucial issue is the language of instruction. During their long years of exile, Meskhetians have been unable to be educated in their native tongue or in Georgian, which for many was a second language before the deportation. While knowledge of Russian allowed many to gain a higher education in the USSR, after the collapse of the Soviet Union Russian-language institutions were closed in some countries, which in turn hindered many from attempting to go to, or continue, school.[60] For other Meskhetians, both young and old, who had learned the language of the country they were deported to, gaining an education and integrating into the society has been less challenging. However for those that resettled, their linguistic knowledge became obsolete in their new home, particularly when attempting to get a higher education. For those children who have attended

school, they often have difficulties doing well, which is coupled with the fact that their parents cannot help them study due to their own poor linguistic skills.[61] Language, thus, is one of the important determinants of the level of education Meskhetians achieve as well as integration within the societies of their nine countries of current settlement.

Another major concern is the cost of education. Owing to the fact that within the former Soviet Union higher education is at times no longer free, sending children to university has become an often highly expensive decision. For this reason, some parents support their children finding employment rather than attending an institute for higher learning. This situation is especially prevalent in rural regions, where the parents are unable to afford their children's schooling. Following independence the Turkish government established several Turkish-taught *lyceums* (secondary schools) in the post-Soviet states and also set up programs to provide Meskhetian youth with finances and residences to study in Turkey.[62] Even with these opportunities, though, education still remains a costly choice that more often than not restricts Meskhetians from going to university. Consequently, education, as a social asset, is subject to several considerations and affairs of both the family and the society.

Resettlement to the USA

Owing to a lack of durable solutions to ending the years of overt discrimination and widespread

xenophobia throughout the Krasnodar *krai* in Russia—to where Meskhetians had been resettled as early as the 1960s with rising numbers in the beginning 1990s following the Fergana pogrom—the United States government implemented a resettlement program from 2004 to 2006 to the country. Administered by the International Organization for Migration, some 11,500 Meskhetians voluntarily resettled to cities all over the United States, mainly in the states of Pennsylvania, Georgia, Washington, Illinois, Kentucky, Arizona, Idaho, Texas, Virginia, New York and Colorado (see map Settlement of Meskhetians by Country: USA).[63] While it will still take time to gauge the integration of the Meskhetians into the wider society, in the few years the resettlement program has been implemented, the overall move to the USA has been met with positive attitudes on both sides. A crucial aspect of the program has been the legal status granted to the Meskhetians—which the US Refugee Program defines as refugees of "special humanitarian concern" according to the Immigration and Nationality Act 1999—which allows them the to legally reside in the country and receive resettlement assistance. Further linked with this initial success have been the opportunities to be employed and attend school without fear of discrimination. Consequently, underlying this early success of the US resettlement program has been the provision of legal, economic and social assistance to support the integration of

the Meskhetians into the multiethnic society of the country.

In regards to the legal status of Meskhetians, according to the US legal framework pertaining to refugees, they can apply for permanent residency after one year and for citizenship after five years.[64] Concerning the actual processes of resettlement, the established refugee agencies throughout the resettlement locations have been essential in overseeing, monitoring and implementing programs to aid in the integration of the Meskhetians. Of major concern is establishing the economic self-sufficiency of the Meskhetians, which is accomplished through job development, training, placement and counseling. In addition to employment assistance, which is provided for both men and women, services for youth and elderly as well as health care have also been made available. Owing to the fact that language skills are needed to ensure stable employment as well as integration into the society, the refugee agencies have provided English classes as well as Russian or Turkish interpretations when needed. Moreover, education has also been supported with help from the refugee agencies. Meskhetian children are enrolled in local schools and placed into English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, eventually attending courses with other students. While the young generation of Meskhetians still grapple with the choice between continuing education or seeking employment, the access to higher education has been welcomed by

many boys and girls as well as by their families.[65] With these approaches of providing legal, economic and social assistance the Meskhetians have resettled to the USA without any major obstacles.

While much success has been due to the extensive help offered to the refugees through governmental agencies, the positive attitudes of the Meskhetians in integrating into the society has also ensured initial favorable results. This has been most apparent in their good work ethics, which has enabled them to quickly be accepted both in their work and social environments. Meskhetians have also utilized their social networks—which span not only Turkic-speaking and Caucasian identity circles but also Russian-speaking and Soviet affiliations—to find work, integrate into society and to make contacts in the USA.[66] Inevitably, while Meskhetians still struggle with defining their place within their new societies, which stem mainly from issues of identity construction as well as language acquisition, this transition has been welcomed by the resettled individuals and families from the Krasnodar *krai*.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

Since their deportation, the Meskhetian communities have been dispersed across the post-Soviet space and beyond. While at times their separate experiences have resulted in specific traditions being shaped by the environments of

their countries of current settlement, a shared culture and comparable circumstances have bound the members to one another. With strong family ties and social leaderships roles, Meskhetian communities have internally maintained intertwined personal and professional relationships, while externally reflecting this sense of belonging to the local societies, in which they live. A cornerstone of this communal affiliation is their homeland of Meskheti, which remains both a real and imagined place of return for a majority of the Meskhetian communities. Despite the fact that many of the Meskhetian youth have come to see their current countries of settlement as a substitute home, older generations continue to view southern Georgia as their homeland and the origins of the Meskhetian people.

With their decades in exile, Meskhetians have come to see their collective suffering as a common denominator of their group identity, which is maintained through their close-knit kinship networks as well as shared cultural, linguistic and religious traditions. While their sense of collective belonging has helped them endure their years banishment, the varied environments of the nine countries of current settlement has in turn influenced their individual practices and customs as well as political, economic and social integration. As a result, Meskhetians have had advantages and disadvantages in integrating into the societies, which owing to local and national affairs have influenced, both positively and negatively, the incorporation of the Meskhetian communities into the countries. Whereas some Meskhetians have utilized their large support networks to find employment, be involved in politics or engage the social institutions of the country, others have found

themselves unable to integrate fully and often have become marginalized in the societies. Taking these group affiliations into account, together with the experiences of adapting to the many places where they have resettled, repatriation and integration of the Meskhetian communities—while requiring great efforts—will culminate in exceptional deeds to right the wrong of the Meskhetians' deportation.

Relations with Host Communities in Georgia

In face of that fact that since their deportation the vast majority of Meskhetians found themselves barred from returning to Georgia, against all odds a few resettled throughout the country from the late 1960s onwards without the approval of the authorities. With nearly 1,000 Meskhetians today residing in rural areas across the Imereti, Guria, Shida Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions, relations with the Georgian local communities have exhibited rather positive attitudes from both sides. According to interviewed repatriates and locals, these good relations were, and still are, a reality both before the Meskhetian deportation from the country as well as following their unofficial return to Georgia. Before the deportation, as stated by repatriates, Muslim and Christian communities shared in a peaceful coexistence as seen by the fact that some Meskhetians took part in the festivities of the Christian Georgians. While the events of 1917–1919, which

resulted in the oppression of the Christians living in the southern regions of Georgia, are still recalled by members of the local communities, they also speak of Meskhetians helping to protect the Christian Georgians during these years. At the time of their deportation, Meskhetians remember their Christian neighbors being sympathetic to their forced expulsion.

After their repatriation, many Meskhetians speak of the troubles they faced, which was particularly true immediately following Georgia's independence with the nationalist attitudes that affected most minority and related groups residing in the country. During this time many Meskhetians were forced to leave despite the fact that before the ethno-political conflicts of the early 1990s there were favorable relations with the local populations. Following the civil strife in the years after the demise of the Soviet Union, Meskhetians found that relations gradually improved again both in school and work. In spite of these connections, both sides note degrees of isolation from the other. One reason for misunderstandings between Meskhetians and local Georgians is the different notions and expectations concerning friendships and community relations shared in parallel, but separately, by each group. While Meskhetians claim that there are friendly relations with the local populations, the cultural habit of living in closed communities is often commented negatively upon by Georgians. Regardless of these remarks, local Georgians speak of Meskhetians in positive terms,

particularly of their honesty, hard work and mutual support. All in all, while historical circumstances and political policies from before their deportation have strained, and even broken, many positive relationships that were once shared, the current relations between the host Georgian communities and repatriated Meskhetians are mostly friendly.[67]

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework for Repatriation & Integration

3.1 Introduction

When joining the Council of Europe in 1999, Georgia undertook the obligation and commitment to repatriate the Meskhetians and other communities deported from Georgia in the 1940s. After a long and difficult process, the Law on Repatriation was adopted by the Georgian parliament in July 2007, which was followed by the process of collecting applications from Meskhetians residing in their nine countries of current settlement. Within a two-year deadline set by the Georgian parliament for applying for repatriation status, nearly 6,000 applications mostly originating from Azerbaijan (covering less than 9,000 individuals)—out of the estimated total of 425,000 Meskhetians and their descendants—have been received and registered by Georgian officials. While Georgia has committed itself to repatriate the deported Meskhetians, an issue that is greatly supported by several international organizations, careful planning is required to ensure the processes of repatriation and integration are properly executed with the least possible amount of problems. Owing to the interconnected political, economic, social, and legal issues surrounding the Meskhetians' return, as well as serious psychological

challenges for the communities, these processes will be demanding for both the Georgian government and the involved stakeholders. The current political situation, the recent August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, economic troubles, and existing external threats are not particularly conducive to any large-scale endeavors such as the repatriation of a deported people. At the same time, it is important to ensure that future repatriates are provided with opportunities to participate in the society of the country as full-fledged citizens without fear of discrimination.

The repatriation of Meskhetians is a sensitive political issue, involving and affecting different stakeholders both inside and outside of Georgia. While the adopted legislation facilitates the repatriation of Meskhetians and other deported persons to Georgia, there is still significant official and public opposition to their actual repatriation. As of March 2011, the government of Georgia is still addressing issues relating to the processing of applications and other preparations for the repatriation, which is expected to physically begin only in the second part of 2011. However, the government has yet to define its strategy and develop plans for the actual repatriation of the deported people. In addition, many people in Georgia are concerned with, or even hostile towards, the possible return of Meskhetians. These opposing feelings are especially prevalent in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region where people, both ethnic Georgians and Armenians, are worried that the settlement of Meskhetians could negatively impact upon their own lives.

Since repatriation is an extremely important issue for many Meskhetians living abroad, it is important to understand why such a limited number has applied and

become engaged in this process, while many more seem to have lost interest or faith in repatriation after years of efforts and resources spent in pursuing the goal of returning to Georgia. One of the reasons may be the differences between the generations, as the younger people have taken root in their countries of current settlement. At the same time, many of the potential repatriates lack accurate and objective information regarding the resettlement process and what they can expect upon their repatriation to Georgia. In addition, the legal provisions for repatriation are rather complicated, perhaps resulting in many Meskhetians being deterred from submitting applications given that, to them, there seem to be insurmountable obstacles in the application procedures. Finally, the long delays in preparing the legal basis for return, coupled with the heated debates in Georgia on whether to allow for repatriation, seems to have influenced many Meskhetians' optimism about their possibility of return.

Upon their arrival in Georgia, the repatriates may indeed face a number of difficulties; for example, accessing public services (education, healthcare, social security, etc.), organizing their legal status, and finding employment. The arrival of many Meskhetian repatriate families to an existing community can also place an increased strain on social facilities, infrastructure, and land, which may increase the potential for disagreement and tension with the local inhabitants. Therefore, it is necessary for the government, national civil society organizations and international organizations to develop programs and other interventions that not only prepares the groundwork for the repatriation of Meskhetians to Georgia, but also assists in their future socioeconomic integration.

Along with the legal aspects of repatriation, such factors as international pressure; the lack of clearly defined long-term governmental policies or a relevant institutional framework; the negative attitudes amongst the Georgian population and political elite towards the issue of repatriation; and the Meskhetians own opinions on returning are all crucial in understanding the difficulties foreseen by the repatriation. The fears, perceptions and expectations of deported Meskhetians who want to return to Georgia, and those of the host population who will be their neighbors, also need to be understood and taken into account in the repatriation planning process. While repatriation and rehabilitation of deported groups is a moral imperative and duty of the Georgian government, every effort should be made to ensure that the integration of repatriated Meskhetians into the society does not provoke new tensions or conflicts stemming from Georgia's ethnic, territorial and economic problems.

There is no doubt that repatriation of Meskhetians can be beneficial for Georgia as well as for the repatriates themselves. Repatriates can make valuable contributions to the society by relieving labor shortages and increasing economic development, while acting as catalysts for job creation, innovation and growth. Culturally they will enhance diversity throughout the already multiethnic society and stimulate interest in other ethnic groups' traditions and customs. However, the benefits from repatriation are far from automatic considering that certain dangers are also present. In the absence of careful management, the process can accentuate existing problems of ethnic tensions, feelings of insecurity, housing, schools,

and labor markets. Some of these problems may already arise in the short term, although none of these obstacles are linked to repatriation and integration per se but rather to the ways they are and will be managed. Indeed, failing to be proactive today could lead to serious consequences for the Georgian society in the future. For this reason, attentive and well-thought-out administration of the repatriation will be both beneficial and valuable for the country as well as the returning Meskhetians.

Underlying the concept for the management of the repatriation process and socioeconomic integration of repatriates are two major assumptions:

A. *Repatriation of Meskhetians is a moral obligation of both the Georgian state and society, as well as the international community, that will bring great benefits to the country if the process is handled properly. In order to be beneficial, repatriates should feel both welcome in the country and trust in the government and its institutions. Therefore, efforts are needed to stimulate a friendly environment, positive public opinion, and effective governance concerning repatriation.*

B. *Transparency and democratic procedures should be the basis for any decision-making related to repatriation. Therefore, important policy decisions should only be made through a transparent, open, and participatory manner. These decisions should respect and take into account the opinions, values and preferences of the general public and the repatriates themselves, while convincing both of the right course of action.*

It is the obligation of the Georgian state to guarantee for the repatriated Meskhetians the same legal, political, social, economic and living conditions that are enjoyed by all citizens of Georgia, while removing any possibilities that may exclude the Meskhetians from enjoying their equal rights within the country. At the same time, it is the moral responsibility of the Georgian civil society and the international community to support the Georgian government in these efforts.

3.1.1 Structure & Conceptual Framework

On the way towards developing a conceptual framework for return, while encouraging constructive debates on measures that should be adopted in preparation for repatriation and integration, this chapter examines problems, mechanisms, and policies that will affect the return and settlement of Meskhetians. The chapter begins by analyzing the key issues and obstacles for repatriation in a number of fields relating to historical, geographical and demographical, cultural, economic, political and legal topics. This is followed by a presentation of specific principles and aims to be followed in the design and implementation of programs and interventions for the repatriation of Meskhetians. Following, is an examination of the need for establishing management structures and policies both to ensure a straightforward and dignified repatriation as well as the subsequent socioeconomic integration of repatriates. Due to their particular importance, some of the policies—such as those related to communication strategies, lobbying, awareness raising,

dialogue between communities, and empowerment of repatriates—are examined separately. Further discussed is how to encourage an accommodating environment within Georgia for the repatriation of the deported people who have experienced much pain and suffering throughout their decades in exile. In addition, the relationship between the communities and the role of civil society in dealing with these issues is examined. Towards the end of the chapter, issues related to the monitoring, impact, assessment and feedback on the repatriation process are expanded upon, followed by general conclusions briefly summarizing the main ideas formulated in the conceptual framework.

However, there are certain limitations to the utility of this chapter given the extremely complex objective of repatriating and integrating a significant population of deported people, who on one hand drastically differ from the host society in language, culture, life experiences, beliefs, traditions, and collective memories; and on the other hand, who have the right to return to the country of their ancestors, thereby correcting the tragic injustice committed against them. These limitations pertain particularly to the lack of knowledge about the Meskhetian population as well as their current and future interaction with the host communities both during and after their repatriation. For this reason, this lack of awareness needs to be rectified concurrently with the implementation of policies and mechanisms to ensure repatriation is successful. All in all, the outline of a conceptual framework is meant to encourage debate amongst policy makers and practitioners involved in the practical execution of the repatriation and integration processes.

3.1.2 Objectives

The main goals of the Georgian government and the international community concerning the repatriation of Meskhetians can be perceived as threefold:

A. Successful and dignified repatriation of all persons who are eligible and willing, while encouraging an accommodating environment in Georgia for the repatriation of the deported communities

The process of repatriation should be implemented in a way that focuses on respecting the human rights of the repatriates. The process needs to be completely transparent and monitored by independent experts, both international and national, as well as Georgian and Meskhetian civil activists. All unnecessary prolongation, bureaucratic obstacles and deliberate hindering of repatriation should be eliminated so that the repatriation process can be realized fully.

B. Socioeconomic integration of repatriated people by helping them adapt to Georgian culture and society

It is important to understand that socioeconomic integration is not an end result that the Georgian society can achieve through short-term measures, but a long-term, dynamic process in which both the society and the repatriated Meskhetians should engage together in order to further human rights, development and well-being for all.

C. Preventing/minimizing the eruption of social tensions amongst host communities and the Georgian society as a result of repatriation

Large-scale social processes, such as repatriation, do not occur without accompanying risks, which places responsibility on the government as well the society responsible to minimize—or if possible totally exclude—the main risks of social and ethnic tension following repatriation.

3.1.3. Areas of Intervention

To achieve these goals, programs and interventions should advocate only those policies and strategies that will be thoroughly coordinated with the government of Georgia as well as key national and international organizations. Programs should aim at addressing the complications involved with repatriation and integration through at least five specific areas of interventions:

1. *Assist the government of Georgia in developing and implementing a repatriation strategy*

Support the government in the coordination and management of the repatriation process as well as provide expertise and assistance in developing a governmental strategy that is considered suitable by all involved stakeholders.

2. *Promote awareness raising*

Improve awareness on deported people amongst recipient communities as well as provide clear and accurate information on living conditions in Georgia amongst potential repatriates.

3. *Prepare repatriates for repatriation*

Support persons who have applied for repatriation in preparing themselves for repatriation, and improve their

knowledge about Georgia so they are able to make an informed decision about their return.

4. *Provide repatriates with support in their physical repatriation*

Help repatriates to successfully repatriate from their former places of residence to Georgia, including assistance in transporting and passing customs with property they bring with them to Georgia.

5. *Provide support for the socioeconomic integration of repatriates*

Facilitate the integration of repatriates through educational and socioeconomic support targeting both repatriate and host communities.

3.2 Issues & Obstacles

Stemming from a prolonged disregard for the circumstances of the Meskhetian communities in exile, set against a backdrop of widespread problems throughout Georgia, a whole range of issues and obstacles related to Meskhetian repatriation arise that challenge both the competencies and willingness of the authorities and the society in general. While several issues relate to the political, economic and legal restraints of the country, many of the obstacles connected to repatriation and the subsequent integration are rooted in the potential repatriates themselves and their aspirations. Particularly, the Meskhetians' lack of knowledge about Georgia, both concerning language and culture, together with their distinct religious and social characteristics are

possible problems affecting their return. For this reason, it is only natural that numerous difficulties and risks associated with these processes of repatriation and integration arise, which in turn must be identified, analyzed and remedied to ensure a successful resettlement.

3.2.1 Historical Issues

The historical events that took place between Meskhetians and the local populations in Georgia have created an animosity that persists up until the present day, which may hamper attempts by both sides at repatriation and integration. While rarely discussed, either by Meskhetian activists or the Georgian media, vague memories still persist of the bloody events of 1917–1919 in southern Georgia. For this reason, memories of tension and violence are still quite strong amongst those whose families experienced this violence, which in turn have become popular myths amongst descendants of those communities that were resettled in the region after the Meskhetians' deportation in 1944. Amongst Armenians, the negative feelings towards Meskhetians are mixed with bitter memories of the massive Armenian casualties in Turkey from 1915 to 1923, since Meskhetians are identified by many Armenians—particularly in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region—as being Turks. The local population in the region also recalls accounts, initiated by Soviet propaganda, of sabotage and violence by Meskhetians before their deportation in 1944. Accordingly, historical grievances from both Meskhetians and the local populations have great potential in hindering return to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and the country in general.

3.2.2 Geographical & Demographical Issues

3.2.2.1 Ancestral Homeland

The origins of Meskhetians and their desire to return to the villages from which their families were deported *(küv)* are of great significance for repatriates. While it is only natural that their preference would be to return to their ancestral lands in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, rather than to other areas of Georgia, the Georgian government may not support repatriation to southern parts of the country due to concerns over tensions with the local populations. However, since there are no legal mechanisms in the Law on Repatriation that allows the authorities to influence where the repatriates will be resettled, repatriates can make their own decisions of where to move. Owing to the fact that there are also no provisions concerning housing, returnees, once they have obtained the repatriation status, have to rent or purchase a house on their own. On this basis, it is more than likely that Meskhetians will prefer to settle predominantly in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, *unless* incentives are provided for resettling in other areas. In addition to the location of settlement, there will most likely be the desire of deported persons to settle together in groups, which may also cause problems with the integration into the wider society.

3.2.2.2 Population Impact

The return and integration of Meskhetians, despite the relatively low numbers of applicants for repatriation, is considered by some members of the Georgian society as

an unwelcome population inflow that has the ability of shifting the host community's position in the country. While in general repatriation should be considered as an asset in Georgia with its low fertility and high emigration rates, there are still fears in some regions of the country that the resettlement of Turkish-speaking Muslims with a high birth rate will endanger the status of the Georgian culture, language and religion. For those critics that consider Meskhetians to be a non-Georgian population, many argue that Georgia does not need to facilitate the repatriation of a linguistic and religious minority. As a result, these worries of a population impact have the possibility of preventing overall acceptance of Meskhetian repatriation.

3.2.3 Cultural Issues

3.2.3.1 Ethnic Identity

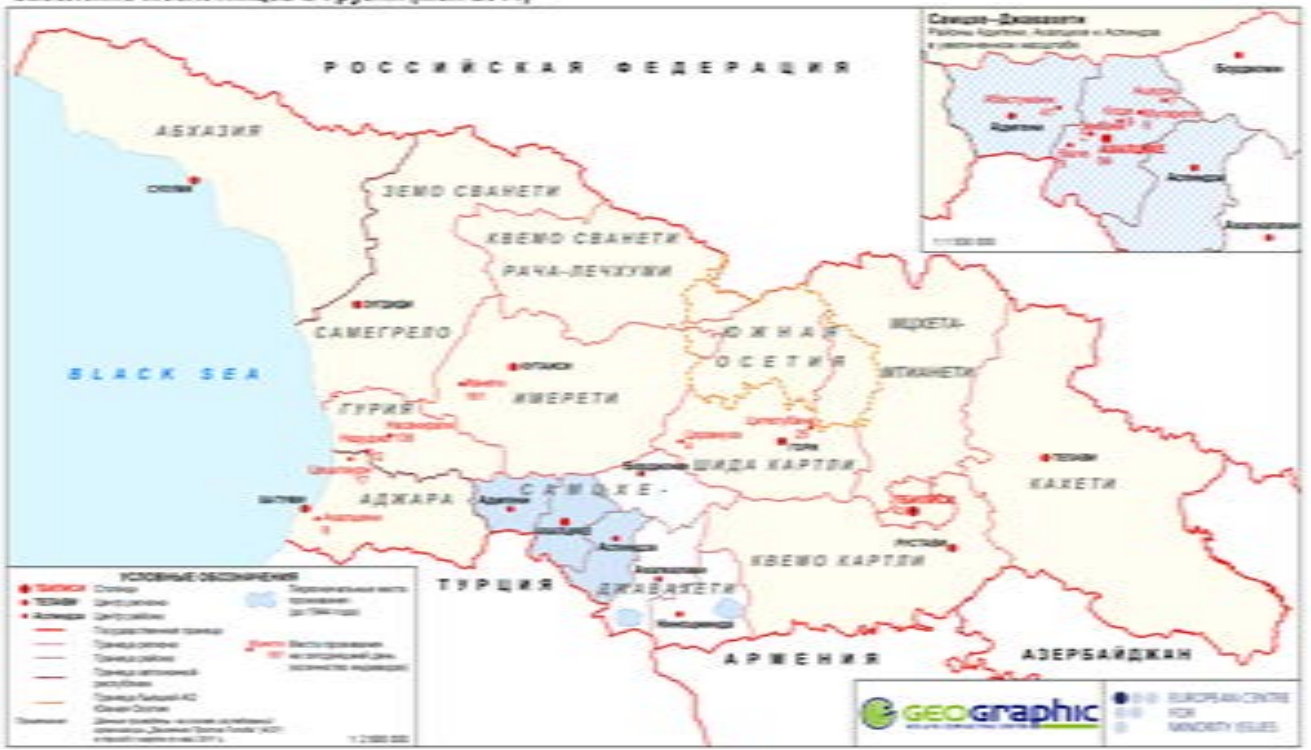
One of the characteristic features of Meskhetians is their complex identity, which due to its diverse associations, influences not only decisions to repatriate but also integrate. While the majority of Meskhetians clearly identify themselves as belonging to the same community, and although one of the strongest self-identity factors is that of the village from which they originate (*küv*), there are varying opinions on who Meskhetians actually are. One division identifies themselves as Turks. Among the Turkophone Meskhetians there are two orientations: those who advocate return to their historic homeland, and those who instead of repatriating to Georgia favor resettlement in Turkey. Another group, particularly those Meskhetians already

in Georgia with support from most Georgian scholars, claim to be Muslim Georgians and adhere to the view that following repatriation Meskhetians should assimilate into the larger society. While these dividing lines have caused much internal strife among the Meskhetians, over the past decades there has also been an unfortunate tendency by Georgian state authorities to attempt at imposing the pro-Georgian orientation upon repatriates. In spite of the fact that this tendency has seemingly declined, and although some of repatriates readily embrace Georgian identity without any external pressure, other Meskhetians continue to uphold either of the two pro-Turkish opinions. Accordingly, policies aimed at assimilation into the society may be counterproductive and backfire, causing mistrust and alienation amongst the Meskhetians. With these varied identities—which depend on the circumstances of each individual—as well as the fear that there will be pressure to identify as Georgians by governmental officials, obstacles may arise for the integration of Meskhetians.

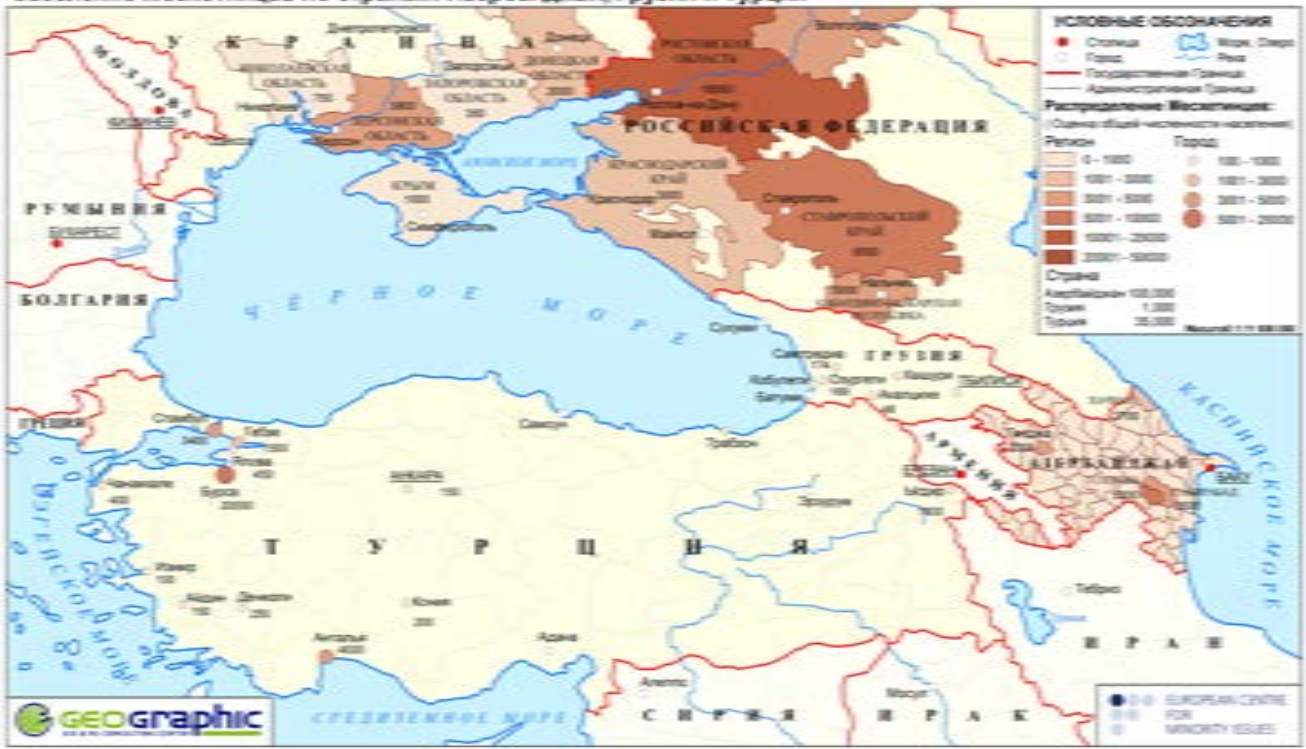
3.2.3.2 Language

Indeed, due to its multi-functionality, language plays a significant role in the process of individual and societal integration, constituting both the medium of everyday communication and a resource, in particular in the context of education and the labor market, as well as serving as a symbol of belonging. Of great concern, accordingly, is the fact that the majority of the repatriates do not speak Georgian. Although most Meskhetians were Georgian speakers before their deportation, after almost 70 years

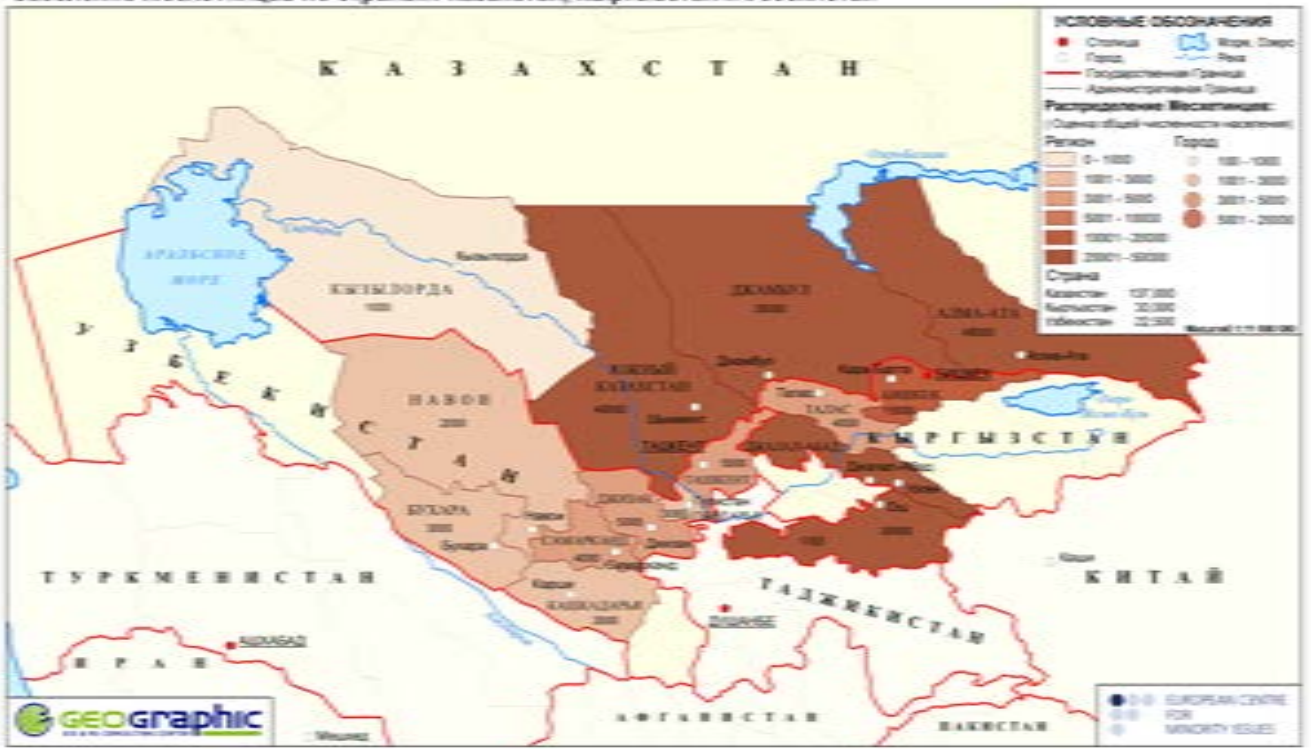
Заселение Месхетинцев в Грузии (Май 2011)



Заселение Месхетинцев по странам: Азербайджан, Грузия и Турция



Заселение Месхетинцев по странам: Казахстан, Кыргызстан и Узбекистан



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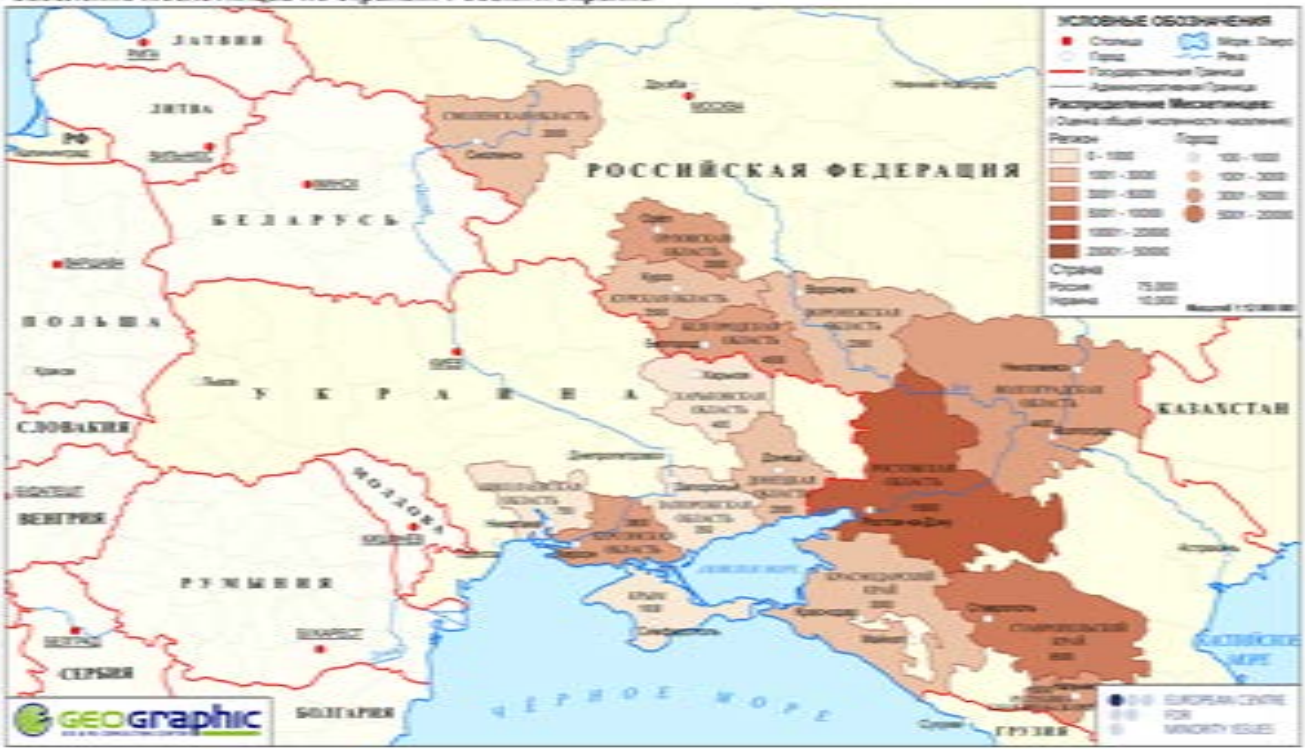
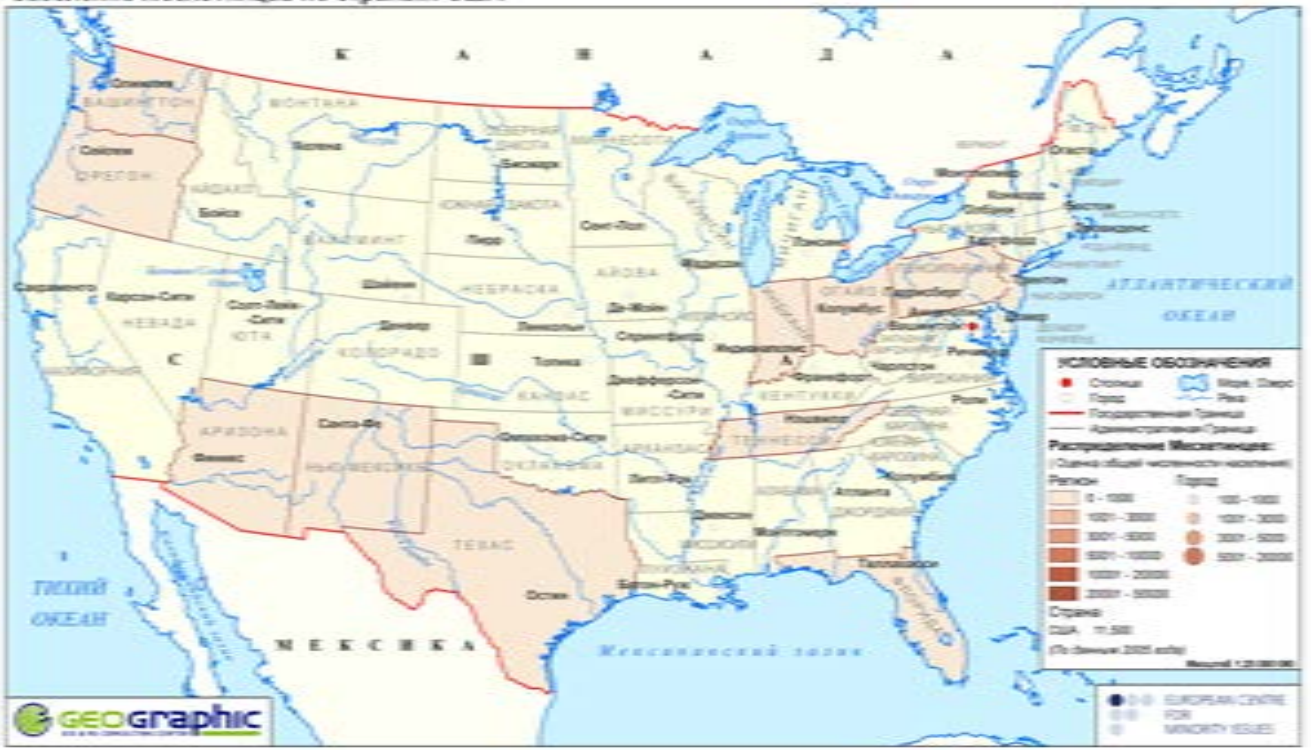


Заселение Месхетинцев по странам: США

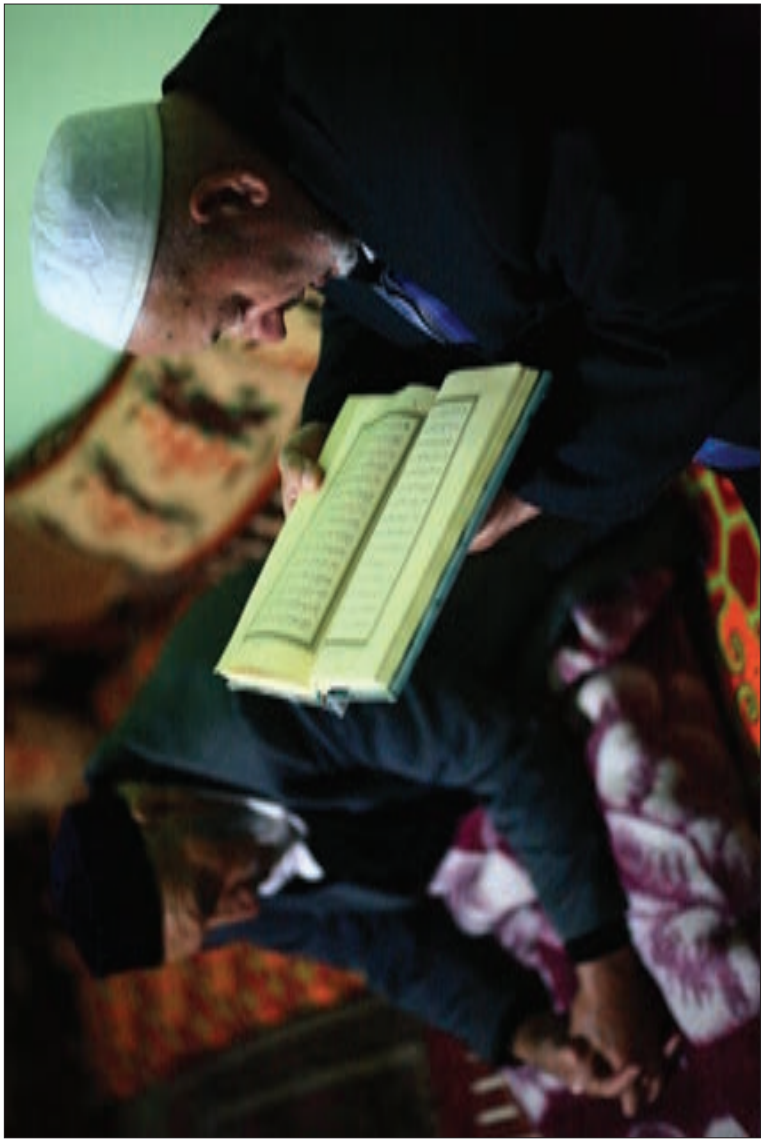


Месхетинский праздник, Абастумани, Грузия, 2011 г.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили

Вязание ковра, Алма-Аты, Казахстан, 2010
Фотография предоставлена Сонай Улфановой

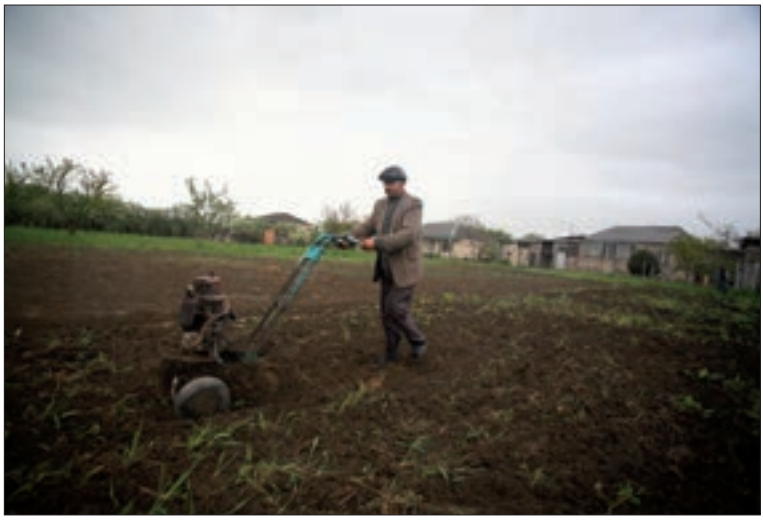
Месхетинские женщины готовят традиционное блюдо: хинкали, Алма-Аты, Казахстан, 2010
Фотография предоставлена Сонай Улфановой

Регулярные, пятничные молитвы, Абастумани, Грузия, 2011 г.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили

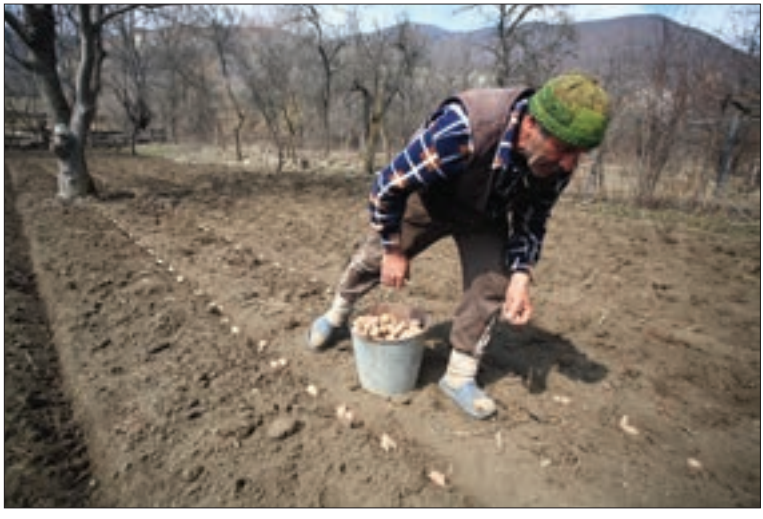


Регулярные, пятничные молитвы, Абастумани, Грузия, 2011 г.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили

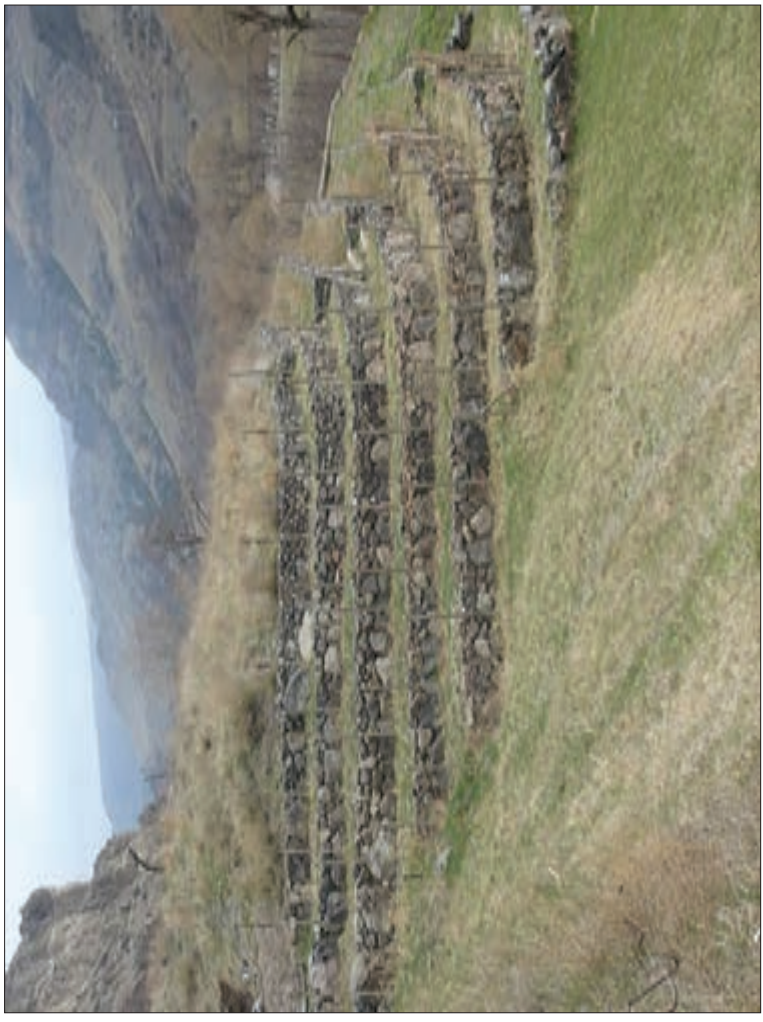
Семидесяти-девяти летний Месхетинский фермер Ислам Ниазов в собственном саду, Абастумани, Грузия, 2011 г. Он переехал из Азербайджана в Грузию в 2007 году.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили



Preparing the land for season, Tsitelubani, Shida Kartli, Georgia, 2011. Half a dozen of Meskhetian families have settled in Tsitelubani since 2007.
Photo: Temur Bardzimashvili

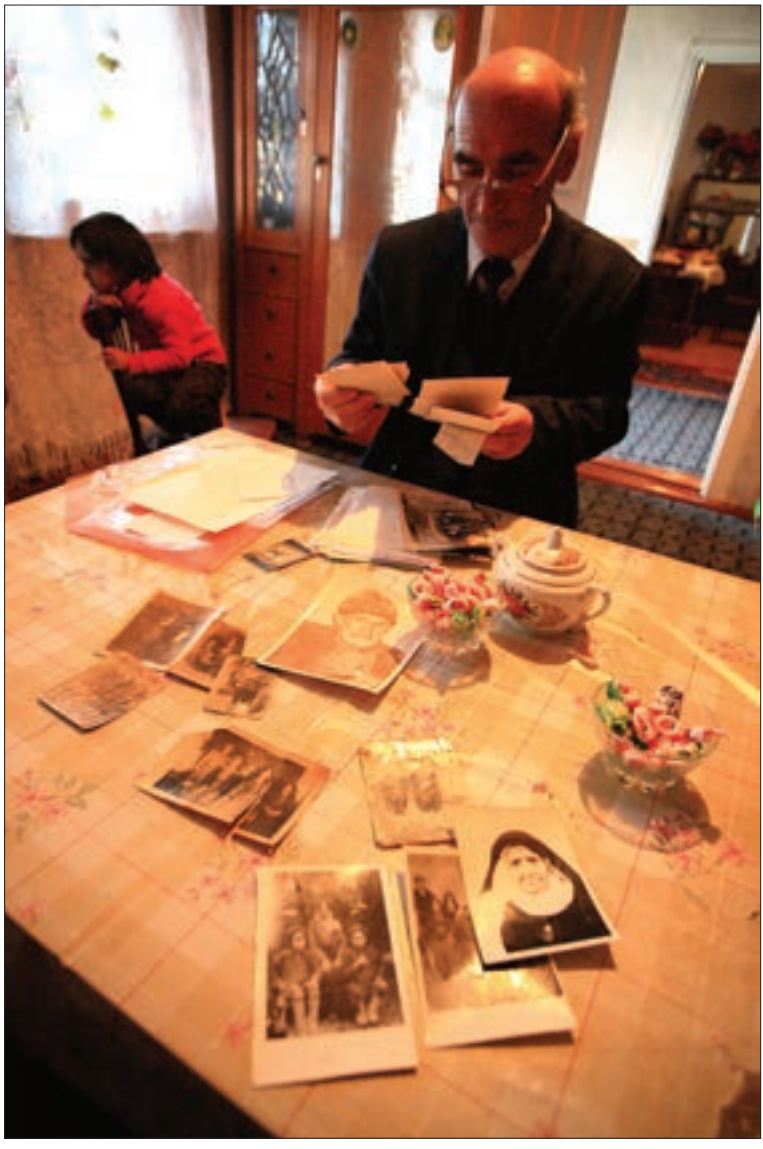


Laying potatoes, Abastumani, Georgia, Spring 2011.
Photo: Temur Bardzimashvili.

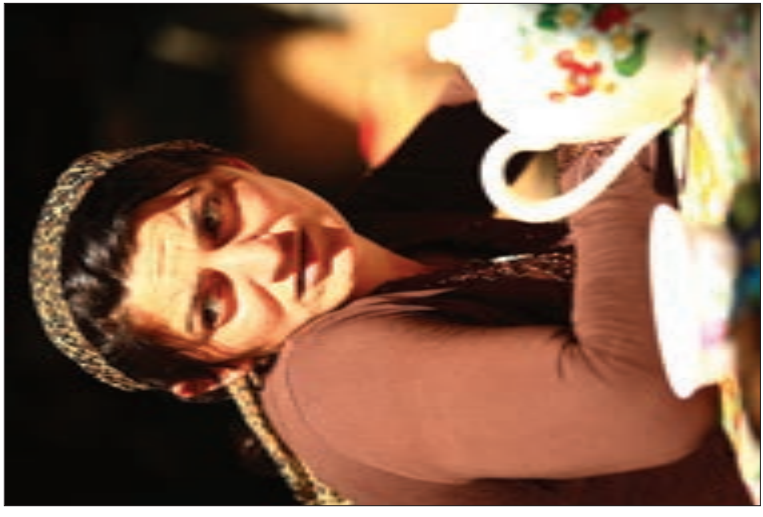


Террасы, Самцхе-Джавахети, Грузия. В регионе единственное, что можно увидеть так это террасы со времен их переселения до депортации 1944 года.
Фотография предоставлена Александром Бегиашвили

Месхетинская семья Сафарова-Лазишвили, которая переехала их Азербайджана в Грузию в 2008 году. Ахалцихе, Грузия, 2011 г. Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили



Пятидесяти-девяти летний Сарвар Сафаров-Лазишвили,
воспоминания, Ахалцихе, Грузия, 2011 г.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили



Месхетинцы, Абастумани, Грузия, 2011 г.
Фото: Темур Бардзимашвили

in exile the linguistic skills have largely been lost, apart from the oldest generations who still speak the language. Inequalities in terms of access to quality education, income, state jobs, and societal acceptance and interaction are to a great extent determined by linguistic competence in the state language. While this fact may contribute to the feeling of uncertainty when making the decision to repatriate, the real problem arises when a family arrives in Georgia. The lack of knowledge of the Georgian language will create problems in everyday life, particularly if settled in areas with a predominantly Georgian-speaking rural population. Not only will this inhibit repatriates securing employment in the public sector, but will also cause educational problems for school children who have to adjust to studying in a different language. For these reasons, the commonly spoken languages of repatriates—the Meskhetian Turkish dialect, Russian and other languages of their countries of current settlement—may appear of limited use in adapting and integrating. Consequently, lack of proficiency in Georgian may lead to isolation and exclusion from the society, which could cause frustration and disappointment amongst some repatriates.

3.2.3.3 Religion

Although a significant part of Georgia's population—a total of 9%, including ethnic Georgians living in the mountainous areas of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara—are Muslims, the Christian majority of the country has undergone a strong religious revival after the fall of the USSR. It is therefore a highly sensitive issue amongst the general society to repatriate Meskhetians

whose Islamic traditions are regarded by some Georgians to be strengthened in relation to Orthodox Christianity. The possibility of mosques and other Islamic landmarks being built in the country following repatriation might lead to irritation within the society and ultimately unfavorable relations between Meskhetians and their host communities.

3.2.3.4 Social Customs & Knowledge

Owing to the social customs of Meskhetian communities, integration may be hampered by such habits as living in close-knit communities as well as a lack of cultural competencies and knowledge of local traditions. In turn, the social distinctiveness of Meskhetians and other deported people may also trigger additional fears and mistrust in the Georgian population, which could further alienate the repatriates. Based on the existing experiences with repatriate communities in the regions of Guria, Imereti and Samtskhe-Javakheti, the objective of socioeconomic integration has become particularly difficult when the Meskhetian community lives both geographically and socially isolated from the host community, which limits interaction with locals on a daily basis. Therefore, there is a dilemma on the one hand to meet the repatriates desire to live together in larger communities, and on the other to ensure integration into the general society.

3.2.3.5 Feeling of Injustice

One of the most sensitive issues for many Meskhetians is the feeling of injustice committed against them since their

banishment from Georgia. Accordingly, the most tragic events of their deportation in 1944 by the Soviet leadership, the massacres in Fergana in 1989 with the subsequent displacements and resettlements, and ultimately their obstructed repatriation throughout their exile have become a collective memory of the Meskhetians' suffering. When the time comes for repatriation, these underlying feelings of cruelty and injustice may cause some Meskhetians to abandon the idea of returning, while Meskhetians' suspicion of the host communities and authorities could hinder integration.

3.2.4 Economic Issues

3.2.4.1 Employment

While amongst Meskhetians one can find persons of various professions, still the vast majority are engaged in their traditional occupation of agriculture. For this reason, the majority of the returnees can be expected to settle in rural areas where they have access to land. This in itself poses a problem for their adaptation, as integration efforts in general tend to be more successful in urban environments. Besides, while it is questionable that there is enough arable land of sufficient quality, since agriculture remains a less developed sector of the Georgian economy, the rigid occupational options could appear as yet another problem for the socioeconomic integration of repatriates. Moreover, most agricultural land was privatized after the demise of the Soviet state owned farms in the early 1990s, excluding Meskhetians from acquiring land through privatization.

3.2.4.2 Poverty & Exclusion

Even though Meskhetians are renowned for their strong work ethics, the well-being of repatriate households depends on finding employment, which as mentioned before will be difficult to secure with Georgia's weak agricultural sector. The risk that repatriates will be affected by poverty, a major social problem throughout Georgia, is a considerable threat to successful integration. Furthermore, it is possible that economic hardship will result in vulnerability within the society, which in turn will lead to fear and mistrust of the host communities. In this way, problems of limited integration may arise from the widespread poverty of the country, thus hindering repatriation efforts.

3.2.4.3 Financial Burden & Resources

The costs of repatriation and integration of Meskhetians may appear to be a heavy burden on Georgia, which still has not yet recovered from its prolonged economic crises, repercussions of civil strife during the early 1990s and the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008. With about half of Georgia's population in poverty, together with some 250,000 IDPs still living in dire conditions, there are fears that repatriation will overstretch the scarce financial resources of the country. On account of the fact that the Georgian state is in the process of recovering from several waves of crises that have hit the country during the past two decades—coupled with the competition over funds between various groups—there are scarce resources at the government's disposal for repatriation and integration

efforts. In addition to these financial concerns, there is also scarcity of arable land, investment to create jobs, as well as other needed funds to ensure integration. As a result, there is a high dependency on external assistance for Meskhetian repatriation. While it can be anticipated that some financial resources from international donors will be granted at the first stage of the repatriation, there is no guarantee that in the long term such assistance will not diminish, in spite of the undeniable need for continued funding to facilitate the repatriation and socioeconomic integration of returning Meskhetians. Also, there is the possibility of an ineffective, and perhaps non-transparent, use of allocated funds. With the return of Meskhetians, there are concerns that repatriates may demand restitution for their lost property, land and houses, which is a particularly sensitive issue in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Consequently, sufficient funding is a major issue that could influence the ultimate return and integration of Meskhetians.

3.2.5 Political Issues

3.2.5.1 Governmental Capacity

With the fact that both nationally and internationally there are limited experiences with the repatriation of such a distinct people, the Georgian government is both confronted with a lack of knowledge on resettlement and a gap in funding possibilities. For the moment, the key state agencies that are assigned with responsibility to address such issues, in particular the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation

and Refugees (MRA), lack both the political leverage and the capacity to deal efficiently with the return of the Meskhetians. Therefore, the ultimate goal of a successful resettlement might be impeded by the government's inability to adequately carry out the processes of repatriation and integration.

3.2.5.2 Resistance to Repatriation

Until a few years ago, the dominant attitude of the governmental officials was to postpone the issue of repatriation indefinitely. Despite positive rhetoric, the authorities never genuinely went to the heart of the matter to solve the problem of repatriation, instead preferring—if evading was not possible—to wait until the issue became less controversial both within the governmental and public spheres. Although preparations for resettlement of Meskhetians have started, the processes of repatriation and integration may still suffer from reluctance from the government to take on proactive policies and programs.

3.2.5.3 Secession

With Georgia's past and present circumstances relating to the *de facto* independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, fears of secession are widespread throughout the society and government. With some Meskhetians supporting the pro-Turkish orientation of the community, coupled with myths about a hidden irredentist agenda, there is an anxiety of repatriating Meskhetians, particularly to the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Although undetermined,

these suspicions by both the government and society have the possibility of impairing repatriation and integration.

3.2.6 Legal Issues

3.2.6.1 Minority Status

A significant, but unclear, issue is whether Meskhetians can be, or should be, considered as an ethnic minority, which in turn will greatly affect their integration. While the Georgian government is not inclined to consider them as an ethnic minority, some international organizations and diplomatic missions regard Meskhetians as a separate ethnic group. To a certain extent, the issue is complicated by the discord amongst Meskhetians over whether they are Georgians or Turks, and while the majority of those within Georgia claim they are the former, those outside of the country largely maintain the latter view. At the same time, there is no definition of ethnic minority in either Georgian legislation or in international law—including the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) that Georgia is signatory to—while the Georgian government has not yet defined which groups currently enjoy a minority status in the country. In turn, this lack of a minority status will most likely inhibit Meskhetians in both their repatriation and integration.

3.2.6.2 Restitution Rights

While all Meskhetians were forced to leave behind their possessions, including their properties, the issue

of restitution has become considerably important for repatriates. Although there are no such provisions in the Law on Repatriation, and property restitution for deported Meskhetians is not a part of Georgia's obligations and commitments to the Council of Europe, the restoring of lost land remains a sensitive issue for both sides. Despite the fact that Meskhetians have not yet raised the question of restitution, the Georgian government remains adamant against any compensation, which is clearly set out in the Law on Repatriation. Regardless, this standoff could lead to problems in the foreseeable future if some Meskhetians, irrespective of being repatriated or not, may decide to address international legal bodies such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) with these issues.

3.2.6.3 Cultural Rights

Owing to the distinct culture of Meskhetians compared to that of the Georgian society, cultural rights are important not only for the community's desire to return and ability to integrate, but also as a way to ensure they do not lose their customs and traditions. To date, although there have been no obstacles to using the Meskhetian Turkish dialect in private life, for those who have already repatriated the state government has also made no efforts to help preserve or support their culture. This line of thinking follows the logic and common opinion amongst officials that Meskhetians are ethnic Georgians, and thus the need to preserve and nurture Turkish is not a priority or even a consideration of the government. To a certain extent, the same is also true regarding their religious freedom. No assistance has yet

been provided to the Meskhetians, who are traditionally Sunni Muslims, to ensure that they have access to mosques or to guarantee in other ways that they can practice their religion freely. Today, Meskhetians do not have easy access to mosques outside of the areas inhabited by Muslim groups—for example, in Adjara, Kvemo Kartli or Tbilisi—as they are mostly settled in the areas with a predominant Christian population. The exception is the mosque in the settlement of Nasakirali in Guria, a village inhabited by Georgian Muslim that resettled there in the 1960s, living side by side with more recently arrived Meskhetians. Furthermore, with rumors of the ruins of mosques being destroyed in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, the protection of Meskhetians' heritage and customs have become particularly crucial for repatriates.

3.2.7 Attitudes

3.2.7.1 Among Meskhetians

Although there are different interpretations of the issue of resettlement, judging from the relatively modest number of applications for repatriation—nearly 6,000 applications amounting to less than 9,000 persons—Meskhetians have not demonstrated a high motivation to return to Georgia. Indeed, it seems that the major problems for many aspiring repatriates are both psychological and economic. In these regards, it is unquestionably difficult to decide to repatriate and come to Georgia without knowledge of how much time the transitional process will last, what the results will be, and how they will manage life afterwards. At the same time, the decision to repatriate may appear irreversible, as well

as requiring significant expenditures needed for both direct and indirect costs. While it is expected that there will be some limited opportunities in the short term to earn money, the process of adaptation to a new society could take years, which will probably deter many Meskhetians from following through with repatriation.

3.2.7.2 Within the Georgian Government

One of the greatest obstacles to Meskhetians' return is the lack of political will on the part of some government officials as well as bureaucracy involved in implementing the repatriation program. For some members of the ruling elite, repatriation is not a result of moral obligation, nor a potentially beneficial process, but an outcome of relentless international pressure. As a consequence, there is a tendency among some government officials to consider that the commitment should be implemented insofar as to weaken this demand by only undertaking formal and short-term steps. Furthermore, there is the risk that some political forces might take advantage of the issue of Meskhetian repatriation to mobilize support around illusionary threats to Georgian identity and the state. All in all, such disregard to ensure a successful repatriation and opportunistic attitude may threaten to incapacitate the entire process while turning the general public against returning Meskhetians.

3.2.7.3 Within the General Public

Georgian society, while traditionally quite tolerant towards diversity and cultural or religious minorities, has witnessed

in recent decades periods of exclusionary nationalism and xenophobia, boosted by external threats and internal instability. As a result, the public is still divided regarding the issue of repatriation. Presumably, the majority of the population sees the repatriation as a political, economic, cultural, religious, and demographic threat. Moreover, many fear that repatriation may cause tension, destabilization and conflict, and some even believe that the return of the Meskhetians may challenge the very existence of the state. In turn, these public perceptions may have the capacity to block progress on developing effective policies. While some of the mentioned public fears may have some real historic roots, they are not always based on a fair and informed evaluation of the opportunities and risks associated with repatriation. In this way, negative public opinion influences repatriation and integration in two main ways. On the one hand, decision-makers are inclined to take into account public opinion when forming policies and planning measures, while avoiding actions that may cause public dissatisfaction. On the other hand, decision-makers are themselves an essential part of the public, often sharing the same opinions, attitudes, and prejudices as the public at large.

3.2.7.4 Within the Local Communities

As a result of its complex history, centuries of isolation, as well as the multiethnic and multireligious composition of its population, the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti differs greatly from other parts of Georgia. Owing to the historic memory of Turkish invasions and the perception of a Turkish threat that was nurtured during and after World War II

by the Soviet authorities—who placed areas of Samtskhe-Javakheti under a special border regime—repatriation is met with suspicion by the local communities of Georgians and Armenians, many of whom were resettled to the region in the former houses and lands of the Meskhetians. As the great majority of Meskhetians claim today to be Turks, there are fears amongst the locals that repatriation will drastically change the ethnic balance in the region and lead to the Turkification of the population as well as cause additional tensions due to property claims. Furthermore, based on previous experiences, although the majority of Meskhetians living most recently in Georgia have not encountered any large-scale violence or threat of violence due to their identity, there have been a few cases of abuse and harassment. The main area where such tensions may be expected is in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where on several occasions some members of the local population have demonstrated their opposition to the issue of repatriation. While several families of Meskhetians already living there—mainly in the town of Akhaltsikhe as well as in the village of Abastumani—have adapted quite well to local conditions, it is not clear how things will develop when more Meskhetians resettle in the region. For these reasons, the attitude of the local communities, coupled with the risk of intercommunal tensions, cannot be ignored during the processes of repatriation and integration.

3.2.8 External Influence

3.2.8.1 Foreign Experiences

Having lived for nearly seven decades outside of Georgia, it is only natural that other societies and countries have influenced both the cultural and political development of the Meskhetian communities and their attitudes towards repatriation to and integration in Georgia. This is evident by the existence of Meskhetian organizations that are at times receptive to the state influences of Turkey or Russia, countries which for a long time have both been involved in supporting different movements and orientations. Additionally, there are certain fears throughout Georgian society that after repatriation Meskhetians may be manipulated, to some extent, by external forces: Turkey or the Russian Federation. It may therefore appear that if such influences continue to exist after repatriation has taken place, in some cases, it may lead to internal division according to different values and opinions, as well as external conflict with the Georgian society.

3.2.8.2 Turkey

On account of the historical and contemporary relations with Turkey, coupled with the pro-Turkish identity of most Meskhetians, there are many feelings of unease within Georgia regarding the country's influence on the Meskhetian communities. Accordingly, while Turkey has undoubtedly had an impact on Meskhetians and their desire to return, this general anxiety negatively affects attempts at

repatriation and eventually integration. While Georgian-Turkish relations are generally positive, suspicions with regards to Turkey's hidden agenda, based on the historical events of the invasion by the Ottoman Empire, have been recently strained after the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Owing to Turkey's hesitance in allowing US warships into the Black Sea, coupled with the Turkish leadership expressing a moderate level of support towards Russia's actions, doubts have been raised about Turkey's relations with Georgia. Furthermore, Turkey's proximity to southern Georgia, particularly the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, and these aforementioned trends tend to reinforce the suspicions that Meskhetians might also be used as a fifth column in Georgia. Also, pro-Turkish organizations are perceived to be under the influence of Turkish, as well as Russian, governmental agencies. Accordingly, feelings of the Georgian government and society towards Turkey, coupled with pro-Turkish identity of many Meskhetians, will likely have an impact on the repatriation and integration processes in the future.

3.2.8.3 Russia

Russia has played, and continues to play, a significant role in determining the future of Meskhetians, even if lately this role is less visible. There are several aspects of Russia's involvement in and influence on repatriation. The most important fact is that Russia has declared itself the legal heir of the Soviet Union, accepting the debts and responsibilities of the USSR. Logically, Russia should also be held at least partly responsible for the mass deportations of peoples,

Meskhetians specifically, and should contribute to the rehabilitation and repatriation of the communities to their homeland. Another important factor is the sheer number of Meskhetians that currently live all over Russia, which possesses certain leverage over the process of repatriation or applying for it. In some areas, the Krasnodar *krai* in particular, repressive and discriminative pressures led the US government to invite the Krasnodar Meskhetians to resettle in the USA, resulting in thousands of Meskhetians to leave Russia (see fact box on Russia's Krasnodar *krai,* p. 84).

One more important aspect of the problem is that during the last decades the Russian government has supported Meskhetian organizations, especially *Vatan*, through the funding of some of its activities and headquarters in Moscow, while pressing Georgia to expediently repatriate Meskhetians. Concerning *Vatan,* even though the central leadership based in Moscow enjoys rather limited influence over the attitude of Meskhetian communities outside of Russia, its agenda and strategies can still be regarded as having considerable influence on the decision to repatriate. All in all, although currently Russian policies on Meskhetian issues remain less visible, they should not be considered to be nonexistent nor to have any affect on repatriation efforts.

3.3 Principles & Aims

To ensure the successful implementation of the repatriation and integration processes, the following guiding principles and aims that should be taken into account when developing strategies and action plans for repatriation and integration have been elaborated upon:

A. Ensuring a dignified life as well as respect for civil and human rights

Among other rights, repatriates possess the unalienable constitutional right to choose their place of residence anywhere within Georgia, as well as enjoy state benefits, social welfare, healthcare and educational services in the same way and practice as any other citizen of Georgia. In this regard, repatriates have the right to implement any economic initiative and to have the same access to economic resources; the right to participate in all public discussions of societal issues and in decision-making processes; and are equally entitled to enjoy all constitutionally guaranteed democratic rights, including the right to elect and to be elected to public office as any other Georgian citizen.

B. Incorporating the principles of gender equality and the protection of children's rights

The repatriation and socioeconomic integration programs should pay special attention to securing gender equality and the protection of children's rights, as well as other universal principles of human rights, by developing mechanisms and programs to this end. Gender issues in particular should receive more attention owing to the fact that women play a pivotal role in successful integration.

C. Safeguarding free and voluntary choices

Repatriates should be able to make their decisions freely and voluntarily concerning their lives in Georgia, including such issues as their place of residence and housing.

D. Safeguarding social justice while providing assistance to repatriates

As the repatriates will live side by side with local communities, programs or activities focusing on supporting repatriates should also cover the host populations. The principle of social justice, however, does not exclude the possibility of prioritizing assistance to repatriates whenever there is a justifiable need.

E. Supporting the right to appeal

Within the framework of Georgia's legislation, implementation of the repatriation process should include clear mechanisms for complaints and appeals.

F. Encouraging public participation in decision-making

Appropriately, repatriates, as well as relevant civil society representatives, should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process as well as in the development and implementation of all programs concerning the host communities.

G. Securing transparency and openness

Important policy decisions on repatriation and integration should be transparent and open. Both the Georgian public and the repatriates should be included in the processes in a manner that allows for their opinions, values and preferences to be respected and taken into account.

H. Encouraging civil society monitoring and control

While policy decisions on repatriation are ultimately adopted by the state, decision-making, policies and action

plans should not only include public participation, but also independent monitoring and control by civil society.

I. Ensuring consistency in policies

Policy decisions and public statements concerning repatriation and integration should be coherent and consistent, while misleading and conflicting policies and information should be avoided by all means. This requires thorough coordination and alignment of policies and actions between all involved actors.

J. Placing the issue of Meskhetian repatriation into a broader context

For return to be managed effectively, Meskhetian repatriation needs to take into consideration those contributing factors that may not seem directly linked to return and resettlement.

K. Establishing reliable information and research data

Effective implementation of the repatriation process requires comprehensive and reliable data. Whenever necessary and feasible, targeted research should be carried out for the development and implementation of the repatriation and integration activities.

L. Ensuring coordination and information-sharing among state agencies and stakeholders

The implementing agencies should work in close cooperation and in coordination with international stakeholders as well as civil society. Programs relating to repatriation and integration should be organized and implemented in a way that ensures information is freely and easily shared between all involved actors.

M. Integrating specialized programs designed for repatriates into wider national programs

Socioeconomic integration programs should be integrated into broader national programs when they exist. When such national programs do not yet exist, specific programs should be developed in a manner that would easily allow for subsequent integration into an overall national program.

N. Supporting sustainability of programs

Any program or activity should aim at achieving a relevant and sustainable outcome. When a sustainable solution for beneficiaries cannot be achieved through short-term actions, long-term support must also be provided.

3.4 Management & Policies

The success of repatriating and integrating Meskhetians remains dependent on well-planned strategies for development and implementation of policies, strong political will on the part of the government, institutional capacities of the state, and constructive civil engagement of Georgia's citizens. Correspondingly, with a multitude of problems and difficulties in resettlement, there arises a great amount of tasks and challenges that the government should engage despite limited resources and time. Hence, it is of overall importance to first understand and formulate the priority areas that require special attention and effort.

Repatriation can bring large benefits to the society if the appropriate policies are pursued. Sensible actions towards repatriation require that negative public perceptions and fears are properly addressed, as well as that all beneficial

factors and opportunities are strengthened and capitalized on. To ensure the successful return of Meskhetians, the measures adopted need to demonstrate that repatriation is managed rather than endured. Furthermore, it is crucial that the concepts and aims of socioeconomic integration and inclusion remain central to the repatriation of Meskhetians, as based upon the overarching principles of equity, trust and plurality. The management of the repatriation and integration processes include both general strategies and specific policies. While the former identifies overall approaches common to the return, the latter describes particular policy areas. While not exhaustive of all courses of action, the following sections outline those that are most crucial to the successful resettlement of Meskhetians.

3.4.1 Strategies

3.4.1.1 Understanding the Repatriates & the Situation on the Ground

A proactive approach is crucial for the success of any policy development. Preventive measures should be applied to promote a smooth process of repatriation for Meskhetians, equity and peaceful coexistence between them and their new neighbors. Hence, it becomes a matter of utmost importance to understand the feelings and anxieties of those who seek repatriation as well as those of the population of the region where the relocation of Meskhetians will take place. In order to obtain deeper insights into how much Meskhetians are willing to compromise in relation to repatriation—for example, in terms of the location

of settlement, the number of fellow kin living within a settlement for them to feel comfortable, and which other components are needed to secure an acceptable quality of life for them—focused research by qualified experts should be carried out to provide the necessary recommendations. At the same time, consultations and dialogue with Meskhetian communities as well as their leaders and elders are imperative. It is equally important to maintain dialogue with the host communities so that they do not feel or become disadvantaged as a result of repatriation.

3.4.1.2 Approach to Repatriation

In order to ensure the process of repatriation is smooth and effective, the government needs to develop a well-thought-out, long-term strategy that is detailed as well as flexible. These planning tools need to be developed in a transparent manner, and take into account the existing and possibly available resources. The development of these strategies must bring together the interests of various stakeholders, discuss expected social impacts and possible difficulties, and incorporate mechanisms for monitoring, feedback and readjustment to the changing reality of the Meskhetians' return.

3.4.1.3 Approach to Integration

The process of repatriation must be complemented by positive measures that encourage the effective integration of Meskhetians, preferably already with the first generation. Such measures have to include several

interconnected policies adopted by the government, some of which are discussed below. Successful integration also requires consistent efforts on the part of the repatriates and Meskhetian organizations, owing to the fact that integration is based upon a shared responsibility between all stakeholders. Indeed, the process of integration concerns all aspects of life in a society and includes repatriates as well as the host communities. Integration measures should aim to preserve or reestablish the trouble-free functioning of society, and at the same time to assist repatriates who require support in order to become active participants in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the country. Early and full access to institutions and the social infrastructure, as well as to public goods and services, on a non-discriminatory basis equal to other citizens is a critical foundation for socioeconomic integration. Additionally, integration efforts need to be accompanied by awareness raising about the existing opportunities for repatriates. Frequent interaction between repatriates and host community members is another fundamental mechanism for integration. The participation of repatriates in the democratic process and in the formulation of integration policies and measures, both at the local and national levels, is also essential to the inclusion of Meskhetians into the Georgian society. Activities should be undertaken to support the integration of repatriates as soon as they arrive in Georgia as well as to continue to target those Meskhetians who have already settled in the country.

3.4.1.4 Agencies, Stakeholders & Actors

Properly functioning governmental bodies responsible for repatriation and integration are key to the successful implementation of this program. Until recently, the government had no clear allocation of responsibility for Meskhetian repatriation to any single governmental body, and even today the division of duties remains unsettled. Still, the leading body managing repatriation is the Department of Migration, Repatriation and Refugee Issues of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees (MRA). Another leading agency dealing with the return of Meskhetians is the Ministry of Justice, as it is through this state institution that repatriates are to receive their citizenship documents. Other state bodies likely to be involved are the ministries of Internal Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Education, Health, Economic Development and Regional Issues as well as the National Security Council and the Office of the State Minister for Reintegration.

3.4.1.5 Coordination

In order to achieve success with the complex and multidimensional task of repatriation, there is a need for a sufficiently high official status to be granted to the curator and lead agency that will coordinate repatriation and guide all efforts of involved agencies, donors and civil society organizations. This harmonization of endeavors requires the creation of a special body, which is envisaged to be established in early 2010 by the Georgian government

with an interagency state commission on repatriation that will include representatives of the aforementioned state executive agencies. Such a commission will benefit from the creation of a well-organized secretariat capable of leading the efforts in developing policies, involving experts and initiating public participation. At the same time, there are plans for organizing a consultative body that would include representatives of international organizations, national civil society organizations and Meskhetian community representatives.

3.4.1.6 Monitoring & Feedback

Putting in place an effective monitoring and evaluation system is one of the most sensitive issues in the management of Meskhetian repatriation, especially in the area of socioeconomic integration, but its relevance is unquestionable. Numerous challenges will be encountered in the creation and operation of such a system, such as the organizational and institutional context upon which the system will be built, the conditions for its implementation, as well as the methods of evaluation and monitoring. Also of importance is the establishment of a set of effective procedures and practices; the creation of a database structure with special safeguards for privacy protection; the development of informational tools; the initiation and implementation of evaluation studies; and the distribution of information on these studies. As there is very limited international experience on implementing a repatriation process similar to the case of Meskhetians, much attention should be dedicated to developing respective benchmarks

and standards. Of use here could be the European experience of developing the index of social integration of migrants known as the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). Developing clear goals, standards, as well as monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are necessary to gauge progress on integration and to make the exchange of information more effective. Monitoring, however, is not a goal in itself. Suitably, the institutionalized monitoring and feedback should lead to the fine-tuning and adjustment of strategies, activities and projects.

3.4.1.7 International Assistance

Owing to the fact that the Georgian state does not possess sufficient financial and other material resources to fully accommodate repatriated Meskhetians, the process heavily depends on international assistance. As a certain amount of external support needs to be attracted to begin the repatriation process, there may appear a need to organize a donor conference. In any case, in order to attract funding it is important to present to donors a well-developed strategy, action plan and budget that should meet all basic needs of the repatriates. Another important task is to create transparent procedures and an easily accessible information system that would reflect the financial flows of the implementation process. Additionally, donors should be requested to commit to the coordination and transparency of financial assistance, possibly through the creation of a joint supervisory body for the appropriation of international funds.

3.4.2 Policies

3.4.2.1 Repatriation Procedures

In the narrow sense of repatriation, (a) providing a repatriation status, (b) organizing a legitimate arrival, (c) obtaining initial housing, and (d) acquisition of citizenship are the key elements of the whole process. While a detailed discussion of procedures is not the aim here, it is important to stress that the procedures should be designed and implemented so that they are fair and flexible, while minimizing stress on repatriates and paying due attention to special cases, such as disability or other types of vulnerability of the applicants. It is also crucial that the repatriation process continues to progress so that the initial procedures are completed just as socioeconomic integration begins. Accordingly, at no point should repatriates feel that they are being abandoned by the state.

3.4.2.2 Resettlement Locations

One of the most sensitive issues of repatriation is the issue of location for settlement of repatriates. As discussed before, the majority of Meskhetians would like to settle in their ancestral homeland of Meskheti, i.e. in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, while the government hopes to avoid too many settling there in order to reduce discord with the local population. According to the international obligations and commitments undertaken by Georgia, the legislation does not require Meskhetians to be repatriated directly to the areas from where they were originally deported. At the

same time, however, there are no stipulations in the Law on Repatriation that would prevent Meskhetians from resettling in regions of their own choice or encourage repatriation to other regions than Samtskhe-Javakheti. While there are no conditions in the Law on Repatriation as such, mechanisms can be developed that encourage settlement elsewhere by providing economic incentives through repatriation support projects. Overall, however, policies must take into account that at least a portion of repatriates will eventually move to Samtskhe-Javakheti. At the same time, regardless of where the repatriates are settled, the interests and sensitivities of the host communities must be considered, while the local population should be encouraged to see the benefits of hosting the repatriates. In this lies another policy dilemma: on the one hand, the repatriated Meskhetians can settle in any part of the country they want, given that it is up to them to take care of their own resettlement, including the appropriation of housing. On the other hand, this also implies that repatriates themselves—in the absence of assistance programs—have to buy or rent their own accommodation.

A related issue concerns the settling of repatriates in rural and urban areas. While many Meskhetians prefer living in rural areas, it should also be understood that an urban environment often provides better opportunities for integration, employment and education. Social, kinship and community networks, which are based upon members of villages left behind in Meskheti, are of great significance for Meskhetians and thus should always be taken into account when planning settlement locations for individual households, which should be given several options to choose

from. While no actions to these ends have been developed so far, it is crucial that such assistance programs are developed as the repatriation process starts.

3.4.2.3 Socioeconomic Integration

Socioeconomic integration, appropriately, is seen as a central factor influencing the broad endeavors to ensure repatriation and the related issues of inclusion, adaptation, and human rights of the repatriated persons. Integration is a two-sided process, with the repatriates on the one side and the government and society on the other. Integration should occur at every level: within and between family and community, communities and the society at large, and institutions and the country. In terms of societal dynamics, socioeconomic integration helps to create a process that makes it possible to predict, prevent or avoid social marginalization of repatriates. In fixed terms, social integration suggests a state of social harmony or social cohesion between the repatriates and the host communities, enabling the repatriates to enjoy a sense of belonging, recognition and legitimacy. Furthermore, building social capital is also a key component of effective integration. This refers to the fabric of social relations that holds communities together, such as general trust in the society and its institutions as well as the degree of civic engagement.

3.4.2.4 Educational Programs

As Meskhetians were essentially cut off from their homeland for many decades, there is a need for focused educational

efforts targeting both children and adults in order to help them quickly acquire a basic knowledge of the Georgian language, history, and institutions. Such knowledge is indispensable to integration. Furthermore, education is critical for preparing repatriates and their descendants to be more successful and more active participants in Georgian society. Learning the Georgian language appears to be a priority, particularly amongst children who need to be included immediately into the general educational system. This aim may be undertaken through intensive language classes, cultural courses, summer camps and study tours to other parts of Georgia. Language training efforts should also be undertaken in countries where there are Meskhetians that are likely to seek repatriation.

Educational integration of adults should not be neglected either, and should include the provision of extensive language classes, cultural courses and other practical information. Professional training may appear equally necessary in order to facilitate adaptation to the local labor market, which may take the form of specific vocational training courses to be implemented in repatriate communities, or through the involvement of general training programs. Courses will improve the technical skills of repatriates and increase their occupational opportunities in sectors with a high employment potential. The training topics should take into account the interests and skills of the participants, as well as employment opportunities in the area of their settlement.

3.4.2.5 Protection of Cultural Rights

The practices of cultural and religious life are guaranteed

under the Georgian Constitution, as well as protected by many international treaties and conventions. Nevertheless, attention must be paid to the need of taking special measures not only to help fully implement constitutionally and internationally guaranteed rights, but also to strengthen and develop cultural traditions where needed. Here, a particularly sensitive question is the status and usage of the Meskhetian Turkish dialect. Another issue pertains to ensuring that the repatriates are able to freely practice their religious customs. Undoubtedly, the provision of support in these two areas will promote the trust of the Meskhetians in state institutions. It should also be realized and articulated that the cultural diversity stemming from the return of repatriates can be utilized constructively, while at the same time preserving social accord and unity.

3.4.2.6 Access to Employment

Employment is a key part of the integration process and is central to the participation of repatriates in the economic life of the country. Through employment, or by means of income-generation activities, repatriates can contribute to the economy while simultaneously becoming financially self-sufficient. Labor market integration is especially important as it encompasses other aspects of integration, such as language and culture. However, it is most likely that Meskhetians will prefer to work on their own land as small-scale farmers and remain self-employed, which stems from their traditional occupations in agriculture. In any case, targeted efforts to support income generating activities can be implemented with great benefit in the repatriate communities, whether

the sectors of economy are agricultural or non-agricultural. Success in such activities can be enhanced by appropriate training, particularly in management and organizational skills, project implementation support, and monitoring by international development agencies. It must be remembered, though, that training is less effective if it is not accompanied by efforts concerning job placement, or the facilitation of other forms of income generation. Development of small and medium enterprises (SME) is particularly effective when it is envisaged that there could be individuals from amongst the repatriates who have already developed business skills. Respectively, access to micro-credit is a factor that contributes to the financial viability of SMEs, family farming, or any other household economic activity. Implementing agencies are needed that would function as facilitators, establishing linkages between existing micro-credit organizations, repatriate groups and SMEs. Creating business incubators aimed at helping develop the starting businesses with a broad range of support (office space, communication facilities, financial accounting, etc.) and training functions, according to internationally tested models, is another possible option.

3.4.2.7 Social Protection & Healthcare

Since Meskhetians will be arriving to a primarily unknown country with limited knowledge of the social security, health or legal environments, special attention must be given to the repatriates in the early stages of their resettlement so they become acquainted with Georgian institutions and procedures. Support and information will be required to

make certain repatriates are aware of the legal and social rights to which they are entitled. Additionally, continued efforts must be made to ensure that their rights are upheld, in particular with regard to their social security and healthcare needs. This could be achieved by providing free of charge consultations for repatriates through the establishment of consulting centers in the major recipient settlements, through mobile consultation teams, or through the training of relevant public officials. Another possible option is to provide temporary health insurance policies to repatriates immediately upon their arrival. In any case, close supervision by social workers can be of great benefit, particularly for the more vulnerable households.

3.4.2.8 Housing

Adequate housing is crucial for the well-being of any household. Through assistance programs, Meskhetians' needs for shelter should be satisfied in a way that would provide comfortable housing that is not considered as an offense to their dignity due to size or lack of basic utilities. At the same time, many of the repatriate families are likely to appear quite capable of improving their own living conditions if provided with construction materials and, perhaps, additionally with technical advice. Repatriates could easily form working crews that could help in repairing or constructing housing for other repatriates. Such an approach could simultaneously work towards several ends by creating a sense of ownership and responsibility, securing a high quality of construction, and employing repatriates. Nevertheless, assistance programs that include

provisions for housing should be overseen by an independent commission to evaluate the quality of housing and the physical infrastructure developed for repatriates.

3.4.2.9 Legal Rights & Status

In addition to careful planning and implementation is the formulating of a supportive legal environment for repatriation and integration. As a basis for this creation, eventual legal difficulties should be evaluated, such as possible restitution of property claims and the likelihood that there might be demands to consider Meskhetians as an ethnic minority and thus have the right to receive related legal protection. A main focus should be on guaranteeing basic rights of both the repatriates and the members of the host communities in the process of repatriation.

An issue worth special consideration is that of Meskhetians who apply for repatriation after the deadline (1 January 2010) for receiving applications has passed, as such requests will be difficult to exclude or ignore, even if the Law on Repatriation—with amendments—has only provided a two-year time frame for submitting applications. If the first wave of repatriation proves itself successful, more Meskhetians may express desire to repatriate, and it would be highly unfavorable for the Georgian state's international image to block further repatriation.

3.4.2.10 Reducing Tensions through Dialogue & Community Support

It has been stressed on several occasions that avoiding tensions between repatriates and local communities requires the most scrupulous attention and special efforts, even beyond working through media communications and other awareness measures. As a primary course of action, shared dialogue between Meskhetians and the host communities, both with their distinct cultural traditions, should promote mutual understanding and trust in order to prevent and address tension. Successful efforts should generate an open and respectful exchange of views that helps participants to find common grounds for cooperation. There should be follow-up activities and monitoring, along with other endeavors at strengthening social and organizational networks in the community as well as a shared sense of responsibility and ownership. Accordingly, community development projects can be discussed jointly by repatriates and host communities, with external mediation when appropriate, so that the needs of both groups can be identified through a participatory process and open debate. Such projects should be developed in cooperation with the local authorities to address and implement priority community concerns, such as infrastructure and public works as well as education and social programs.

3.5 Public Knowledge & Civil Involvement

Public misunderstandings of the attitudes and traditions of repatriates, as well as the impact their return will have on

the country, create conditions that may lead to the exclusion and marginalization of repatriates together with inaction or backtracking in state policies. Lack of accurate information and awareness among the local population are among the most important challenges to successful repatriation and integration. Georgian society will hardly benefit from a psychological climate in which Meskhetians are mainly perceived as a threat instead of a benefit to the country. Here, civil society and the international community has a great responsibility to exert continuous pressure both through creating supportive public opinion, as well as debates and discussions to strengthen the political will of and mobilize more support within the ruling strata of society. An effective and smooth repatriation process requires focused attention on improving perceptions of repatriation, even though influencing or changing public opinion is admittedly a daunting task. Georgian citizens need to be better informed on the benefits of repatriation as well as have related misunderstandings and misbeliefs corrected. Politicians, policy-makers and mass media share a special responsibility to avoid exacerbating negative viewpoints, and to frame the issue of repatriation in a fair, objective, and balanced way.

There are several issues that need to be considered if the society is to be provided with an objective picture of repatriation that should counter the negative stereotypes and myths still persistent in the society and within some community groups. A proactive long-term media strategy needs to be developed owing to the fact that media coverage is most effective in changing attitudes when it is properly supported. Clear aims and objectives for such a media strategy need to be developed while identifying intended

audiences and tailoring messages accordingly. The media should openly discuss existing concerns with a special emphasis on transparency and objectivity of information. It is essential to disentangle the concepts and relevant facts from myths and illusionary threats, as well as to give reassurances by explaining the real threats and showing how they will be countered. At the same time, public perception needs to be improved directly, which requires more thorough explanations of the circumstances and objectives of repatriation.

When possible, emphasis should be placed on the positive aspects of repatriation, while also openly discussing possible negative aspects. At the same time, news reports should avoid sensationalist and selective reporting as well as exploiting prejudices and negative stereotyping. Background reporting and more contextual information should be encouraged so that information on repatriation issues can be viewed in a broader context. The sensitivity of repatriation issues should be considered when informing the public about policies and projects. Attention should also be given to the daily lives and circumstances of repatriates as well as the deportation, rather than to the question of whether Meskhetians are Georgians or Turks. Local contexts and past experiences should be reflected upon when considering ideas about how to target and frame their messages for an intended audience. It would be helpful to focus on similar values together with human interest stories through the use of personal accounts and case studies. Consideration must also be given to the media style, as some media are more likely to devote more time to emotional stories; in such cases, using personal accounts of Meskhetian repatriates may appear more

effective. Messages may also be communicated effectively if there is a professional or outspoken person who can legitimately speak on behalf of Meskhetian communities, while explaining and promoting sensitive issues in a media and audience-friendly manner.

In general, a successful strategy for improving public perception has to include Meskhetians themselves. It should be taken into account that some political movements and their agendas may have a strong negative influence on the portrayal of Meskhetians in the media, depicting them as a threat to Georgian cultural norms and values, national identity, and nation-building processes. One way of counterbalancing such unfavorable perceptions of repatriates is by giving Meskhetians a 'human face' by presenting real-life stories of members. In general, being familiarized with the repatriate Meskhetians as they are, with their good and bad life circumstances, is likely to result in a more empathetic and favorable public attitude.

3.5.1 Public Knowledge

3.5.1.1 Empowerment

Empowerment efforts should aim at enhancing the capacity of repatriates and their communities to participate fully in society and public life, while effectively involving them with mainstream institutions. Returning Meskhetians will arrive with different experiences and many hope to build on their existing capital, knowledge and resources, while acquiring additional skills during the integration process. They may also wish to improve their life situation by overcoming

obstacles that impede their access to available resources and rights, their participation in public life, or their ability to lead independent dignified lives based on their own choices. The empowerment measures that are needed to address these issues differ from purely educational programs by the fact that they combine education and action, thereby providing target groups with the unique opportunity to act upon their acquired knowledge. Repatriates should be encouraged to be involved in programs as participants, audience members and experts, as well as to develop their own initiatives. Special attention should be devoted to the empowerment of Meskhetian women who are traditionally more reserved and isolated from the outside world. In turn, empowerment is one of the most attractive areas where civil action is needed and welcomed. At the same time, prospective host communities should also be involved in the repatriation process. This follows the need to be well informed as well as providing a voice on how the repatriation and integration processes should be directed in order to benefit all stakeholders. This would not only help avoid future tensions between communities, but also strengthen the cooperative attitudes and sense of ownership over any policies that involve Meskhetians and the wider society.

3.5.1.2 Dialogue

Dialogue should be encouraged between communities to promote mutual understanding and trust, as well as to prevent and solve conflicts. Dialogue platforms and civic spaces should be designed based on existing international experience as well as used to negotiate integration. By

addressing the lack of mutual understanding and trust that may exist between repatriates and the host communities, an open, thorough and respectful exchange of views and opinions will be formed. The overall objective, accordingly, is to develop shared concern and responsibility so specific problems as well as common ground for working together can be identified. In the long term, the process instigated by such dialogues will reduce social distance and mutually reinforce the social capital and well-being of the repatriates as well as the host communities.

3.5.1.3 Awareness Raising

To prepare the grounds for repatriation and encourage an accommodating reception of deported people and their descendants among the host communities, extensive awareness raising is required throughout Georgia. An important issue is the provision of clear and accurate information on living conditions in Georgia among potential repatriates, as well as awareness raising about Meskhetians among recipient communities. Awareness raising activities should seek the involvement of Meskhetian community representatives and national civil society organizations, in particular those in Samtskhe-Javakheti. The involved stakeholders can work directly with Meskhetian representatives and organizations to help them develop a more positive public image and bolster effective integration. Together they should distribute information on the facts and benefits of repatriation, thereby helping to foster acceptance of repatriation as a potentially beneficial phenomenon.

The stakeholders should work together to change negative

attitudes in the Georgian society through the promotion of positive information and images to counteract hesitation or resistance to repatriation. Awareness raising can be conducted through media sources and outreach campaigns in specific regions. Such efforts should include various education and awareness campaigns for the public, local governments, schoolchildren, university students and other relevant individuals and groups. Regional and local media may play a particularly important role when raising issues that are of local significance, while the national media can be utilized to conduct a larger, nationwide information campaign.

Comparable statistical data on repatriation should serve as a base of information, with well-prepared and well-timed public opinion surveys drawing public and media attention to key issues of repatriation, while highlighting upcoming initiatives for debate. The timing of the public release of these studies is critical for awareness raising projects and the policy-making process. Raising public awareness about repatriation issues also aims at raising the public's expectations for policy responses by framing information campaigns through special events or overarching themes, such as a special day commemorating the deportations. Often in the form of information campaigns and events, these measures provide a specific target group—the general public, policy-makers or repatriates—with facts and experiences about a specific integration topic. Increasing the target group's knowledge and understanding allows them to have more informed opinions about diversity and to actively participate in the integration process, thus promoting the mutual adaptation of repatriates and host communities to repatriation. Awareness raising measures that draw on the

stories of individual repatriates and the expertise of migrant associations empower Meskhetian repatriates, in turn, by enhancing their public voice, expanding their sphere of action, and providing opportunities for interaction.

3.5.2 Civil Society

3.5.2.1 Public Debate

Public debate on repatriation is a crucial element of the process to broaden public support for Meskhetians' return. A helpful instrument for proceeding further with the repatriation process could be the creation of a broader discussion forum constituted by respected individuals from the government, civil society and Meskhetian community, working in close contact with the interagency state commission on repatriation. Such a forum, moderated by international experts and coordinated by one or more international organizations, could undertake several important functions: generating and testing new ideas in a non-restrictive environment, maintaining a two-way exchange of information, working as an informal negotiating body, and acting as a public advocate for an effective solution. In addition to monitoring and evaluation, civil society actors can also influence processes of repatriation and integration through lobbying for better legislation, approaches and practices, which in turn will promote debate amongst stakeholders. Civil society actors are best positioned to initiate public debate on the issues of Meskhetian repatriation and their integration in the society. Civil society organizations have significant power to influence and form

public opinion. Therefore, when appropriate, they should develop relationships with governmental officials to support positive messages, or where the messages are negative, to ensure the viewpoints of civil society have been taken into consideration by the government. However, this does not preclude mobilizing popular opposition, or even peaceful forms of confrontational approach, when the official policies are believed to harm the repatriation process.

3.5.2.2 Capacity Building & International Involvement

Civil society organizations and international non-governmental organizations have certain comparative advantages in capacity building as key repatriation actors compared to many other main stakeholders, including governmental bodies, experts on civil integration, and other persons, organizations or agencies dealing with repatriation. Civil society organizations are often more flexible, well-connected and innovative than governmental agencies in attracting expertise in the area, whether local or international, and in creating better conditions for the development of repatriation and integration projects. Civil activists may achieve significant results by earning trust between both Meskhetian and local communities due to their equal standing in the society. Furthermore, civil society organizations can assist Meskhetians in mobilizing civil activism, establishing new organizations as well as developing their implementation and analytical capacities, which in turn will help in integrating Meskhetians. For these reasons, the donor community should pay particular attention to supporting such initiatives.

In turn, international involvement is crucial and may have a special role in bringing in best practices and lessons learned from the vast scope of world experiences in supporting repatriation and social integration of migrants and repatriates. This may involve various activities, such as inviting international experts, officials and civil activists working on repatriation and integration; organizing study tours to countries with a good record of inclusive and multiethnic programs; providing various types of consultancy; training; exchanging experiences; and providing material support. International involvement also has a very important function in offering objective and unbiased monitoring of the processes, demonstrating international concern for the protection of the repatriates' human rights, and attracting attention of the international community as a whole as well as of donor agencies.

3.5.2.3 Coordination of Civil Efforts

In order to achieve a successful repatriation process, as well as to facilitate relations with both governmental agencies and donors, it is important that civil society actors coordinate their efforts, possibly through creating a singular or multiple issue-based coordinating council(s). Coordination may take the form of establishing joint information channels, newsletters, and websites; organizing regular workshops and meetings focusing on specific issues; or cooperating in organizing press conferences and public debates. However, in order to be successful, such coordination between civil society efforts may require institutionalizing coalitions and coordination bodies so that all interested civil actors

have a role and a voice. Particularly beneficial will be the involvement of the Meskhetian organizations, so as to promote dialogue, coordination and cooperation from the very start of the repatriation process.

3.5.2.4 Monitoring Policies

While the repatriation and integration processes are primarily the responsibilities of the governmental agencies, it may be that the government is less innovative in their approaches, or may pursue multiple agendas that may harm the return of Meskhetians. Moreover, when monitoring and evaluating the repatriation process governmental agencies tend to regard it, as well as their own achievements, in a more positive light, while underestimating drawbacks and failures. It is therefore the task of civil society and independent experts to provide more objective perspectives on the repatriation and integration processes. Less constrained by political considerations, such evaluations may be of particular importance for the donor community to know how funds provided by them are used, and for international organizations, such as the Council of Europe or the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, to follow the developments in an objective manner.

3.5.3 Media

3.5.3.1 Prevailing Attitudes & Media Environment

The media both forms and reflects the views and attitudes that are prevalent in society: some tolerant, others

discriminatory, some openly hostile and others indifferent. In order to change public attitudes, these attitudes first need to be studied and understood. Suitably, time should be taken to study the media environment—in terms of the main actors, legislative framework, and audiences—to understand why, how, and which media organizations are interested in working together towards a more accurate and balanced portrayal of repatriation. Therefore, a media strategy is likely to be more effective if efforts have been made to map the media environment as well as identify and analyze the stakeholders.

3.5.3.2 Involving Media

While mass media can be encouraged to provide an accurate and fair portrayal of repatriation and Meskhetians, media companies cannot be expected to promote repatriation and integration agenda unless it is in their own interest. Therefore, strategic alliances between civil society, government, and organizations of media professionals can help attain a positive opinion within the society concerning Meskhetian repatriation, and, through media, outlets encourage public debate and awareness raising. Providing materials, training programs, and dialogue venues are also practical ways to work directly with media professionals, while involving and supporting media educators and administrators. It may also be helpful to encourage attention toward the area of repatriation by recognizing and rewarding good media practice, as well as creating incentives for editors and journalists to work on the portrayal and inclusion of repatriates in the media. Good media practices can be encouraged by local and

national media organizations as well as the government and civil society by awarding prizes for excellence in covering repatriation. Stakeholders themselves should also generate more presence in the media environment by including public relations in their planning, and aligning their approach to meet the preferences and quality standards of media structures. Monitoring media output and discussing findings with media organizations, journalists and editors, when appropriate, may also appear quite effective. Discussions can also be initiated and encouraged to better understand the media impact on repatriation, while constructive dialogue with media stakeholders can facilitate responses about changing events in the repatriation process.

3.5.3.3 Capacity Building

One of the most effective ways of improving the media coverage of the repatriation issue is educating media professionals and developing their capacities through training, workshops and conferences; providing materials; and collaborative exchange programs. Collaboration between the government, civil society organizations and research institutes can help to develop a research foundation. In turn, analyzed data can be used in repatriation debates in the media, so that media outlets distribute findings of independent fact-finding and expert opinions on the impact and expected contribution of repatriates to the Georgian society. Mentoring and development opportunities for both new and current professionals of Meskhetian background are also effective tools for enhancing knowledge on repatriation among media professionals.

3.6 Concluding Remarks

After years of delay, Georgia has finally begun the process of repatriating Meskhetians and other communities deported from Georgia in the 1940s. Since the Law on Repatriation was adopted in July 2007, the process of collecting applications from Meskhetians residing abroad has been conducted, with approximately 6,000 applications being registered by Georgian officials. Although Georgia has committed itself to repatriate those Meskhetians who have applied and are willing to return, it is well understood that the process of both repatriation and especially socioeconomic integration of repatriates will pose a number of significant challenges. It is important to ensure that future repatriates are provided with opportunities to participate in the society of the country as full-fledged citizens without fear of discrimination. At the same time, these processes should be undertaken in ways that minimize inconveniences for, and tensions with, the rest of Georgia's population, which has already suffered a lot through the crises and instability of the country over the last decades.

Upon their arrival in Georgia, the repatriates may face a number of difficulties with fitting into the society as well as with accessing public services, securing their legal status, and finding employment. However, the underlying risk is the creation of any additional friction between repatriates and host communities. Avoiding such a scenario requires scrupulous work in effectively informing the population groups and stakeholders about the policies implemented. Furthermore, careful attention must paid to designing and implementing proactive actions as well as balanced

and well-thought-out instruments and procedures. The fears, perceptions and expectations of Meskhetian repatriates as well as those of the host communities need to be taken into account, lest in the absence of careful management the process accentuates ethnic tensions and feelings of insecurity. Georgian society should come to an understanding that repatriates are not a threat to stability but, especially if the process is properly handled, can make valuable contributions to the country's development. Still, Meskhetians may need a great deal of support in learning the state language and adapting to the new environment, which should be provided in a tactful and efficient manner. It is the obligation of the Georgian state to guarantee for the repatriated Meskhetians the same legal, political, social, economic and living conditions that are enjoyed by all citizens of Georgia, while removing any possibilities that may lead to exclusion or discrimination. At the same time, it is the moral responsibility of Georgian civil society as well as the international community to support the Georgian government in these efforts.

Conclusion

During the last century Meskhetians have experienced many tragic events: deportation, resettlements, repression, violence, and the inability to return to their homeland in southern Georgia. Nevertheless, the desire to return to the land of their ancestors appears astonishingly strong and deeply rooted, and, after many decades, a significant proportion of Meskhetians still strive to return to their homeland. Over these long years in exile, Meskhetian communities have been able to retain many of their traditions and a sense of unity, even though fate has dispersed them over many countries and even continents. Today, finally, it seems there are some real hopes that those who want to repatriate to Georgia will be able to do so despite the implicit and explicit difficulties with returning to and integrating with the society.

It is obvious that after all these decades of isolated existence repatriation is not an easy task. It should be openly admitted that there are many problems linked to successful repatriation, but the issue of public attitudes is probably the most important for the initial stages. The process of repatriation may generate some degree of public anxiety and perhaps even fear, especially due to the existing political volatility, external threats and economic downturn within Georgia. Throughout the country, increased negative attitudes toward repatriation may be caused by a combination of misinformation, media reporting, political discourse, lack of contact with repatriates, and xenophobia.

Concerning Meskhetians, feelings of past injustices and the desire to only return to Meskheti might also lead to friction with the local communities. Repatriates may also sometimes be perceived as a threat to Georgia's cultural, religious or national identity, or even territorial integrity. These perceptions, in part, stem from a general and often unspecified feeling of uncertainty and uneasiness, but also from certain historical realities and myths. Even though these attitudes of the general society do not take into consideration the fact that repatriation cannot be halted, but only managed, great effort must be made to ensure that negative public opinions do not lead Georgia to violate its promises and international obligations.

The Meskhetian motives for repatriation, natural as they are, cause suspicion amongst the local communities, particularly in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti where some members reside in homes formerly owned by Meskhetians. This skepticism also exists in Georgia at large, with some parts of the population associating certain issues with Meskhetians: competition for land, accommodation and employment; demographic and religious threats; territorial loss through secession; high economic burden; and increased influence of Turkey. Apart from repatriation itself, the question of settlement areas that repatriates will choose is among the most sensitive issue. The Georgian government has committed to ensure their repatriation to Georgia, but not to a specific region within the country. Nevertheless, Georgian officials have stressed their intention to direct repatriation to other areas in Georgia than the historical homeland of Meskheti. According to state considerations and interests, the government argues that there is not enough

free land and resources in southern Georgia for a mass repatriation. Still, as soon as repatriates become full-fledged citizens of Georgia, or just lawful residents having obtained repatriation status, they possess the irrefutable constitutional right to move or settle anywhere in Georgia they wish. The only legal mechanism the Georgian authorities would have to regulate the patterns of settlement would be through incentives to move to parts of Georgia other than Samtskhe-Javakheti. While no actions to this end so far have been developed, it would be crucial that such assistance programs are developed as the repatriation process begins.

Just as with the Georgian population as a whole, there exists a negative attitude and unwillingness amongst a part of the Georgian political elite and state bureaucracy to deal with the issue of repatriation of deported people. While the decision-makers acknowledge the commitment the Georgian state has to the Council of Europe, at times the government's intention to actually undertake repatriation has appeared reluctant, or exceedingly formal rather than practical. This unwillingness to act will likely remain an unfortunate reality for some time, and it will have to be dealt with in a way that does not cause the repatriation process to come to a standstill. Public perceptions of repatriation will also strongly influence the efficiency with which this process can be managed. Therefore, the government, civil society organizations, and international stakeholders need to envisage in advance how to counteract possible negative attitudes through effective media campaigns, open and unbiased public debates, engagement of the local communities and wider society, as well as capacity building and coordination of civil efforts.

There are also many sensitive issues associated with the Meskhetian's socioeconomic integration into the society following their repatriation. Many of these are related to the issue of national identity of Meskhetians, their rights, and the practical and cultural difficulties related to their inclusion. The issue of identity—Georgian versus Turkish—has become a focal point of the debate. On the one hand, it is important that Meskhetians, if they wish so, are able to preserve—as stipulated by Georgian legislation—their identity, language, and religion and cultural traditions. On the other hand, they need to adapt quickly and become accustomed to the Georgian environment; acquire proficiency in the state language; and establish useful social networks and contacts within the host communities, as well as understand the specifics of Georgian legislation; business ethics, or sometimes its deficiencies; labor market requirements; and educational and career opportunities. From the human rights and legal perspectives, there are also several issues of importance related to what rights Meskhetians have as individuals, as well as a group, and how to ensure that they are fully implemented.

The current period appears to be crucial for the process of Georgia's state building, with repatriation of Meskhetians acting as an important step in the direction and the gradual maturing of Georgian statehood. Over a very short time, the Georgian political landscape has changed drastically. The political events that took place throughout the last two decades were of enormous importance for Georgia's relationship with its past and defining its future. With the repatriation of Meskhetians, who were brutally deported by the regime of the USSR, one more legacy of Soviet totalitarianism, long

overdue, will be reversed. In turn, Georgia's development as a stable, democratic country—increasingly integrated into the global economy and world community of states—remains dependent on fulfilling the country's moral and international obligations. Decisively, the issue of Meskhetian repatriation is one of the most vital trials in revealing the direction Georgian society is moving in today.

Abbreviations

ACF	Action Against Hunger
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CoE	Council of Europe
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECMI	European Centre for Minority Issues
ESL	English as a Second Language
EU	European Union
FCNM	Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities
FMP OSI	Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute
GYLA	Georgian Young Lawyers' Association
HCNM	High Commissioner on National Minorities
IDP	internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MIPEX	Migrant Integration Policy Index
MRA	Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
OSI	Open Society Institute

PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
SME	small and medium enterprises
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Notes

Foreword

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Introduction

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About the Authors

Tom Trier (Denmark) is a Senior Research Associate for the Danish-German research foundation, the European Centre for Minority Issues and the Centre's regional director in the Caucasus since 2005. With a background in social anthropology, he specializes in ethnonational and migration issues in Eastern Europe and the CIS, particularly in the Caucasus region. For the past decade, Tom Trier has worked extensively in the Caucasus region, including the North Caucasus (Ingushetia and Chechnya), Azerbaijan and Georgia. He is the author of a range of publications and articles on ethno-political issues, and is co-editor to a major study of the deported Meskhetians, *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?* LIT Verlag: Berlin, 2007 (with Andrei Khanzhin).

George Tarkhan-Mouravi (Georgia) is a Co-director of the Institute for Policy Studies in Tbilisi. Since the beginning of the 1990s, he has been working on a wide range of humanitarian, development and policy issues. He has carried out numerous research projects commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Soros Foundation and other international organizations. For a decade, he has been conducting research on Meskhetians, authoring a range of papers on the issue, and as part of an ECMI research project in 2004–2006, he

authored a thorough study of Legal and Political Aspects of the Issue of Muslim Meskhetians in Georgia, which is published in the volume by Tom Trier & Andrei Khanzhin: *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads: Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?* LIT Verlag: Berlin, 2007.

Forrest Kilimnik (USA) is an editor and research assistant for the European Centre for Minority Issues' regional office in the Caucasus since 2010, where he has applied his knowledge to the projects pertaining to the secessionist movements in the region and other minority-majority relations. He has undertaken extensive schooling in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Japan and the United States, studying global affairs and trends as well as Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. During his Erasmus Mundus Master's Course 'Global Studies – A European Perspective,' he completed a detailed thesis titled *The War of Laws: South Ossetia's Movement for Self-Determination Between the Russian and Georgian Fronts*, focusing on ruling elite, interethnic conflict, and international law.

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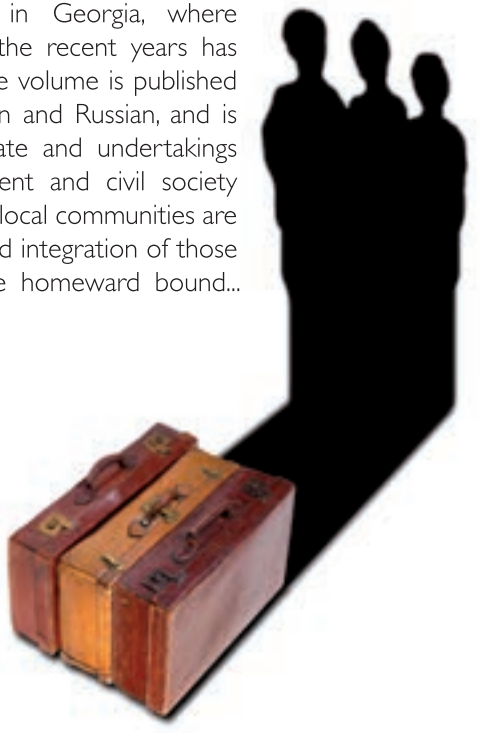
Meskhetians: Homeward Bound...

67 years have passed since the wholesale deportation of the Meskhetian communities along with other targeted Muslim groups living in the southern parts of Georgia in the Caucasus region. In 1944, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin ordered some 100,000 people from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic to be banished to Central Asia. Throughout the following decades, the Meskhetian communities found themselves in a lingering exile, prohibited from returning to their homeland. With the collapse of the USSR, oscillating perspectives arose both from the Georgian government and society concerning the repatriation of Meskhetians to the country. Today, with support from the international community, as well as civil society organizations, the estimated 425,000 Meskhetians that are dispersed across nine countries of current settlement Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey and the USA seem to have a long-awaited opportunity to return to Georgia.

With a foreword by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Knut Vollebaek, this book on the Meskhetians aims at introducing the deported communities, the circumstances of their years in exile, and their current situations into the broader context of their possibility of repatriation. The book has been prepared to be of particular use as a reference material, especially in Georgia, where the issue of repatriation over the recent years has increasingly become a reality. The volume is published concurrently in English, Georgian and Russian, and is intended to stimulate the debate and undertakings among the Georgian government and civil society stakeholders as the country and local communities are preparing for the repatriation and integration of those deported Meskhetians who are homeward bound...



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