

## Gesellschaftliche Transformationen/ Societal Transformations

In dieser Reihe werden sozial, wirtschafts- und kulturwissenschaftliche Analysen veröffentlicht, die sich aus intertemporal und interkulturell vergleichender Perspektive mit gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprozessen beschäftigen. Drei Problemapakte stehen dabei im Zentrum: Akteure, Dauer und Differenzierungen, Steuerbarkeiten sowie weltgesellschaftliche Dimensionen von Transformationsprozessen.

This book is the result of a comprehensive and pioneering research project, and offers innovative insights into the life of the Meskhetian Turks – an ethnic group collectively deported from Georgia by Stalin during World War II. The volume examines their integration in the countries where they now live, their understanding of home and belonging and their desire to return to Georgia. Apart from thoroughly documenting the current life of Meskhetian Turks, the research also identifies new approaches in finding solutions to the issue of Meskhetian Turk displacement.

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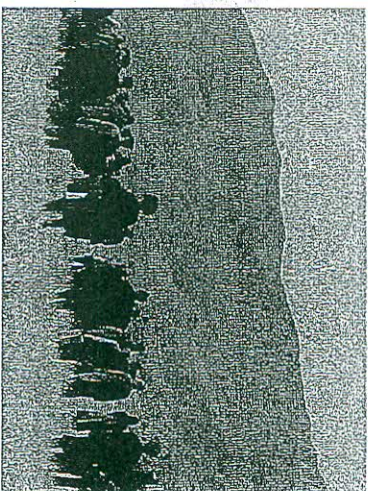
Tom Trier, Andrei Khanzhin (Eds.)  
The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads

Gesellschaftliche Transformationen/Societal Transformations

## The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads

Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?

Tom Trier, Andrei Khanzhin (Eds.)



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# Gesellschaftliche Transformationen Societal Transformations

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# The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads

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Tom Trier and Andrei Khanzhin

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## Resettlement and Belonging Among Cultural and Ethnic Kin: Meskhetian Turks in Turkey

*Aysegül Aydıngün*

### Introduction

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey remembered the ties with the Caucasus and Central Asia that it had forgotten throughout the Soviet period. Turkey has a very long history of migration from the Caucasus. During the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, both forced and voluntary migrations took place from the Caucasus. The Russian Empire encouraged the people who were sympathetic to the Ottoman Empire to migrate to the Ottoman lands and an important influx of migrations took place (Tonmarkine 1996). Different groups living in Russia were affected by this trend. One of these groups of people were the Meskhetian Turks who were living in the southern part of Georgia, which became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1578 for 250 years, until the region came under Russian rule in 1829 with the Treaty of Adrianople. Later, in 1918, with the Batoum [Batumi] Conference, the region was returned to the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1921, with the Treaty of Moscow, it was given to Georgia.

The population of the Turks in Meskheti (statistics also include Javakheti) was 208,000, according to the 1897 Russian census. It decreased to 108,000,

The term 'Meskhetian Turk' is a controversial one. Although the term used by the group members to name themselves in their mother tongue, is 'Ahıska Turk', this term also is new. The interviewees have stressed that, while living in their home villages, they defined themselves as 'Caucasian Turks' (*Kafkas Türkleri*) and that, during the Soviet regime, different Soviet nationalities simply called them 'Turks'. In the western literature, this group is known as 'Meskhetian Turks', whereas they are named 'Meskhetians' in Georgia. The term 'Meskhetian Turk', as used in this chapter, includes basically three different ethnic groups, namely: the Turks, which constitute the large majority, the Kurds and the Terekeme. These people were largely unified under this appellation because they were either Turkish or Turkish speaking and had similar experience of deportation and discrimination. (Aydıngün, 2002).

according to the 1917 Soviet census, and, in the 1926 census, their population in Georgia was 137,921. In these censuses, Kurds, Turks and Terekeme were mentioned separately because the appellation 'Meskhetian Turk' did not exist at the time.<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish population in Russia was 99,900 in 1897 and 117,800 in 1917. Their population in Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki was 4,024, according to the 1926 Soviet census. The population of Terekeme was 29,900 in 1897 and 43,300 in 1917. Their population in Meskheti (statistics include Javakheti) was 6,316, according to the 1926 Soviet census (Kaiser 1994; Conquest 1970; Wimbush and Wixman 1987). From 1917 until the 1944 deportation (especially in the 1930s), some Meskhetian Turks fled secretly from Georgia to Turkey and those who did not leave their villages were deported to Central Asia by Stalin. The descendants of those who escaped to Turkey between the late 1920s and 1944 still live in Turkey.

Recently, Turkey has continued to be an important country of immigration. After the immigration of Iranians, Bulgarian Turks, Bosnian Muslims and Kurds from Iraq, Meskhetian Turks, escaping from the growing ethnic tensions, economic problems and discrimination in the former Soviet republics, began to migrate to Turkey both as settled or free migrants following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In particular, the Meskhetian Turks who suffered the pogrom that occurred in Uzbekistan have formed a mobile population since 1989. As a result of deteriorating ethnic, economic and human rights conditions in the former Soviet republics, such as in the case of Krasnodar in Russia, some of the Meskhetian Turks decided to migrate to Turkey. Those surveyed in Turkey have stressed that they migrated to Turkey because they perceive Turkey to be their homeland. The willingness to return to the homeland was strengthened by increasing nationalism in the post-Soviet republics and deteriorating economic conditions, especially for non-titular nationalities.

Facing important problems in the post-Soviet republics in which they live, Meskhetian Turks continuously demand the help of Turkey and asked Turgut Özal, president of Turkey from 1989 to 1993, and all the politicians and officials during their official visits to these former Soviet republics to save their compatriots. In 1989, Turkey was highly concerned with the migration of Bulgarian Turks and did not seriously consider the demands of Meskhetian Turks, largely due to financial difficulties. However, in the early 1990s, with the initiative of Turgut Özal, the issue of the Meskhetian Turks made it onto the agenda and a law was passed on 11 July 1992 (Law 3835) for the migration and the settlement of the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey. This law authorised the migration of Meskhetian Turks to Turkey as free or settled immigrants with, priority given to those living under

the most difficult conditions and on the condition that they would not exceed an annual number to be determined by the Council of Ministers. As a first step, the Council of Ministers agreed to finance the resettlement of 500 Meskhetian Turk families to Iğdır, which is very close to the original villages of the Meskhetian Turks. Iğdır used to be a town within the province of Kars. It was returned to Turkey in November 1920 and, while Meskheti (and Javakheti) was given to Georgia under the treaty of Moscow, Turkey retained Kars and Ardahan under the same Treaty. Iğdır became a separate city in 1992. Among the inhabitants of the region, it is possible to come across Meskhetian Turks who migrated in the 1930s. Meskhetian Turks share the same culture and language with the people of the region and this was the main reason for their settlement in Iğdır.

According to the resettlement programme, 150 families would be settled in 1992 and 350 families in 1993. In February 1993, the first group of 30 families came to Turkey from Azerbaijan and they were settled in Iğdır. Then 70 families from Kazakhstan, 20 from Russia, 20 from Kyrgyzstan and 10 from Uzbekistan were settled. These Meskhetian Turks were given the right to citizenship and the majority started to work in the public sector according to their qualifications and professions. However, the legal measures taken for the settlement in Turkey were applied for a limited time period and the settlement of these 500 families is still to be completed.

Besides the legal settlement, an important number of Meskhetian Turks continuously migrate to Turkey by their own means. Although Turkey's official position related to the ethnic Turks outside Turkey in general and to Meskhetian Turks in particular is to keep them where they are, the migration of the Meskhetian Turks has not been prevented. In fact, with the initiative of Turgut Özal, Turkey modified its general policy in the specific case of Meskhetian Turks in 1990 and welcomed them. Those who migrated to Turkey by their own means were allowed to stay on an unofficial basis. However, there are still important problems that need to be solved. Meskhetian Turks who have come to Turkey with a tourist visa and who became illegal migrants when the official stay period ended are mostly not expelled from the country. In other words, although they are illegal migrants, they are informally welcomed by the Turkish state and, thus, it is possible to argue that their unofficial presence is in a way encouraged by the Turkish state pending the legalisation of their stay.

Currently, approximately half of the Meskhetian Turk migrants in Turkey still do not have Turkish citizenship. However, apart from individual applications that are in progress, a series of decrees by the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Internal Affairs granted residence permits to 39,000 persons between 1997 and

2005. The latest decree covers those who arrived in Turkey between 5 August 2004 and 12 October 2005. Meskhetian Turks who came after that date are staying without residence permits. Since the beginning of the migration of Meskhetian Turks to Turkey, several decrees and a law have been promulgated:

- (1) According to Decree No. 10856 of the Council of Ministers of 25 March 1998, those who migrated before 12 March 1997 got their residence permits together with their work permits (6,652 persons).
- (2) Law No. 4360 of 14 May 1998 gave residence and work permits to those who came between 12 March 1997 and 14 May 1998 (5,688 persons).
- (3) Decree No. 588 of 1 April 2000, promulgated by the Council of Ministers covered those who came between 14 May 1998 and 1 April 2000 (8,022 persons).
- (4) Decree No. 5006 of 18 July 2002, promulgated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, gave residence and work permits to those who came between 14 January 2000 and 31 July 2002 (5,708 persons).
- (5) Decree No. 182008 of 10 October 2003, promulgated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, covered those who came between 31 July 2002 and 10 October 2003 (2,726 persons). However, they were given only residence permits.
- (6) Decree No. 144859 of 5 August 2004, promulgated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, covered those who came between 10 October 2003 and 5 August 2004 (3,781). They were again given only residence permits.
- (7) Decree No. 175053, promulgated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, covered those who came between 5 August 2004 and 10 October 2005 (7,138). They were only given residence permits.

The government encouraged personal applications after 2003 and residence permits were only given for 6 months without the work permit as opposed to previous practices (it was mostly given for two years). The work permit requires another application to the Ministry of Work and Social Security, which is the normal procedure for all foreigners residing in Turkey. The work permit is based on Law 4817 of 27 February 2003, aimed at providing the principles of work permission for foreigners in Turkey. According to Article 8 of this law, those who are in Turkey according to the Law on Settlement No. 2510 have the right to obtain a work permit. Until July 2002, the work permit was given to the Meskhetian Turks by the police department together with the residence permit.

This was a special policy adopted only in the case of the Meskhetian Turks. The officials' objective was to provide a quick legal basis for their stay and work in Turkey. It is important to note at this point that Meskhetian Turks are considered to be 'national refugees' according to existing laws in Turkey. For instance, it is the Law on Settlement (No. 2510) that regulates migration to Turkey. According to this law, those who are of Turkish descent and culture are entitled to migrate, settle and receive Turkish citizenship. As the definition of ethnicity and culture is not clear, the Council of Ministers has the power to decide which groups are of Turkish descent and culture (Kirişçi and Neemi 1995).

Furthermore, the residence permit application fee is not demanded from the Meskhetian Turks who are in the lists prepared by the Meskhetian Turk associations. According to Law No. 5683 on the residence of foreigners in Turkey, the residence permit requires a payment of around 483 YTL (around US\$350) per person per year and it is not guaranteed that all applicants will be given residence permits. Paying that amount of money is quite impossible for most of the Meskhetian Turks who live under great economic difficulties and they mostly do not prefer personal applications and do it via their associations without paying any application fee. The general policy regarding the settlement of Meskhetian Turks underwent certain changes after the elections of 3 November 2002 with the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government opting to encourage personal applications: thus, the special treatment of the Meskhetian Turks ended to a certain extent. However, one has to point out that the fragmentation of the Meskhetian Turk organisation al structure—the increasing number of Meskhetian Turk associations and federations—is an important factor that influenced the attitude of the officials. The officials interviewed usually stressed that they do not know which one of the associations really represents the Meskhetian Turk community in Turkey. However, even after 2002, three decrees were promulgated and more than 14,000 people received residence permits.

It is also important to note that Law No. 3835 of 2 July 1992, which allows ethnic Turks to migrate and settle in Turkey, makes reference to the Law on Settlement and asks for its application. Briefly, it is clear that the necessary legal basis for the settlement and integration of the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey exists. However, these laws are not applied consistently due to several reasons, such as the fear of coping with the integration of high numbers of migrants and the changing priorities of the various Turkish governments. The main obstacle to the implementation of Law No. 3835 is that the issue has lost its popularity because there are other issues, such as domestic politics or other groups migrating to Turkey (i.e., Bulgarian Turks, Iraqi Kurds and Bosnian Muslims) that the

government must take into immediate consideration. It is necessary to note that, since 2002, the state ministry that is responsible for the Meskhetian Turk issue has not been very active, as opposed to the practices of previous governments. This policy shift by the AKP government deepens the existing problems of the Meskhetian Turks.

It is clear that the people in Turkey have sympathy for the Meskhetian Turks, who suffered a lot under 'communism'. Despite all these existing problems and difficulties, Meskhetian Turks continue to come to Turkey by their own means. Currently, it is possible to find Meskhetian Turks in several cities of Turkey but they are mainly concentrated in Bursa, Antalya and Istanbul.

### Demography and Mapping of Meskhetian Turks in Bursa, Antalya and Iğdır<sup>2</sup>

According to the estimations of the Meskhetian Turk associations *Ahıska Türkleri Kiliir ve Dayanışma Derneği* (Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture) in Ankara and Bursa, currently the approximate number of Meskhetian Turk households in Turkey is as follows: Iğdır (178), Istanbul (600), Yalova-Cınarcık (80), Izmir (25), Konya (29), Çanakkale (67), Ankara (27), Aydın-Incirlıova (30), Denizli (40), Gebze (250), Bursa (3,500) and Antalya (700). This makes a total of 5,526 households. Given the family size of the Meskhetian Turks, this refers to a population of at least 35,000 people. In addition, there are thousands of young Meskhetian Turks who come seasonally to work in the tourist places of Antalya. Meskhetian Turk families are mostly horizontally and/or vertically extended families with at least two or three children. This means that the household population varies mostly from six to eight. With the arrival of seasonal visitors, the households become much more heavily populated.

Meskhetian Turks are mostly concentrated in big cities such as Bursa and Antalya. The population of Bursa is over two million, while Antalya's is approaching two million. Currently, there are around 3,500 households (approximately 20,000 persons) in Bursa, according to the data provided by the Meskhetian Turk associations. Meskhetian Turks in Bursa, for the most part, cluster in the adjacent neighbourhoods of Zımmırtıevler, Yeşilyayla, Teleferik and Egitim. These neighbourhoods are low income neighbourhoods. In Antalya,

<sup>2</sup> This chapter is based on field studies in three locations in Turkey where Meskhetian Turks live in substantial numbers: Bursa, Antalya and Iğdır.

there are approximately 700 households (4,000 persons), again according to the estimations of the local associations. They mostly live in Zerdalılık and Lara, which are middle class neighbourhoods. Since these neighbourhoods are also inhabited by locals, it is not possible to argue that the Meskhetian Turks are residentially segregated in the above mentioned neighbourhoods. Furthermore, most of the time, Meskhetian Turks have close relations with their neighbours, except in the case of middle-class neighbourhoods such as Lara (Antalya), where neighbours' relations are weak in general due to class-based factors.

Meskhetian Turks who live in Antalya and Bursa are mostly those who came to Turkey by their own means, whereas those who live in Iğdır are legal settlers. The settlement in Iğdır was based on Law No. 3835, which ordered, among other things, the foundation of a commission composed of the directors of the branches and institutions of the ministries and establishments of the provinces; the adoption of necessary measures in order to provide the immigrants with employment; the provision of permanent places of settlement; and the making of the necessary arrangements for their exemption from all kind of taxes, custom duties and fees during their migration. Within that remit, apartment buildings were constructed for them. These were sold to them on a 20 year low-interest credit. Residents pay approximately 60 to 70 YTL (US\$40–50) a month for the credit. Those legal settlers obtained Turkish citizenship immediately; their diplomas were officially recognised and they were offered jobs in the public sector in accordance with their education. Some of them, however, moved within time to other cities of Turkey for different reasons, such as the wish to live in a big city, family unification, better jobs and better education for their children.

In the early 1990s, the city that attracted the majority of Meskhetian Turks was Bursa, which is an industrial city in the Marmara region. The textile industry is highly developed there, with approximately 8,000 enterprises of different sizes where at least 60,000 people work. Another industry that is equally important in Bursa is car production. Both sectors are supported by related industries, which also offer an important number of jobs. Due to the city's increasing population, the construction sector is also in need of workers.

Until the economic crisis of 2001, Bursa continued to be a centre of attraction for Meskhetian Turks. However, Meskhetian Turks faced two economic crises in Turkey: one in 1994 and the other in 2001. In both crises, the bankruptcy of small size enterprises where Meskhetian Turks were concentrated, such as in the textile and construction industries, caused a deterioration in their economic conditions.

Another city that became attractive, with its growing sector of tourism and growing number of Russians and Russian-speaking tourists, is Antalya. Starting

at the end of the 1990s, the number of Meskhetian Turks who settled in Antalya increased very rapidly. Some families who originally settled in Bursa moved to Antalya and some family members started to go to Antalya to work seasonally, aiming to provide additional income for their families in Bursa or to secure their survival.

It is important to note that the majority of Meskhetian Turks in Bursa are those who left Uzbekistan following the Fergana events, whereas an important part of those who settled in Antalya are mostly from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Those who settled in Iğdır were selected from different post-Soviet republics. Due to continuing geographical mobility, it is quite difficult to make a clear-cut mapping of the Meskhetian Turks living in Turkey. It is also very difficult to know their exact number due to the continuation of their migration.

Another point worth mentioning is that those who came to Turkey from Uzbekistan followed different paths and lived in different places for different periods of time. Concerning the migration of the Meskhetian Turks, it is possible to make the following classifications. First, we can classify the Meskhetian Turks who migrated from Uzbekistan into two: those who migrated before the Fergana events (mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, they migrated to Azerbaijan either directly or via Georgia), who constitute a small minority; and those who migrated as a result of the Fergana events. The second group, which constitutes the great majority, should again be divided into two: those who were living in Fergana; and those who were living in other places in Uzbekistan. This distinction is important because those who were living in Fergana were the real subjects of the pogrom and were evacuated to Russia by the Soviet government. However, those who were living in other places in Uzbekistan and who felt insecure left the country by their own means. This means that the first group did not have the possibility of choosing the place of migration, since they were evacuated by the state, whereas the second group had the opportunity to choose where to migrate to. The chosen place was Azerbaijan in most cases.

In the case of Bursa, the most common path is Fergana via the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan to Turkey. These are mostly the Meskhetian Turks who were living in Fergana and were evacuated to the Russian Federation. In some cases, their stay in Russia was limited to two or three months but, in other cases, the stay was longer (two or three years). Most of them moved from the Russian Federation to Azerbaijan. Their stay in Azerbaijan was a peaceful and long one, varying from three to seven years. Azerbaijan was considered as a land whose inhabitants, despite sectarian differences, had the same religion and spoke the same language. During interviews, all the Meskhetian Turks stressed that



both the Azeri government and the Azeri people helped them a lot during and after the Soviet period. The second path is from places in Uzbekistan (other than Fergana) via the Russian Federation (such as Kabardino-Balkaria and Chechnya) to Turkey. The third path is from places in Uzbekistan (other than Fergana) via Azerbaijan to Turkey. In that case, the stay in Azerbaijan varied from three to seven years. The fourth path is from Uzbekistan via Central Asia (Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan) to Turkey. Finally, the fifth path is from Uzbekistan via Georgia and Azerbaijan to Turkey. Some of them hoped to return to their original villages in Georgia but, once expelled from Georgia, they found refuge in Azerbaijan and then came to Turkey. The research has shown that some of the Meskhetian Turks had different experiences of migration following the Fergana events but the ones explained above constitute the experiences of a large majority of the Fergana victims (Aydingün, 2001:161–166).

In the case of Antalya, one path is direct migration from Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan to Turkey. A small group, lacking new passports from the Russian Federation, were sent by plane by the Russian authorities directly to Antalya with old Soviet passports. Those Meskhetian Turks were the victims of the Fergana massacre who were taken to the Russian Federation. Furthermore, a small part of those who lived in Bursa decided to move to Antalya as a result of the new economic conditions following the economic crises mentioned above. It is also important to note that those who wanted to leave Russia and Krasnodar in particular for Turkey by their own means faced important difficulties due to a lack of valid passports and other legal obstacles caused by local authorities. Some of the Meskhetian Turks became stateless as a result of the discriminatory policies of the Krasnodar authorities and the lack of a valid passport on the part of those who were sent to Turkey constituted an important problem in the process of the legalisation of their stay in Turkey (see also the chapter by Osipov in this volume).

In the case of Igdir, some Meskhetian Turk families from the post-Soviet republics were selected by Meskhetian Turk associations and the Turkish embassies and invited to settle in this north-eastern city.

To show the variety of migration paths is essential in explaining the difficulties, discriminations and human rights violations encountered by the Meskhetian Turks and, more importantly, their degree of dispersion. Because of the constant migration situation and economic difficulties, it is not possible to find even a single Meskhetian Turk family that does not face a unification problem and their dispersion is often not limited only to two different places. Some Meskhetian Turks explained that their family members are living in at

least four or five different places. A 50-year-old female teacher who lived in Uzbekistan and who left after the Fergana events said in Bursa:

My kids tell me that they will send me to pilgrimage to Mecca when they make enough money. I told them 'if one day you have enough money, send me to Uzbekistan to see my sister whom I haven't seen in ten years; send me to Russia to see my daughter whom I haven't seen in four years; send me to Azerbaijan to see my brother whom I haven't seen in five years. This will be my pilgrimage'.

The poem she wrote explains clearly her pain caused by this dispersion:<sup>3</sup>

Hasret bükrtü belimi	Longing has rendered me helpless
Çok özledim ailemi	I ache to see my family
Kaybettim ben kendimi	I have lost I
Hep şaşırđım yolumu	I have lost my way
Ak kanatlı kuş olsaydım	Were I a bird with white wings
Gelip sizi bir görseydım	Were I to come and see you
Özlemime bir doysaydım	Were I to trench my longing
Somra rahat ben ölseydım	I would die in peace
Gelen vurdu giden vurdu	I have been hurt by so many for so long
Felek de hep bizi buldu	Why does misfortune not leave me
Acı son ayrılık oldu	The bitter end came with this exile
Acısı bağrımı deldi	Its pain runs through my heart
Ak kanatlı kuş olsaydım	Were I a bird with white wings
Gelip sizi bir görseydım	Were I to come and see you
Özlemime bir doysaydım	Were I to trench my longing
Somra rahat ben ölseydım	I would die in peace
Anam, babam, bacı, kardeş	Mother, father, sister, brother
Yanar bağrım ateş ateş	My heart is aflame
Ah ne zordur canım kardeş	It is so hard dear brother
Her gün ölmek yavaş yavaş	To die a little bit everyday

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Çiğdem Balım for the translation of this poem.

Alk kanatlı kuş olsaydım	Were I a bird with white wings
Gelip sızı bir görseydim	Were I to come and see you
Özlemime bir doysaydım	Were I to trench my longing
Sonra rahat ben işeydim	I would die in peace

The possibility of a settlement programme recently offered by the U.S. government to Meskhetian Turks living in Krasnodar is not welcomed by the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, who often mentioned that the programme is used by the local authorities to force them to migrate to the U.S. by aggravating the already existing problems and discriminatory policies of the local authorities. All the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey stressed that they are against the settlement programme to the U.S. and that this is going to contribute to the further dispersion of the community and worsen the conditions of the ones living in Krasnodar. Interviewees have also stressed that, in their view, the Armenian population of Krasnodar is supporting the exodus of the Turks from the region.

A Meskhetian Turk from Rostov was visiting Bursa and wanted to see and film the situation of the Meskhetian Turks in Bursa in order to show it to those in Russia (Rostov and Krasnodar). He said:

My in-laws are in Krasnodar and they want to go to the U.S. and take my two daughters with them. I said to them that they should send my daughters back. I do not want them to go to the U.S. This means that I will never see them again. I have already some family members dispersed in Uzbekistan, Russia and Azerbaijan. That's enough. (Male, 48).

The history of the dispersion of the Meskhetian Turks is quite long and it should be analysed according to three different periods of history. The first period covers the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, during which some of the Meskhetian Turks, formerly subjects of the Ottoman Empire and later citizens of Georgia, escaped from Georgia to Turkey. This was the beginning of the dispersion process. The second period started with their deportation in 1944. This time, Meskhetian Turk families were dispersed to different places in the three Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. From 1944 until 1956, because of the Special Settlement Regime, Meskhetian Turks were not allowed freedom of travel. Thus, some of them did not even have the opportunity to visit their relatives who were deported to other places and, most of the time, they did not even know where they were living. After 1956, with the elimination

of the Special Settlement Regime, some of the families migrated to Azerbaijan, both because they felt close to the Azeris and because they wanted to be close to their homeland. The dispersion of families took on a dramatic dimension in 1989 with the events at Fergana. This can be considered as the beginning of the third period of the history of dispersion. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Meskhetian Turks found their relatives in Turkey and the opportunity to visit each other after around 50 or 60 years. Some of them started to migrate to Turkey, mainly to Bursa, as already mentioned. However, the Fergana events and the dissolution of the Soviet Union caused new separations and once more dispersed the families concerned. Recently, their migration from Krasnodar to the U.S. is perceived by all the interviewees as a move that deepens the already existing dispersion and that is why it is defined as the third deportation after the ones of 1944 and 1989.

### **Functional Integration: Education, Health Care and Employment**

As already mentioned, although almost half of the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey have completed the necessary procedures and obtained Turkish citizenship, more than half of them still do not have Turkish citizenship and this lack causes important problems in major areas such as education, social security and employment.

#### *Education*

Meskhetian Turk migrants in Bursa and Antalya argued that they had a relatively prosperous life when they were living in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), referring to the socio-economic conditions of the Soviet regime. An important number of them are university graduates. Among them, there are doctors, engineers and teachers. The rest of the Meskhetian Turk population are secondary school graduates. It is possible to find primary school graduates only among the very old because their education was interrupted due to the closing of Turkish schools, deportation and the hard conditions of the early deportation years.

In Bursa, their level of education is quite high compared to the education level of the local population living in their neighbourhoods, which are mostly inhabited by poorly-educated low income families. A similar interpretation can

be made for Antalya too but it is important to stress that the level of education of the local population living in their neighbourhoods in Antalya is relatively higher compared to the education level of locals in Bursa because, in Antalya, the Meskhetian Turk migrants live in middle-class neighbourhoods. In the case of İğdir, however, their level of education is much higher than that of the locals.

One important problem that Meskhetian Turks face in Turkey is the enrolment of children in school. This problem is real both for those who have a six month residence permit and those without residence permits. Those who have Turkish citizenship do not face any problem and are not subjected to any discrimination. Most Meskhetian Turks mentioned that the locals in general and the teachers in particular are sympathetic to them because of their bitter experiences during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. However, children without citizenship have to have one year residence permits to be enrolled in school. The enrolment of the children of those having no residence permit or having it only for six months depends on the informal practices of the teachers and school directors. Although most of the time school directors and teachers welcome these children to schools, they hesitate because of controls and they are afraid of violating the existing laws, which were recently changed in the process of the desired integration into the European Union.

During interviews carried out with officials of the local National Education Directorates both in Antalya and Bursa, it was said that there is no problem regarding the equivalence of foreign diplomas (this includes only primary and secondary education because the equivalence of university degrees is under the responsibility of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK)). After validation of their diplomas, children can go to school (those who have no diploma can continue to school based on a declaration of the parents about the grade level. Children can start from one previous grade if their parents desire so as to overcome language difficulties).

For the validation of diplomas, the Cultural Affairs Directorate used to ask for a translation with a notary approval. Considering that this was very expensive for the Meskhetian Turks, they included Russian speaking teachers to the Equivalence Commission and, as a result of this policy, there was no need for approved translation of diplomas from the notary. It is also stressed that citizenship is not required for validation of diplomas.

In Antalya, the Director of the National Education Directorate said that any child has the right to education and that he is for the enrolment of all children in school with or without residence permits because Turkey has signed the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. His argument was that the enrolment

problems of these children should be sorted out, since an international agreement should be honoured above all national laws and decrees.

The Meskhetian Turks interviewed argued that the education of their children is the most important problem waiting for a solution. They said that they are vexed at being treated as foreigners under the laws in their homeland and that they came to Turkey for the future of their children. They stress that they are proud that these children are in the end getting education in their mother tongue in their motherland. A 31-year-old woman from Kazakhstan said during an interview in Antalya:

When I went to school with my daughter, when I listened to her while singing the national anthem, I cried. When I first listened to the oath the children were taking, saying 'I am a Turk and I am proud of that', I was deeply touched and I was all the time saying to my daughter 'please repeat once more'.

School teachers interviewed in both Antalya and Bursa said that Meskhetian Turk children are, most of the time, very hard-working, disciplined, polite and respectful to their teachers. During the fieldwork, it was observed that most children became honour students and that Meskhetian Turks accord importance to the education of both girls and boys, arguing that they are all facing difficulties in regard to the future of their children. One exceptional example should be given at this point to emphasise the psychological difficulties that children face. One of the respondents said in Bursa:

One day, all the parents of the Meskhetian Turk children were called to the school. We were surprised and did not know the reason. When we went there the director said that Meskhetian children are hard working and successful but sometimes quarrelsome. Even girls are sometimes kicking other children. One of the parents said, 'we were deported from Fergana to Russia. From Russia we went to Azerbaijan. Everywhere these kids were excluded because of being Turk. When they hear any minor comment about themselves they start fighting to defend themselves. That is the reason for their aggressiveness.' The director replied in such a nice way and he said, 'tell your children not to quarrel because you are now in Turkey and no one can exclude you' (Female, 38).

The case of İğdir is a bit different compared to Bursa and Antalya because the Meskhetian Turk children have citizenship and do not face any problems in

regard to enrolment in schools. In Iğdır, the Meskhetian Turks do not live in the city centre but rather on the outskirts of the city, about 5km outside the city towards the town of Doğubeyazıt. A primary school (grades 1 to 8) was built specifically for the Meskhetian Turk children right across from their apartment buildings. However, the number of Meskhetian Turk children who go to that school decreased recently due to the increasing number of Kurdish students attending the school. The Meskhetian Turks interviewed stressed that they prefer to send their children to a school in the city centre, which is quite far from their apartment buildings. They argued that they were, in a way, obliged to take such a decision because of the increasing number of Kurdish students who rarely speak Turkish. They mentioned that this situation had a deep impact on the quality of education because the teachers were obliged to spend much of their time and energy on making them learn Turkish. They have also stressed that tensions existed between Meskhetian Turkish and Kurdish children who attend this school. During the interviews carried out in Iğdır, Meskhetian Turks said that the education of their children is very important for them and that they do not hesitate in spending money on their education.

Regarding the children without residence permits, one has to say that some of them are accepted to school but that their education is illegal because a residence permit is required for legal enrolment in school. In cases where Meskhetian Turk children are informally accepted to schools, legal problems remain unsolved because, even if they finish primary or secondary education, they cannot receive diplomas, which means that they cannot continue their education or go to university until they get the residence permit.

It is also necessary to point out that Turkey offers a quota each year to Meskhetian Turk youths in the university entrance exam. These youths take the *Türk Cumhuriyetleri Sınavı* (TCS - Exam for Turkish Republics) in Turkish Republics if they want to get a scholarship from the Turkish government or *Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı* (YÖS, Exam for Foreign Students) if they want to study under their own financial resources. Each year, Turkey welcomes a number of students from Turkish republics and some of these children receive a scholarship from the Turkish government. A special quota is reserved for Meskhetian Turk students who obtain the possibility of getting a university education in Turkey. One of the students, who was successful in the TCS exam that she took in Bishkek first came to Bursa TÖMER (Turkish Language Teaching Centre) to learn Turkish. Then she moved to Ankara to study in one of the better universities in Turkey. Her family lives in Antalya. During the interview in Antalya she said:

In Kyrgyzstan, there was a quota of 20 for Meskhetian Turk students. I was successful and I preferred to come to Turkey, although I was accepted in two universities in Bishkek. One reason is the declining quality of education in Kyrgyzstan and the difficulty of finding a job. If I was Kyrgyz or Russian, things would be different. But as a Turk you haven't much choice... The other reason is that I was feeling myself excluded there. I was influenced by my personal experiences and the ones of my parents and grand parents. Very bad things happened. All my family members went through very bad experiences. (Female, 19).

Students like this informant receive residence permits without any problem. They have access to free dormitories, do not pay any tuition fees, have access to free health care and receive a scholarship from the Turkish government.

#### *Health Care*

Meskhetian Turks without Turkish citizenship work in a clandestine way and do not have any health insurance. Among those who lack citizenship, some have both residence and work permits, some have only residence permits and others lack both permits. Most of those who came after 31 July 2002 do not have the work permit. However, all of them are working and only a small minority have health insurance.

Regarding health care, Meskhetian Turks in Bursa stressed that, until 2002, it was possible to get a consignment to the hospital. This was provided by the governorship, especially for urgent cases and operations. Furthermore, the local authorities of the places where the Meskhetian Turk migrants live are sensitive to this issue and they try to solve some of their problems within the limits of their responsibility. In the case of Bursa, for example, where the majority of the migrants live, the governorship provided, until 2002, official consignments to the hospitals whenever necessary in order to solve the health problems of the Meskhetian Turks, despite the fact that they have no legal entitlement to such a consignment. It is also important to mention that Meskhetian Turk doctors help their community members in cases where they can intervene. Poor locals with no social security have access to a green card, which provides free access to hospitals. Meskhetian Turks may also acquire this green card. However, citizenship is required to get it. Those who have no free access to health care are obliged to pay the expenses themselves, which most of the time they cannot afford.

As they lack Turkish citizenship and their social rights are not transferred to Turkey from the former Soviet republics, most migrants will not have any social security for their old age. The vast majority of the middle-aged or elderly have neither health insurance nor a retirement pension. Currently, all of them are dependent on their children since they cannot receive their retirement salary, due to the fact that they no longer live in the former Soviet Union. Thus, their future is not guaranteed and their survival depends on the family and communal solidarity. The young population working without any social security will also face the same problem and be dependent on their children in the future. Meskhetian Turks have stressed that it was possible to transfer their retirement pensions only from Kyrgyzstan, thanks to the agreement made between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan. Some also mentioned that it was possible to give a procurator to someone who can take the pension to their place or to pick it up when they go there. However, since travel costs are too expensive and the pensions so low, they just leave their pensions or give them to their kin who still live in the former Soviet republics.

### *Employment*

Meskhetian Turk migrants who are obliged to work for the survival of their families are sometimes illegal workers and, thus, are, in some cases, exploited by employers who are aware of the fact that migrants do not have the right to work and sue. One of the consequences of illegal work is low wages. However, it should be noted that, although low paid, not all migrants have the chance to find a regular job. Some of them are irregular workers, meaning that they do not have a regular income. An important number of Meskhetian Turk migrants in Bursa work in temporary jobs, such as construction and house painting. Some work as translators for companies that trade with the former Soviet republics. Women are generally employed in the textile industry. Whether in regular or irregular jobs, some of the migrants declared that certain employers do not pay their wages on time or do not pay at all. In Antalya, they mostly work in tourism agencies or as vendors in shops.

It is essential to point out the downward mobility that Meskhetian Turks are experiencing in Turkey, especially in Bursa where the level of income is much lower compared to Antalya. The majority of Meskhetian Turks in both cities do not work in accordance with their professions and thus work in irregular and unskilled jobs. It is possible to come across former surgeons who are working as painters or former engineers who work in shops as vendors. It is quite striking

to note that these professionals see their future being in Turkey despite this downward mobility. Those migrants who are educated cannot compete for highly qualified jobs because they must work illegally and the validation of university degrees is quite complicated. Only those who were settled by the state to Iğdır received relatively easily the equivalence of their university diplomas. During a discussion in the Meskhetian Turk Federation in Bursa, a Meskhetian Turk dentist who first settled to Iğdır and then moved to Bursa said:

The situation of the doctors is very difficult. I have a friend. He was a very good surgeon but he cannot practice his profession and, to survive, he is now painting houses with his hands, with which he was once doing important operations. I work as a dentist in the hospital. One day he came and said, 'please give me an opportunity and let me sew a cut. A small cut is enough, I started to lose my talent and forget everything.' It was really very painful to see him in such a situation. (Male, 43).

Mostly, there are at least two persons working in every household, and this is how they manage to survive. In some cases, they have no health insurance despite possessing Turkish citizenship. This is a general problem and is still very widespread in the Turkish informal sector. In that sense, it should not be considered as specific to the case of Meskhetian Turks but rather as a structural problem.

Regarding the economic situation of the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey, it is possible to argue that those in Antalya are relatively better off than those in Bursa due to the high level of their revenues earned from the tourism sector, although they only work seasonally. Housing conditions are relatively better in Antalya compared to Bursa. Personal wealth such as computers, DVD players, cell phones and satellite television are again more widespread in Antalya compared to Bursa. The number of Meskhetian Turks who bought apartments is higher in Antalya. It is also important to note that the large majority of Meskhetian Turks are employed in the private sector. A few of them, particularly among the legal settlers who came to Iğdır, are employed in the public sector in accordance with their professions.

### Relations with the Local Population

Despite all the difficulties, Meskhetian Turks have integrated well into the new environment in Turkey. The difficulties faced in the process of acquiring citizenship do not have a negative effect on the integration of migrants into life in Turkey. They are more than welcomed by the locals and have gained their love and sympathy. Among the reasons for this welcoming attitude, we can enumerate their painful life stories, the fact that they are known as a hard-working and honest community and the help they give to their low income neighbours (who sometimes lack health insurance) according to their education (mainly nurses and doctors).

Arguing that Meskhetian Turks are well integrated and enumerating the legal problems they face may seem contradictory. To clarify the issue of integration (especially in the case of Turkey, where informal networks and practices are widespread) the significance of informal practices and networks should be pointed out. Within that perspective, it is very important to emphasise that Meskhetian Turks in Turkey are not socially isolated. They enjoy informal support both from officials and the locals. In that sense, as opposed to their experiences in some of places they lived following the deportation, there is no psychological isolation, since they are in close contact with their neighbours. The nature of informal support varies, including tolerance of their illegal stay and health support by the officials; financial support or support in kind by their neighbours; and a general sympathy on the part of host society members due to their bitter life stories. Thus, it is important to argue that they do participate in the social community despite the existence of severe legal problems. What is necessary to emphasise at this point, is the significance of the informal attitude towards and approval of their migration by the host society and the feeling of belonging to Turkey possessed by the Meskhetian Turks. The attitude of the local population in Bursa and Antalya plays a significant role in facilitating the integration of the Meskhetian Turks into Turkey. Besides, it can be argued that the unofficial welcoming attitude of the government plays a significant role too. Despite the difficulties in regard to the issue of citizenship, Meskhetian Turks are perceived as national refugees by the authorities and, thus, are not expatriated. Neither residential nor occupational segregation can be said to reinforce ethnic boundaries when they compare themselves with the Turks of Turkey. Although concentrated in certain neighbourhoods, Meskhetian Turks often have close relations with their neighbours and people in the work place as they share a similar culture with them.

### Social Networks

The role of family is vital for Meskhetian Turks in general and is specifically so for the transmission of religious and moral education and also for the reproduction of national consciousness. Family solidarity was developed as the main source for surmounting the difficulties of the Soviet regime; together with group solidarity, this continues similarly in Turkey because those networks are essential for surmounting the difficulties they face in Turkey too. The family network and village ties that were essential for the community during the exile years are still important in Turkey. The only difference is that, as pointed out by the Meskhetian Turks themselves, in Turkey they do not use these networks to protect their identity, since they are in their homeland. Nowadays, these are rather used for surmounting economic difficulties. The extended family network is the core unit in the organisation of domestic matters such as marriage, burial and mutual help. The grandparents are powerful in the family and they transmit to their children their traditions and teach them how to behave properly (respect for the elderly, religion and customs).

One major characteristic of the Meskhetian Turk family is that the youngest boy of the family always lives with his parents. This tradition continues also in Turkey. It is also important to note that economic conditions require its continuation. The other characteristic is the continuation of the authority of parents even after marriage. Some changes are taking place, although are not very widespread at the moment. One of the interviewees in Antalya said:

When we were living in Merke, my husband did not have any power at home. When I needed permission for doing something, I needed to ask my mother-in-law, who was supposed to ask my father-in-law. My husband was 22 years old and he could not make any decision because it was his parents who were deciding about everything. Here in Turkey things have started to change. I have two daughters-in-law. I tell them to ask their husbands and not me. If they were in Kazakhstan, they had to ask me and not their husbands. This is not correct. (Female, 48).

During the fieldwork, it was observed that, due to chain migration and close community ties, Meskhetian Turks have guests in their houses all the time who either come to see the conditions and opportunities in Turkey, or to work seasonally, as is common in Antalya. In that sense, an important part of the family

revenues are spent on securing the survival of the visiting kin members. It is important to note that solidarity is not limited to kin. Meskhetian Turks said that, in cases of serious illnesses, death or any other grave problem, the community comes together and everyone helps according to his economic situation. In fact, it is possible to categorise the solidarity network into three: family solidarity (can also be transnational); group or communal solidarity (in the place where they live); and solidarity with locals.

Transnational solidarity is important because one of the aims of most families is to help their relatives to come to Turkey or to help them where they live. Those who are able send money to their relatives. The other way is to host the young members of kin who seasonally come to Turkey, which is especially common in Antalya. These youths stay in their relatives' houses and work to make some money. They sometimes do this for a better life in places where they live but, most of the time, it is the first step taken towards moving to Turkey. Those who are satisfied with their jobs in Turkey and convinced that they can take care of their families go back and take them to Turkey.

An important number of the Meskhetian Turks stressed that they came to Turkey with a very small amount of money and the large part of that money was spent on rent. They explained that they came only with a few belongings and left all their furniture behind and that, in most cases, their neighbours in Turkey gave them furniture and other things that they urgently needed since they could not afford these needs. Some stressed that the owners of their houses did not ask for rent until they found a job and earned some money. Some others have said that they pay a small amount of rent because the owners of their apartments are very touched by their bitter experiences. They also mentioned that, especially during Ramadan, they receive food and clothing help in addition to the meat of sacrificed animals.

During the 'exile years', as they are called by the interviewees themselves, Meskhetian Turks were mostly isolated from the host society cultures. In Bursa and Antalya, however, they do not feel the need to live in isolation from other groups. They have close relations especially with the people from Artvin, Posof, Kars and Erzurum, which are the closest regions of Turkey to their villages in Georgia. They emphasise that they speak the same Turkish and that they have the same traditions and customs. They feel so close to them that they sometimes say that they are from Erzurum or Posof just to avoid long explanations about the history of the Meskhetian Turks. They correctly point out that people in general do not have much information about the Meskhetian Turks and that they sometimes feel tired of explaining their stories.

During the interviews carried out with members of the host society, it was observed that, despite the lack of detailed information on the history of Meskhetian Turks, they are quite positively perceived and welcomed. Host society members were especially surprised to see these educated people working in such unqualified jobs. Meskhetian Turks were most of the time defined as hard-working, very polite and very loyal to their traditions and customs. They were in a way representative of the old Turkish family life and traditions, frozen during the entire Soviet era as people did not experience the Turkish modernisation. The number of guests that the Meskhetian Turks receive and the number of family members living in one household were again surprising for the host society members. An interviewee in Bursa made an interesting comment and compared the case of the Meskhetian Turks with the Turks from Bulgaria and said:

Locals in Bursa have lived the experience of Bulgarian Turks. They were not very positively perceived by the locals because they were immediately given houses and they competed with locals in the labour market. Since they were very hard-working people, employers hired Bulgarian Turks. They had also very powerful organisations. Thus, some people did not like them very much. However, the case of the Meskhetian Turks is quite different. They came from very different places in an unorganised way and in small numbers. They had nothing and they were not organised. Their situation was perceived as a very touching one by the locals who liked and helped them very much. (Male, 29).

Considering ethnic relations in Turkey, the only tension can be said to exist with the Kurdish population both in Bursa and Antalya. A few examples were given about certain events that took place in schools and at work. Those events concerned a few Kurdish students who beat the Meskhetian Turk students in school and a few Kurdish employers who did not pay wages to Meskhetian Turks they employed after making them work for months. These tensions happened among children or youth, in cases where both sides had strongly expressed their ethnic identities. These events were normalised with increasing interaction, the intervention of the elderly community members in general and teachers at schools.

### Political Participation and Discourses of Power among the Meskhetian Turks

Political participation among Meskhetian Turks is limited to the voting of those who have acquired Turkish citizenship. They are so concerned with settlement and survival problems that none of the interviewed stressed any interest in political participation other than voting, which is considered a citizenship duty. Although there are not any legal or informal obstacles to the participation of the Meskhetian Turks who have citizenship into politics, it is also important to stress that active political participation requires financial resources, which is, in practice, an important obstacle for most Turkish citizens.

Regarding the political parties that Meskhetian Turks sympathise with, we can say that an important number of them vote for the Nationalist Action Party (MHP). However, it is difficult to argue that they constitute a population that can influence local politics, considering the size of the two major cities in which they live. Some of them are sympathetic to the Motherland Party (ANAP) because the former president of Turkey and founder of the Motherland Party, Turgut Özal, was the one who welcomed Meskhetian Turks to Turkey and asked for the preparation of Law No. 3835, the law on the settlement of the Meskhetian Turks to Turkey. Some interviewees stressed that if President Özal had lived longer (he died in 1993), the problems of all the Meskhetian Turks would have been sorted out.

Regarding power relations within the Meskhetian Turk community, it can be said that elderly members are very much respected. The Meskhetian Turks' associations also play a significant role in the community despite the critiques that are directed at them. It is also important to note that their number has increased since the early 1990s and their power has decreased as a result of the fragmentation that started to emerge in 2000. In the early 1990s, the role of associations in general and the one in Bursa in particular was quite important, since they were playing the role of a bridge between the community and official bodies. The main responsibility of the associations is the preparation of the lists of the Meskhetian Turks who came to Turkey. This list, which was presented to the local police departments, was very important because it was perceived as a list that includes only and all the names of the Meskhetian Turks who are staying illegally. This list was essential because those who were on the list were receiving residence permits, without paying the regular fees for this application. Together with the residence permits they were also receiving work permits from the police department.

During interviews carried out in the police department of Bursa, one of the commissars said that Meskhetian Turks are, in fact, in a very privileged position because they are the only group that received work permit, together with residence permits. He stressed that even the Bulgarian Turks received work permits much later than their arrival. He also mentioned that the Meskhetian Turks without the residence permit are not expatriated. However, he said that, due to changes in the law on citizenship, they recently have been giving residence permits only for six months and added:

This does not mean that it will continue this way. Everything depends on the decrees that we receive. I think that this is a temporary situation. These problems will be sorted out over time.

Regarding the settlement of Meskhetian Turks in Bursa before the fragmentation of the associations, it is important to mention that when the migrants came to Bursa, they all used to go first to the association in order to be registered and to obtain the identity card of the association, which is very similar to the Turkish birth certificate. This first association, *Ahıska Türkleri Kiltür ve Dayanışma Derneği* (Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture), was founded in 1995 in Bursa. In fact, this card is not legal but it is accepted by the regional authorities, who are tolerant towards the Meskhetian Turks. After being registered, they try to rent a house not far from the association and the other migrants. Although not legal, the identity cards given by the association have a certain 'illegal validity' in the eyes of the local authorities, including mainly the police, since there is an unwritten agreement between the association and the local authorities for their distribution. That is to say that the association registers the illegal migrants with great fastidiousness by asking them information about their parents and their original villages. Since people mostly know each other by their villages or families, they easily understand whether the person is really a Meskhetian Turk or not. As the local identities of kin and village are still very strong, this method of registration works very well.

The Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture was also the major place to go for the Meskhetian Turk men (especially the elderly) and a source of information for new migrants, a place where people come to receive information about citizenship and other measures taken by the authorities in relation to their stay in Turkey. This association also served as a job centre. Local employers who were aware of the illegal stay of the Meskhetian Turks and who knew that they are hard-working and trustworthy people contacted the association when



they were in need of labour. The association informed the migrants and arranged the agreement. For a long time, the most important association was the Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture in Bursa, where the large majority of the Meskhetian Turk migrants were living. Within time, other associations were founded in other cities where Meskhetian Turks settled and they played similar roles.

Since 2000, however, there has been a fragmentation and there are two different associations having branches in different cities and two federations. Currently, there are two associations and one federation in Bursa. The associations are The Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture, founded in 1995, and The Association of Migrant Ahıska Turks for Mutual Help and Solidarity, founded in 2000 in Ankara and 2001 in Bursa. The federation in Bursa is entitled The Federation of the Ahıska Turk Associations; the Ahıska Turk Association for Solidarity and Culture together with its branches are affiliated with this federation, whereas The Association of Migrant Ahıska Turks for Mutual Help and Solidarity together with its branches is affiliated with the federation situated in Ankara entitled The International Federation of Ahıska Turk Associations. Although the associations are very important for Meskhetian Turks in general, this fragmented structure is not welcomed and most interviewees have complained about the functioning and efficiency of these associations. Similar views were also pointed out by the Meskhetian Turks who work in associations. One of them stressed in Bursa:

This year there were two different meetings for the anniversary of the deportation because there are two federations. I can say that there are two different associations in almost all the cities where Ahıska Turks live. This fragmented structure is not good for the community. The official bodies are also confused about this fragmentation and they do not know which ones represent the community and which ones should be addressed. (Male, 44).

Based on the interviews carried out with Meskhetian Turks, one can say that an important number of Meskhetian Turks either do not know much about the activities of the associations or complain about their functioning, arguing that: unity is essential; they should work better for the future of the community; and they should be led by people that everybody can trust. The lack of a charismatic and powerful leader is pointed out by most members of the community. There are also Meskhetian Turks—both men and women—who are willing to be active and do something for the community however, some of them indicated that they

do not want to work with the existing associations. In fact, the fieldwork data indicate, that the existing associations are generally not representative of the entire Meskhetian Turk population. A financial inability to respond to the needs and demands of community members, and the weakness of mechanisms of information and communication, such as regularly published bulletins or journals aimed at informing the community, are both factors that contribute to the gap between the community and the members of the associations. Furthermore, the attitude and the personalities of the persons involved in associations alienate certain members of the community. One of the interviewees, a doctor from Bıřkek, said:

I wanted to help my people in some way and I said to myself that I can receive and help them for free in the association once a week. But when I heard the names of those who work in the association, I gave up the idea of working in the association. (Female, 42).

During the interviews carried out in Meskhetian Turk organisations, Meskhetian Turks pointed out that people in Turkey do not know much about their history. They also argued that the Turkish media does not pay much attention to the Meskhetian Turk issue and that the lack of information is an important obstacle to sorting out their problems in Turkey. The leader of the Association of Migrant Ahıska Turks for Mutual Help and Solidarity said that Meskhetian Turks should be organised and that communication among different associations is essential. He said that they are in touch with the associations in Central Asia. He also said that the association in Kyrgyzstan became a member of their federation and that the one in Kazakhstan will join them soon. He stressed that their major aim is to be in contact with all associations aimed at voicing the problems of Meskhetian Turks both at the national and international levels. According to him, of all the former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan is the only one that took the problems of Meskhetian Turks into serious consideration and welcomed them. He also mentioned that they will bring the issue to the European Court of Human Rights if possible.

It is also important to mention that there are a number of publications published by the Ahıska Turks' Education, Culture and Social Solidarity Association in Istanbul entitled *Ahıska* and by the International Federation of Ahıska Turk Associations in Ankara (published four times a year, entitled *Bizim Ahıska* (Our Ahıska)). There are other publications such as books or booklets sponsored sometimes by state institutions or by private sponsors. As far as the

fieldwork data is concerned, the community in general is not very much aware of these publications. Furthermore, a regularly published bulletin or newspaper aimed at establishing communication between associations and the community at large does not exist.

People are mostly interested in acquiring citizenship and also in getting news from their relatives living in post-Soviet societies. News about relatives or the community in general are provided through visitors, new migrants and phone calls. Some Meskhetian Turks, especially in Antalya, have satellite television and they watch Russian channels to follow recent political developments and try to understand their probable impacts on the Meskhetian Turks.

### Identity and Religion

Before their deportation, Meskhetian Turks—a Sunni Muslim community—used to live in Meskheti as a closed community. In fact, their identity was largely based on religion. At the time, ethnic peculiarities were of minor importance and, very often, religious differentiation was more fundamental than ethnic or national differences. Local identities of kin, village, class and religion were the dominant sources of identity. National consciousness was only beginning to take shape but this does not mean that they had no ethnic consciousness.

Research data indicate that, with the deportation, both ethnic identity and religious identity developed and became reshaped hand in hand. Religious and ethnic identities overlapped and reinforced one another. In other words, they strengthened each other during the exile years, since Meskhetian Turks were deported because they were either Turkish or Turkish speaking. This fact entailed the emergence and strengthening of the ethnic identity of 'Meskhetian Turk'. As a result of the influence of external factors, such as deportation and discriminatory policies against Meskhetian Turks, their ethnic consciousness prevailed to a certain extent over their religious identity. However, their religious identity did not lose its importance but survived on an ethnic basis. It can be said that the significance of religious and ethnic identities differ depending on the context and the audiences encountered. Although both are important elements of identity, ethnicity, strengthened by Soviet social organisation, can be said to have a dominant character. It is also necessary to note that, despite the important role of ethnic identification, especially in the organisation of private life, living among Muslims such as in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Azerbaijan has always been considered as a positive thing by all the Meskhetian Turk interviewees.

However, although the other Muslim groups were defined as close communities, at least closer than Russians even when there are sectarian differences, they were also perceived as different. The following quotation constitutes a good example. A 50-year-old woman from Uzbekistan interviewed in Bursa said:

Following the Fergana events, we were taken to Russia. My father-in-law wanted to go to Azerbaijan. Russians were saying 'are you crazy? Why do you want to leave Russia for Azerbaijan? There is war over there with Armenians.' We said that it is better to live on a Muslim land. It was quite strange for us to live in Russia. We were afraid of disappearing.

The same woman also said at another point in the interview that she likes the Russian language very much and that she has respect for the Russian people. She also told of the difficulties they encountered in Azerbaijan. All this information shows the complicated nature of identity and the dynamism of its different layers.

During the interviews, Meskhetian Turks argued, on the one hand, how the Soviet regime constituted an obstacle to the practice of all religions but they also stressed that their practice of Islam was quite different from that of the people of Central Asia. They also pointed out the differences between Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks, defending the idea that Uzbeks are more religious than the Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs. The way the people of Central Asia practice Islam has been an element of distinction between them and the Meskhetian Turks during the Soviet period. While discussing the post-Soviet period, however, Meskhetian Turks stressed the religious revival that is taking place in Central Asia. They argued that, after becoming independent states, the Central Asian nations began to pay more attention to their culture, including religion.

Meskhetian Turks argued that, despite all the difficulties of the Soviet regime, they managed to preserve their traditional religious practices. Although certain celebrations, such as birthdays, were celebrated by the Meskhetian Turks in a secular and modern way, funerals, religious feasts and Ramadan were all practiced in a traditional way. The migrants in Bursa and Antalya explained how they had fasted during Ramadan and prayed despite the restrictions the Soviet regime placed on religion. They also stressed that they had practiced religious forms of funerals despite the encouragement to use secular forms. The elderly in particular told of how they had engaged in secret prayer, fasting and reading of the Koran. Sons or grandsons would stay at the door to check whether someone was coming or not to warn their parents or grandparents. They also argued that most of the time, they were obliged to carry out circumcision ceremonies in secret.

During the interviews, most of the Meskhetian Turks defined themselves as more religious than Central Asian people. Those interviewed in Bursa defined the Uzbeks, especially those living in cities, as more secular than themselves, who preserved their religion, customs and language. Again, in Bursa, Meskhetian Turk migrants argued that, except for the very recent radical Islamist movements, Uzbeks do not observe Islam very strictly. They said that they drink a lot, intermarry with Russians and do not frequently go to mosques. A similar interpretation was made for Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs by the Meskhetian Turks who came to Turkey from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

While noting the differences in the observation of Islam between Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs and themselves both during and after the Soviet period, Meskhetian Turks stressed that they do not see any difference between themselves and the locals in Bursa and Antalya. However, some of the elderly argued that local Turks are a bit westernised and that the Meskhetian Turks are more conservative. On the other hand, the large majority of the Meskhetian Turks interviewed in Bursa and Antalya—and especially the elderly—pointed out that they enjoy going to the mosques with the locals. They claim that they are happy to observe their religion freely without any restriction and also mention that they are happy to see mosques everywhere in Turkey.

Meskhetian Turk migrants also stressed that religious education in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan only took place within the family. They said that there are special Koran courses in Turkey that their children may attend. They argued that, in Central Asia, the children did not go to the mosque and that, in Turkey, they are pleased to see their children joining them in mosques. In Turkey, religion became for Meskhetian Turks a common cultural component with members of the host society. However, some Meskhetian Turks argued that they were not very much aware of sectarian differences that exist in Turkey. Women, especially, said that they did not know about the fundamentalist movements and that they were surprised to see young women who cover their heads and wear long clothes, arguing that this way of getting dressed did not exist in the Turkish culture before.

It is important to point out that ethnic identification can be understood through the consideration of external factors such as state policies and internal factors such as group characteristics. The Meskhetian Turk identity was the outcome of a complex interplay of historical processes, inter-ethnic relations and specific group characteristics. One main characteristic is the significance of Turkishness, which also indicates the active role that group characteristics may play in ethnic identification and that certain values may resist all types of discrimination and

pressure. For instance, Meskhetian Turks resisted the naming policies of the Soviet regime. They rejected the names imposed by the Soviet state, such as 'Azeri', 'Meskhetian' and 'Meskhs', through an active declaration of their Turkishness. They even eschewed a tactical acceptance aimed at obtaining the possibility of return to their home villages in Georgia. This emphasis on Turkishness is an important factor that facilitates their integration in Turkey, especially when combined with the mostly welcoming attitude of the host society.

### Home/Homeland and Negotiation of Belonging

Since the end of the special settlement regime to which the Meskhetian Turks were subjected from their deportation in 1944 until 1956, they expressed their desire to return to their villages in Georgia. Over decades, they made several appeals to Moscow for their repatriation. These appeals were accelerated in 1989 following the pogrom in Fergana. The official responses to these demands were limited to vague promises and Georgia declared itself unprepared to receive the Meskhetian Turks. Meskhetian Turks considered both their original villages in Georgia and Turkey as their homelands, both being formerly part of the Ottoman Empire. This can be seen in their demands for repatriation addressed to the Soviet authorities. They asked for the right to migrate to Turkey in the event of the rejection of their repatriation to their original villages in Georgia. However, they had no information about Turkey.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the dual nature of the homeland for the Meskhetian Turks, which remained latent due to lack of communication with Turkey during the Soviet regime, became apparent. After the collapse, at a time when Georgia had to begin to consider their rehabilitation, their demands for migration to Georgia lost momentum due to the possibility of migration to Turkey. Meskhetian Turks began to get information about Turkey and some of them found relatives whom they had not seen for more than fifty years, if at all. With migration to Turkey increasing, return to Georgia ceased to be an alternative in the eyes of Meskhetian Turks. However, it is important to note that some middle-age and especially young Meskhetian Turks defined the Central Asian republics where they were born and raised as a kind of homeland. Although they were very conscious about the villages of their ancestors in Georgia or determined to migrate to Turkey, they stressed the significance of the birth place, the place where they had spent their whole lives. While, for some of them, the homeland was very clearly defined, for some others it was confusing. However, in both

cases, the interviewees mostly expressed the view that their home villages are in their hearts but that they see their future in Turkey. One of them interviewed in Antalya said:

We had no problem of homeland until the deportation. But, once deported, the problem of homeland emerged. My homeland can be Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan or Turkey. My mother was born in Georgia. I was born in Uzbekistan. These children were born in Azerbaijan and some of them were born here in Turkey. Which one would you choose as homeland if you were in our place? The one at the very beginning, where my mother was born? Or one of the others? (Female, 55).

A 74-year-old man said:

The only thing that I wanted was to set my foot on Turkish land, because we suffered a lot everywhere in the Soviet Union. I thank my God that we came to the land of our ancestors. Here, no one can tell us anything. This is the last stop; this is our place to die.

While discussing the issue of homeland, the 74-year-old man evokes a saying: “*gezmeğe yad ilke, gymeğe keten, dimeğe vatan* [a foreign country is to visit, linen is to wear and the homeland is to die]” and he added: “Turkey is our homeland, our villages were given to the Soviet government... Despite everything, our real homeland, our country; our place to die is Turkey.”

Their determination to live in Turkey despite the difficulties was sometimes very impressive. It was also very interesting to observe during certain interviews the utilisation of concepts such as *vatan* (homeland) and *menleket* (country—refers to the birth place in Turkish). While *vatan* referred to the mythical ancestral homeland, which is Turkey; *menleket* referred to the birth place, which was usually one of the Central Asian republics. It was possible to come across the use of the words *menleket sekeri* to refer to the sweets brought as gifts by those coming from Central Asia. The use of the term *menleket* contributes to an understanding of the complexity of the term homeland in the case of the Meskhetian Turks. A 48-year-old man born in Kazakhstan and who has lived in Antalya for 8 years said:

My father used to say that Turkey is our homeland. I think so too. My children also think so. We lived in Azerbaijan but I did not consider it as homeland. Kazakhstan can be my *menleket* because it is my birth place. I was born there, grown up there and ate their bread. You should not forget this. But homeland is something else. My roots are from Turkey.

A doctor in Antalya told her story in the following way:

I was offered a job in Japan in 1998 as a result of the studies that I was carrying out. They invited me twice and I did not go. My father said ‘if you go to Japan, you will not come back. Go to Turkey. Turkey is our homeland. If you go there, I can come too.’ They could not come because I have so many difficulties here. I do not want them to come and suffer... I came to Turkey, because the children were at the age of going to school. (Female, 42).

It is also important to note that the Meskhetian Turks who first decided to come to Turkey were those deported from Uzbekistan, who later found refuge in Azerbaijan and pushed in a way to Turkey partly because of the economic difficulties they faced and partly because they felt like guests in Central Asia. However, it is not possible to argue that the migration to Turkey was a rational choice for better conditions in all cases. While some Meskhetian Turks managed to obtain better conditions, most of them experience important economic problems and live in bad conditions compared with their conditions in Central Asia.

None of the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey defined Georgia as their homeland. Although some of them, especially the elderly, considered their particular villages in Georgia as their homeland, none of them stressed that they would go to Georgia if the necessary conditions were provided. In a way, they differentiated their original villages from Georgia. For most of them, their home villages have a symbolic meaning as an imagined land and a tool for self-identification rather than a real place to go.

According to my opinion, our homeland is Turkey. Wherever we live outside Turkey, we shall be like a patch. We can't live in Ahnska because it is a Georgian land. Even if we live there for 50 or 100 years, they will destroy everything again as they have already done several times. (Female, 41).

In the case of some young Meskhetian Turks who grew up in big cities in Central Asia, the perception of homeland and self-identification becomes more complex.

One example is that of a 19-year-old girl born and raised in Bishkek who later came to Turkey for her university education. She said:

I was born and grew up in Kyrgyzstan and now I live here. My family are now in Antalya. To be frank, I feel that I neither belong to Turkey nor to Kyrgyzstan. I was born there, that is why I feel close to that place that I am used to. But I felt insecure and disturbed. I felt that I was excluded. I was also influenced by what my parents and grandparents told me. Based on the films, on the stories told during my childhood and our culture, I always felt close to Turkey and I wanted to come here. When I tell to my Turkish friends in Turkey, when they told me stories told by their grand parents, I realise that I am familiar with all of these. I feel close to people in Turkey and I feel that I belong here. So, I say myself that I should not be confused about this. In the past, I was ashamed of saying that I am Turkish but now I am not. However, here, I still do not feel fully in my home.

Although all the Meskhetian Turks in Bursa and Antalya who we interviewed declared Meskheti (and Javakheti) to be their place of origin, they see Turkey as their homeland and not as a new place of exile where they should live since they have no other choice. The Meskhetian Turks in Bursa and Antalya consider themselves to be in their homeland, as opposed to the fact that they felt themselves to be homeless and insecure while living in the former Soviet republics.

Their villages in Georgia were defined as a sacred place that they believe they cannot go back to in the foreseeable future. However, they continue to identify themselves with their original villages even if they have never seen them. The other homeland, Turkey, is the land of their forefathers, the land where the bones of their grandparents lie, as is argued by some of the migrants. Turkey is also the country where currently some of their relatives live. During the years of exile, they were discriminated against because of their Turkishness, despite being mostly born and raised in ex-Soviet republics. It is this-exile situation that has contributed to the strengthening of their Turkishness and that is why they see their future in Turkey, where, they believe, they will not be discriminated against. However, in some cases, attachment to the birth place is also emphasised. Attachment to the places not only where they were born but also to places where they were educated, where they have friends, neighbours, jobs and, briefly, the places where they spent a whole life until quite recently. A 50-year-old woman from Uzbekistan who was obliged to migrate to Russia following the Fergana events said:

I was a teacher. Uzbeks considered me like a mother. I took care of all children like their mother. Even after their graduation, they came to visit me. They celebrated my birthdays together. I was so happy. I can say that my homeland is Uzbekistan because I was born there. But I knew from my parents that our homeland is in Georgia.

She shared one of her poems during the interview, a poem which expresses a desire to go to the homeland but also a feeling of belongingness to nowhere:<sup>4</sup>

Kanadımı kırıldılar, yurduumu yıktılar  
Beni benden çaldılar, yurttan yurda saldılar  
Sanki göçmen kuş gibi dolaştım oba eli  
Tanrım bana yardım et, bilsin artık bu hasret  
Tanrım bana yardım et, beni vatana ilet

They broke my wings, destroyed my homeland  
They stole 'I' from me, sent from land to land  
Like a migrant bird I travelled the nomad land  
Help me Oh Lord, let this longing cease  
Help me Oh Lord, deliver me to my homeland

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the main objective of most Meskhetian Turks and of their organisations (the Provisional Organising Committee founded in 1964 was later renamed *Vatan* (officially in 1990)), was to return to their villages in Georgia. Nowadays, however, although the objectives of Meskhetian Turks and their organisations vary, an important number of Meskhetian Turks aim to migrate to Turkey to have a secure life. A 69-year-old man interviewed in Bursa said:

We had a good life in Uzbekistan until 1989. Then, things changed. We were not living in bad conditions in Azerbaijan either. However, I am afraid of nothing in Turkey. Turkey is my homeland, its people are my people. I came to my Turkey to live under my flag. Our ancestors died for these lands... Here, I go out without being afraid. No one says 'why did you come here?'

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Cigdem Balın for the translation of this poem.

Attachment to Georgia is especially true for the elderly who lived their childhood in Meskheti. One of the interviewees in Bursa said how much he wanted to go back to his own village in Georgia. He said:

My father was always saying 'my dear daughter, please take me to my homeland'. He was calling his nephew and telling him 'I will sell the cow and pay the gas, please take me to Ahnska with your car'. He died saying 'Ahnska... Ahnska' and without seeing it.

### Conclusion

It is very important to note that the Meskhetian Turk population experienced two deportations (that of 1944 and that of 1989), which entailed important forced population movements causing significant socio-economic problems and sufferings. As a result of these two deportations, Meskhetian Turks became a mobile community scattered in different post-Soviet societies and Turkey. More recently, the dispersion intensified as a result of their migration to the U.S.

As opposed to the Soviet nationality policy that aimed to achieve the fusion of nations in general and the fusion of the Meskhetian Turks into some Muslim communities in particular, Meskhetian Turks mostly preserved their ethnic and cultural identity during the exile years and did not give up the idea of returning either to their villages in Georgia or to Turkey. During the deportation years—and often receiving unequal treatment from Soviet and later from post-Soviet authorities—the Meskhetian Turks used ethnic solidarity as a fundamental means of survival. Thus, solidarity based on a strong ethnic identification was, in a way, a reflexive response to an urgent need, as they have been subjected to severe discrimination. They developed informal channels of resistance against the official myths and pressures of the Soviet regime. Thus, they have developed a high level of social solidarity, which still exists in Turkey due to the continuation of migration and economic difficulties.

Meskhetian Turks interviewed in Turkey defined their situation in Soviet and post-Soviet lands as an 'exile' situation and none of them said that they want to return despite the difficulties they face in Turkey. They all used the term homeland for Turkey and explained that Turkey is their ancestral homeland, although more than half of them lack Turkish citizenship. They all argued that, while living in Soviet and post-Soviet republics, they were discriminated against because of their Turkishness and the only place that they see a secure future is Turkey.

They all expressed the view that it is not easy to understand how it is important 'to sleep at night without being afraid of being attacked'. However, this does not contradict the fact that a certain attachment to the countries in which they were born continues to exist to varying degrees, depending on their personal experiences. Although Meskhetian Turks declared that they are happy to be in their homeland, meaning Turkey, they still face important problems pending solutions. Thus, it may be functional to conclude by pointing out some of the hot issues and problems raised by the Meskhetian Turks in Turkey.

The major problem is the issue of citizenship: more than 20,000 people still lack citizenship. Considering the existing laws in Turkey, one can clearly argue that the necessary laws to sort out the citizenship of the Meskhetian Turks exist. These are the necessary laws, Law No. 2510 and Law No. 3835. However, the application of these laws requires a political decision. A more immediate solution is necessary regarding the issue of residence and work permits, which should be given immediately to those who do not possess them. As already pointed out, the latest decree to give residence permits was promulgated in October 2005. Those who came after that date are staying illegally. This problem can be sorted out by the promulgation of a new decree by the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs or by a law. Furthermore, the applications of the Meskhetian Turks for Turkish citizenship could be accelerated in order to legalise their stay and solve most of their economic and social problems. The lack of interest of the AKP government combined with the fragmentation of Meskhetian Turk movement in Turkey contribute, on the one hand, to a weakening of the dialogue between the Meskhetian Turks and government officials and, on the other hand, to an increase in the sufferings of the Meskhetian Turk immigrants. Thus, both the Turkish government and the Meskhetian Turk organisations need to carry out more active and efficient policies for the well being of the community.

The second problem regards the validation of diplomas. Although there is no problem at the level of primary and secondary education diplomas, the equivalence process for university diplomas is a long and difficult one. Meskhetian Turks ask of the Turkish government to take the issue of equivalence into serious consideration. They all suffer from not being able to practice their professions and they consequently experience an important downward mobility. This is especially true and painful for those who have advanced degrees. They argue that, in certain cases, they have to pass exams, they face language difficulties and they thus ask for other solutions.

The third problem is the enrolment of children lacking residence permits in schools. It is possible to overcome this problem by giving priority to the

Declaration of Children's Rights that Turkey has signed. It is also important to remember that recently the Turkish Parliament has made a constitutional change (Article 90 of the Constitution of the Turkish Republic reformulated on 7 May 2004) that demands the application of international agreements that Turkey has signed in cases of their contradiction with national laws regarding basic rights and freedoms.

The fourth important issue is related to housing. Coming from the Soviet system, the possession of a house is vital for Meskhetian Turks. Renting a house is considered to be a kind of humiliation and loss of status. All the Meskhetian Turks complained about increasing rents and ask for credit to buy houses. All of them stressed that they are capable of paying back the credits because they already pay a large amount of money as rent.

As a final remark, a general comment emphasised by all Meskhetian Turks about their current conditions and the human rights dimension of their case is worth mentioning. They all asked for the restoration of their rights from Georgia. They said that they want to obtain the right to return to their villages in southern Georgia even if they do not return. They have also asked for the restoration of their rights from the Central Asian republics in which they lived, covering issues like the transfer of their retirement salaries. They stressed that international organisations have to consider their case and be mobilised. They also invited the related countries and international organisations to be sensitive about the violation of their basic human rights, especially in places like Krasnodar. These views can be best explained with a quotation by a retired Meskhetian who said:

There are international organisations dealing with human rights violations. We are in exile since more than 60 years but no one cares about us. We took only 80kg with us when we left our villages in Georgia. All our belongings and properties belong to Georgians now. If I had money, I could buy anything I want in Turkey. Georgia did not pay anything for our properties. We worked 45 years in Uzbekistan, they did not give anything. We don't even have a retirement salary. We do not want from their pocket. We want the compensation of our work and properties that we were obliged to leave in different places we lived. (Male, 68).

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