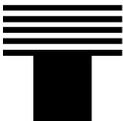


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Reflections on Transnational Minorities and Human Rights: Meskhetians and Hemshins in Georgia and Krasnodar*

INTRODUCTION. Far from being an abstraction, the fate of minorities has decisive consequences for the future of human rights in post-Soviet space. From the on-going Second Chechen war to attacks on religious sectarians in Georgia, the problems of minorities occupy center-stage in the difficult transition to civil society underway in the former Soviet Union. No less urgent are the dilemmas faced by the transnational minorities of the Pontus and Southern Georgia, victims of arguably the longest and most tragic deportation of the Soviet era: Meskhetians and Hemshins. At the time of writing, Meskhetians and Hemshins are subject to wide-ranging human rights violations and ethnic discrimination encompassing statelessness, forced expulsion, and non-rehabilitation. The time of our conference coincides with the year anniversary of major setbacks in the struggle of these two deported peoples to recover from the legacy of deportation as well as to survive in their current homes. Just over a year ago, on March 18, 2002, the Governor of Krasnodar krai, Aleksandr Tkachev pronounced his now notorious speech. Speaking at a conference on the problems of migration, he proposed the creation of "filtration camps" throughout the territory to detain and deport illegal migrants who have non-Slavic surnames, called for the enforced deportation of the Meskhetian population by way of charter flights to Tashkent, Uzbekistan.¹ Responding to the governor's calls and new legislative acts banning Meskhetians from renting land, Cossack groups have begun forcibly expelling Meskhetians in the Krymsk and Abinsk districts for their alleged "criminal activities." The situation has become so dire that the United States is currently considering granting refugee status to the stateless Meskhetians and Hemshin populations of Krasnodar krai. Across the border, the Republic of Georgia has repeatedly failed in its responsibility before the Council of Europe to facilitate a repatriation of the deported Meskhetian and Hemshin populations, which the country was obligated to have begun by April 2002.

 THESE two regions are laboratories for the study of minority rights and the development of nationalism. This essay will aim to illuminate the unique vulnerability of transnational groups in the context of Soviet nationality policy and nexus between their complex identity and human rights dilemmas. First, it is important to review the basic history of the Meskhetians and Hemshins, and the effect Soviet nationality policy had on their identity formation. This analysis provides a framework for viewing the

current discourses of discrimination aimed against Meskhetians and Hemshins in Krasnodar and Georgia. Finally, relying on material collected from recent field expeditions to Hemshin and Meskhetian settlements throughout Georgia and Krasnodar, it is possible to explore the nature of transnational identity of Meskhetians and Hemshins in their present circumstances, and the potential of multicultural approaches to aid in promoting their human rights and civic integration.²

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PART I

Meskhethians and Hemshins: Basic Data

As a multitude of articles, studies, declarations, and anthropological fieldwork has revealed, the issues of identity, origins, and cultural affiliations are still highly disputed among scholars, as well as Meskhethians and Hemshins themselves. Ideological motivations started to influence the formation of Meskhethian identity even before deportation. In the post-Soviet context, which is mainly characterized by the general tendency to reinforce the independence of the new states, essentially in building national identities, the dispute over Meskhethian and Hemshin origins remains highly political.

The issue of naming transnational minorities is highly contentious and inevitably connected to ethno-political identities. Therefore, as a working definition, I will use the term adopted during the OSCE consultations on the Meskhethian issue in March 1999, “the population deported from the Meskhethian region in 1944.”³ Rather than referring to the Meskhethians’ ethnic origins, this formulation emphasizes their geographical origin at the moment of deportation and the experience of deportation itself, which the Meskhethians indisputably have in common. In abbreviated form, I will employ the term “Meskhethians.” Here it is important to point out that the legal formulation decided upon in Vienna includes other peoples deported from the ‘Meskhethian region’ such as Kurds and Hemshins. Deciding on a “proper” identification for the Hemshins is equally confusing, although considerably less politicized. The main variations in the denomination of the group are rooted in language. In Turkish, they are *Hemshinli*, in Russian *Khemshily*, and in Armenian *Homshietsi*.

Today, experts estimate the total number of Meskhethians to be somewhere in between 200,000 and 400,000 people. These estimates originate either from surveys taken by Meskhethian associations or from the 1989 Soviet census. These sources are unfortunately not reliable for a variety of reasons. Ethnic classification in the Soviet Union was often arbitrary, especially in relation to transnational groups such as the Meskhethians, Hemshins, Pontic Greeks, and Crimean Tatars. Today the total amount of Hemshins living in post-Soviet space is somewhere between 3,000-5,000 people.

One’s nationality, as becomes apparent in the case of these groups, often differed from one’s self-consciousness. Deportation also marked a shift in self-identification. Meskhethians who had been

previously classified as Georgian Muslims, and later as Azeris, became “Turks.” The Soviet census mentioned 207,512 “Turks” living in the Soviet Union in 1989. However, many Meskhethians were still registered as Azeri (*Azerbaidzhantsy*) or even as Uzbeks or Kyrgyz. In addition, the Muslim population of Meskhethi and the Black Sea Coast was quite diverse. About 5% were small, distinct ethnic groups: Kurds, Hemshins, Karapapakhs (semi-nomadic Azeris), Tarakama (or Terekeme), and Turkish-speaking Ajars. Other estimates provided by Meskhethian associations state that there are 300,000 to 380,000 Meskhethians living throughout the former Soviet Union and Turkey. Most likely, the true figure lies somewhere in between could be rounded to about 300,000 people.

Contemporary scholarship agrees that Meskhethians are Sunni Muslims and speak one of the Eastern Anatolian dialects of the Turkish language. Their dialect also contains some Kartvelian (Georgian) vocabulary elements.⁴ Variations of this Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish were a *lingua franca* for many peoples living in the Pontus, Meskhethia, and surrounding regions including Armenians, Greeks, Meskhethians, Georgian Catholics, Tarakama, Karapapakhs, and others. In their mode of living, customs, and folklore, one sees many Pan-Caucasian features, but also a dominant Turkish influence. Until 1944, Meskhethians lived in 212 villages located in the southern districts of Akhaltsikhe, Adigeni, Aspinza, Akhalkalaki, Bogdanovka along the Turkish border.

At the present time, the vast majority of researchers consider Hemshins to be descendants of Islamicized Hamshen Armenians⁵ of the Black Sea coast who preserved the Western Armenian language after their forced conversion into Islam by Turkic invaders somewhere between 300 and 500 years ago. Their language, known as Homshetsma, is closest to the Hamshen dialect of Western Armenian.

Changing Borders, Changing Empires, Changing Names⁶

As a part of the Caucasus, the Meskhethian region, and the Pontus have the typical characteristics of an imperial border: disputed by several empires throughout the centuries, situated on trade and migration routes and subject to the influence of different cultures. The regions of Ajara and Meskhethia has been shared by Georgian and Turkish tribes for centuries. Unfortunately, most authors rarely account for this cultural complexity. In adhering to over-

simplified dichotomies of ethnicity, scholars from the “Georgian,” “Turkish,” and “Armenian” camps serve to compartmentalize identity, drawing black-and-white conclusions. One must note that in the former Soviet Union, as well as in Turkey, a primordialist vision of the nation still prevails, which presents ethnicity an objective core. According to this idea, one cannot inhabit two or more cultural and ethnic spaces at one time. If one is a Turk, one is by default not a Georgian. If one is an Armenian, one cannot be a Turk. Identities are mutually exclusive, finite, and timeless. However, to speak of strictly defined Georgian, Turkish, or Armenian identity before the twentieth century is an implausible and unhelpful concept, which becomes especially clear when dealing with transnational groups such as Meskhetians or Hemshins. Both of these populations, by virtue of continual displacement, speak more than three or four languages (Turkish, Armenian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Georgian, Russian, and others), and possess highly complicated conceptions of self. Primordial conceptions dominant among many scholars, and most common people in the post-Soviet region, fly in the face of today’s more dominant constructivist paradigm, the idea that national identities and ethnicity are intellectual and social constructs.⁷

For the Georgian sources, the Ottoman invasion of 1578 is the beginning of the Turkish presence and of Islam in Meskhetia. The local population is described as a Georgian tribe, the *Meskhs*. The *Meskhs* occupy a hallowed place in the Georgian national pantheon, as defenders of the Georgian nation against Turkic invaders. Most Georgian and Russian scholars attribute the presence of Muslim Turkish-speaking people in the region to the Meskhs’ conversion to Islam and a gradual turkicization that occurred under Ottoman rule.⁸ Authors that stress the ‘Georgianness’ of the Meskhetians, or the ‘Armenianness’ of the Hemshins, speak of the Turkish cultural or linguistic elements as alien, forced, and superficial.⁹ This thesis came into being in the late nineteenth and had currency among the intelligentsia of the Russian empire in Moscow and Tbilisi and was mobilized at a time when the re-integration of Meskhetia into Tiflis province was considered a noble cause of the Russian empire. The paradigmatic text for advancing this thesis appeared in 1891 in a Moscow journal of ethnography.¹⁰ According to Alexander Ossipov, that source provides more extrapolations than convincing analyses.¹¹ Nevertheless, the Georgian argument dominated Soviet and Western scholarly interpretations for the next century on the question of ethno-genesis, despite the Soviet official policy to classify of the Meskhetians as Turks, Azeris, and Tatars during and after deportation.

Contrary to the Georgian-oriented studies, Turkish, Azeri, and pro-Turkish scholars argue that the Turkish and Turkic presence in southern Georgia stretches back well into the pre-Ottoman period.¹² In the 11th-12th centuries, the Oguz, a Turkic tribe, which came from Kazakhstan and Central Asia, regularly attacked Georgia. The Georgian King David IV decided to call in their main rival, the Kipchak Turkic tribe, to settle along the border and defend his territory. Several thousand Kipchak settled in eastern and southeastern Georgia, including Meskhetia, in the 12th century. According to this version, the Georgian King converted them to Christianity to ascertain their loyalty. Alongside the Georgians, their presence was firmly established in Samtskhe-Saatabago (Meskhetia-Javakhetia). The region even received its independence in 1469 under the rule of a Kipchak atabek, Sarkis II. In 1578, Samtskhe-Saatabago became part of the pashalæk of Çaldêr, an administrative entity in the Ottoman Empire. The main city was Akhaltsikhe, which is called *Ahiska* by the Turks, hence the terms *Ahiska* and *Ahiska Turks* in the Turkish literature, instead of *Meskhetia* and *Meskhetians* or *Meskhetian Turks*.

As scholars such as Alexander Ossipov have noted, the reality of origins lies somewhere in between the Georgian and Turkish theses. The formation of the Meskhetian community “was a result of both Muslim inflow (migration of Turks, Turkmen, Karapapakhs, Kurds, Lezgins) and the assimilation of Georgians to Islam.”¹³ The acceptance of Islam by the population was probably the main change in Meskhetia during the Ottoman period. Under Ottoman law, only Muslims were allowed to own land, thus some Turks and Georgians were incited to convert to Islam in order to preserve their property rights and social privileges. However, the Ottoman policy of assimilation was probably not systematic enough to acculturate the Georgian elements, as the comparison between the populations in Meskhetia and Ajara reveals. Both regions were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire up until the end of the nineteenth century, but contrary to the population of Meskhetia, Ajars preserved their Georgian language, despite the conversion to Islam.¹⁴ For some scholars, the divergent Ajar and Meskhetian experiences with language support the Turkish thesis of ethno-genesis.¹⁵ It is also important to recognize that pockets of Turkish-speaking communities appeared among the Ajars, as well as Javakheti Armenians.

The Russian conquest the Caucasus had certainly as much influence over the population of Meskheti as Ottoman rule. In 1801 the Russian Empire annexed Eastern Georgia (Kartli-Kakheti). Progressively moving westward, Meskhetia was

incorporated into the Russian empire in 1829. The southern two thirds of Meskhetia, the Kars and Ardahan districts, were won from Ottoman Turkey in 1878 but then returned to Ataturk after World War I. In 1830, Armenians who had fought alongside the Russians, mainly from Erzerum, were resettled in Javakheti, and Russian religious schismatics, the Dukhobors, came shortly thereafter.

The 1897 Russian census of the region revealed that the population remained highly diversified. The Turkish speaking population (Turks, Georgian Muslims, Karapapakhs, Anatolian Turks) made up 31-35% of the total population in the districts of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, Armenians (Apostolic and Catholic) – 5%, Kurds –2%. In 1926, the Armenians still comprised the majority (42%), especially in the Akhalkalaki district (73%), while the Turkic-speaking people represented 40% and the Georgians 18%. The classification of the Meskhetians oscillated between *Sunni Georgian*, *Turks*, *Ottoman Turks*, and *Tatars*.

In 1935-36, the Soviet authorities began to register them as *Azerbaizhantsy* and ordered that schooling for the Meskhetians be held in Azeri, a related Turkic language.¹⁶ As Ossipov has pointed out, these oscillations resulted not only from the unsystematic official approach regarding the Meskhetians, but probably also from the unsteady conception of identity of the group themselves.¹⁷ For example, in Meskhetia, the Muslim population was referred to as *yerlɔ*, literally “the locals” in Turkish, which underlined their indigenous status as opposed to Russians or Armenians. In addition, among Georgian peasants, all Turks whether Azeri, Turkish, or Turkish-speaking Meskhetian, the term *Tatar*, *tatrebi* in Georgian, was used. This confirms a point made by Ossipov that “in general, the Meskhetians’ self-identification in the concrete moment depended on with whom the person was talking...”¹⁸

By the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire was about to be divided among the victorious powers, while the Russian empire was engulfed in revolution. Control over the large territories of the empire, especially in the border regions such as Ajara and Meskhetia, was largely transferred to local rule. In May 1918 Georgia proclaimed its independence and the local authorities began implementing a policy of Georgianization in the southern territories. In response, encouraged by the advance of Ottoman troops, groups of Muslims in Meskhetia, Ajara, and Nakhichevan proclaimed independence represented by the “National Council of the South Western Caucasus,” most likely propped up by Turkey. This semi-autonomous federation included the districts of Kars, Batumi, Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Sharur,

and Nakhichevan and moved for reunification with a decrepit Ottoman empire. In 1918, Meskhetia and Ajara were occupied by Ottoman troops and there was internecine strife between Muslim and Christian communities. At the same time, Georgian Menshevik and Armenian Dashnak forces also clashed over control of this territory. While data from this period is scant, the ‘brutal behavior’ of the Muslim population towards Georgian Catholics and Armenians became a large component of the nationalist discourse against the “punished peoples” after deportation and in the post-Soviet period. In 1921, Meskhetia was divided between Ataturk and Lenin. According to the Treaty of Moscow signed on March 16, 1921, Turkey received back the Kars and Ardahan districts while the Soviet Union took possession of Ajara and the upper third of Meskhetian territory, which had been a part of the Russian Empire since 1829.

Soviet policy towards the Meskhetians and Hemshins did not help to build or reinforce a common Meskhetian identity. Contrary to the Abkhaz, the Ossetians, and the Ajars, no territory was nominally attributed to them within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Officially, the Soviet authorities adopted the idea defended by the former independent Georgian authorities that the Muslim population of Meskhetia was ethnically Georgian. However, the Turkish language was recognized by the local government and taught at all local schools. From 1926 to 1935, the Muslims in Meskhetia were referred to as *Tyurki* (Turkic people), which distinguished them from Azeris registered as *Turki* (Turkish people). After 1935, however, the designation of *Azeri* is applied. From 1938 until World War II, probably linked to Moscow’s limited sanctioning of nationalism to buttress the anti-Hitler campaign, a policy of Georgianization resumed. But in 1944, the Muslim Turkish-speaking population of Meskhetia, and the Kurds and Hemshins of Ajara were deported as “Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins,” although two thirds of the deportees were registered as *Azeris*.

Reviewing the Russian imperial and pre-deportation Soviet policy regarding the Muslims peoples that populated Ajara and Meskhetia, it becomes clear that there was no systematic approach regarding the imposed identification or self-identification of what was clearly a very heterogeneous population. Indeed, the experience of deportation was probably the most consolidating factor in the process of identity formation for both Hemshins and Meskhetians.

Identity Formation in Transnational Displacement

By 1944, Stalin’s vision of a world divided irremediably into different nationalities was exacerbated by a deep-seated paranoia and had already

resulted in the deportation of entire ethnic groups from the border areas of the Soviet Union beginning with collectivization in the late 1920s. From November 14, 1944 until December 1945, at least 100,000 Meskhetians were transported in inhumane conditions to Central Asia. Locked up in cattle trucks for one month, many did not survive the journey. In the words of Hemshin community leader Hasan Salih-Oghly: "At 4 am, four soldiers came into our house and said we had an hour to pack. We were not told where we would be sent. About 120 families were loaded into a freight train. We traveled 18 days and nights to Kyrgyzstan. Many died of typhoid. At each stop they would unload the dead."¹⁹ About 15,000 people died during the deportation and many thousands more from cold or hunger in the first years of deportation.

Surviving the trauma of displacement, the deported peoples were dispatched into 18 districts all over Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan²⁰ and forced to live under NKVD "special settlements' regimes"²¹ until 1956. People assigned to this system were deprived of their civic and political rights. Inmates had to register every month, or even every week, at a special NKVD office and were not entitled to travel anywhere outside their settlement.²² The local population was rather hostile to the newcomers, whom the NKVD labeled as dangerous people who had collaborated with the enemy. Neither schooling nor newspapers were provided in Turkish, and some Georgian names of the deportees were changed into Central Asian ones.

The assimilatory purpose of the special settlements' regime obviously failed. The extremely harsh regime to which the deported peoples were submitted until 1956 encouraged them to band together for physical and cultural survival. In this sense, the experience of deportation could be seen as a catalyst for identification as a separate and distinct people. Due to the practice of endogamy, there was very little intermarriage between the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, on the one hand, and the Meskhetians on the other, which further contributed to the internal consolidation of the groups. Linguistically, aside from a few small and dispersed Meskhetian communities in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, almost none of the Meskhetians or Hemshins assimilated. For Meskhetians, the language of intra-group communication remained their own Turkic dialect, while Homshetsma²³ remained the dominant tongue for Hemshins. For the Hemshins, now largely cut off from surrounding Armenian communities, any conception of the connection of their own language to Armenian became ever more distant.

During de-Stalinization, the *détente*, perestroika, and the final collapse of the Soviet Union,

the consciousness of these deported transnational groups was still critically wavering. This results mainly from the fact that the Meskhetian and Hemshin identity is a recent phenomenon. The lack of self-consciousness before the deportation was frustrated by the lack of a policy regarding their nationality in Soviet times, which favored confusion in the self-identification of these transnational groups. Following the experience of deportation, the Meskhetians followed three main patterns of self-identification, consistent with a transnational identity that wavered between Georgian and Turkish influence. Some consider Georgia as their homeland and identify with as ethnically Georgian, others see themselves as Turks and prefer to emigrate to Turkey, while a third group claims a specific Meskhetian identity, mainly Turkish in cultural terms, but attached to a land located in Georgia. The evolution of opportunities to achieve the 'homeland' project of returning to Meskhetia distinctly influenced the group self-consciousness. The pro-Turkish line was the most popular among the Meskhetians in the late 1960s, early 1970s and late 1980s, whereas the pro-Georgian one had most supporters in the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. One can consider that the Meskhetians' self-identification will continue to change as long as return to Meskhetia is not possible.

Outside Soviet Nationality Policy

Professional ethnographers and linguists played a fundamental role in determining ethnographic and administrative borders of the young USSR, and the case of the deported peoples was no different. Soviet ethno-territorial federalism institutionalized nationality as an individual's legal status,²⁴ and also favored the promotion of titular nationals in "their own republic." In 1932, all Soviet citizens received a Soviet internal passport mentioning name, place and time of birth, authorized domicile (*propiska*), and "nationality." Every Soviet citizen was born into a certain nationality and had it officially confirmed at the age of 16, which could never be changed afterwards.

The institutionalization of nationality in the former Soviet Union on the sub-state level, while at the same time doing nothing to promote nationality on a statewide level, had the result, when the Soviet Union collapsed, to leave ethno-nationally defined republics as the sole sources of legitimacy. "The Soviet nationality regime, with its distinctive and pervasive manner of institutionalizing nationhood and nationality, has transmitted to the successor states a set of deeply structured, and powerfully

conflicting, *expectations of belonging*. Successor state elites, with their deeply institutionalized sense of political ownership and entitlement, see the politics that bear the names of their respective nations — above all the territory and institutions, but also, with some ambivalence, the population as well — as “their own,” as belonging, in a fundamental sense, to them.”²⁵ Agreeing with this reasoning, minorities who are considered as aliens are often excluded from the new citizenry. The rights of those who are not recognized as part of the national community are limited by discriminatory practices, generating sometimes *de facto* statelessness. Even when the legislative acts guarantee the equality of all citizens (the latter usually defined as permanent residents at the time of independence in the citizenship laws of the former Soviet republics), nationalizing practices and policies directly contravene civic principles.

In this context and for several reasons, transnational minorities such as the Meskhetians and the Hemshins are an extremely vulnerable population. These groups were not supported as specific ethnic groups in the Soviet period. The teaching of Turkish (albeit Azeri Turkish) was stopped in 1938 and their official nationality varied arbitrarily between Azeris, Tatars, and Turks.

Not significant or distinct enough from Georgians (although Ajars apparently were) to receive their own titular territory, they endured progressive marginalization, while some Meskhetians and Hemshins were encouraged to Georgianize. Their deportation was indeed the only political measure asserting their cultural specificity: they were deported as Turks and for the very reason that they were culturally close to the Turks. The Kremlin consistently refuted the groups’ latent “Georgianness” or “Armenianness.” During de-Stalinization, ‘becoming Georgian’ would be closely associated with a kind of liberation, freedom, and salvation. (The pro-Georgian Meskhetian organization *Khsna* was certainly an incarnation of this idea.)

Soviet nationality policy toward the Meskhetians and Hemshins continues to have direct consequences on their present conflict of identity and on the attitude of the post-Soviet states regarding the issue. Soviet nationality policy has affected the way the Meskhetians and Hemshins perceive themselves as well as the way they are perceived by other people. On the ethno-national mental map of most of the post-Soviet elite, the Meskhetians do not exist as a national group. Stigmatized as a “punished people,” they are marginalized, distrusted by other people and perceived as second-class citizens. None of the successor states and titular nationalities feels responsible for protecting them; none consider

the Meskhetians a part of its national community. Unfortunately, the unclear stand of the Meskhetians themselves concerning their identity facilitates these states’ irresponsible attitudes. The remainder of this essay seeks to explore this unique vulnerability of transnational groups by using observations, personal interviews, and the current efforts of the local human right communities in Georgia and Krasnodar working with Meskhetians and Hemshins.

PART II

Comparing Anti-Meskhetian Hysterics in Georgia and Krasnodar

While the human rights challenges facing transnational minorities vary according to the group itself (visible Meskhetians, invisible Hemshins), regional context (Kuban, Javakheti, etc.), and the specific aspirations of the community (survival, repatriation, or simply, civic integration), it is possible to compare the discourse of otherness aimed at transnational groups all across post-Soviet space. Krasnodar krai and Georgia, especially, the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti (historic Meskhetia) are paradigmatic examples of this discourse of discrimination. As mentioned before, the situation with human rights, especially minority rights, in Georgia and Krasnodar krai over the past ten years has deteriorated dramatically.²⁶

While some of the most blatant abuses against non-Slavic migrants and minorities perpetrated by Cossack vigilantes and the local administration of Krasnodar krai Governor Aleksandr Tkachev are well-known, the story of the Meskhetian minority still living in Georgia is often overshadowed by other regional developments. One striking fact about the development of anti-Meskhetian hysteria in Georgia was the almost schizophrenic relationship of the Georgian intelligentsia, including the Georgian Helsinki movement, to the Meskhetian issue. At first, treating Meskhetians like a ‘limb torn off the Georgian national body,’ members of the intelligentsia such as Rtskhiladze and Gamsakhurdia who had fought through the 50, 60s, and 70s to return them to Georgia, radically turned against them, viewing them as foils of Moscow or Ankara sent to punish Georgia’s independence movement and to destroy Georgian statehood. This same paranoia is apparent in Krasnodar: “As analysts from the FSB Administration of Krasnodar krai reasonably believe, the Turkish secret services are attempting to turn the Meskhetian Turkish community into a ‘fifth column.’ Therefore, its activists were instructed to settle down in the Kuban and never leave it, which is what they are doing.”²⁷

After the Ferghana massacre, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and armed vigilantes violently deported hundreds of Meskhetian families from Western Georgia. Many of those expelled were newly arrived refugees from Ferghana who had moved to Georgia to be with relatives already settled there or those who simply aspired to return to the 'homeland.' In the summer and fall of 1989, whipping up hysteria, the vigilantes were armed with sticks, stones, and axes recruiting villagers. They set Meskhetian homes on fire. In some instances, Meskhetians were violently beaten, loaded onto pick-up trucks, and 'dropped-off' across the Georgian border. By 1990, the overwhelming majority of villages organized around the tea plantations where Meskhetians were living were liquidated. School directors expelled Meskhetian pupils, migration officials issued deportation decrees, and gangs were sent to rob, intimidate, and attack Meskhetian families in their homes late at night. Those who wanted to stay were told to immediately convert to Christianity: 'either you adopt Christianity by next Wednesday, or face immediate expulsion.'²⁸ Some villages fled collectively to Ukraine, some to Krasnodar, some to Vladimir, some to Azerbaijan, and others back to Central Asia. In the fall of 1989, Gamsakhurdia ordered 'Icarus' charter buses to drive Meskhetians from dozens of villages just beyond the borders of Georgia and leave them in Azerbaijan or Russia. Typical was the experience of the village of Akhalsheni, home to 329 Meskhetians, which was emptied completely by the end of 1991.²⁹ By the time of my visit in the summer of 2002, Naskirali and Ianeti were the *last* two compactly settled Meskhetian villages in Georgia, not counting small isolated groupings of two or three families in other parts of Imereti, Guria, and Ajara. While events in the Ferghana valley were widely publicized, there has been little recognition of the "second deportation" of Meskhetians from Georgia.

The discourse of discrimination against Meskhetians in Georgia is extremely similar to what is found in Krasnodar. Supported by academia, the mass media, and radical groups, the xenophobic view that Meskhetians (and Hemshins) are Muslim Turkic invaders sent to destroy and contaminate Georgian Orthodoxy and statehood is common to both. These ideas are often premised on the pseudo-scientific argument on the need to preserve an 'ethno-demographic balance.' In both Krasnodar and Georgia xenophobia discourses focus on the threat of high Muslim birth rates overtaking the Georgian and Russian population. A sexual deviance is also attributed to the Meskhetians in both contexts as Meskhetian men are accused of raping young

boys. The idea that these minorities are 'guests' (*gosti* in Russian, *stumrebi* in Georgian) is also at the core of nationalist thinking.

One of the single most zealous ideologues of anti-Meskhetian, and anti-minority xenophobia in Georgia today is Guram Sharadze, who from 1995 until 1998 headed the Parliamentary Committee for Migration and Compatriots. Still an entrenched hate-monger and prominent force in the parliament, Sharadze is aligned with the notorious ex-communicated priest, Father Basil Mkalashvili, the leading figure in the persecution of religious minorities in Georgia. (During my interview at Mr. Sharadze's office in August 2002, apparently assuming I did not understand Georgian, he interrupted our conversation to organize, by telephone, an attack on Jehovah's Witnesses in the town of Kaspi, just outside of the city of Gori.) Sharadze's arguments for preventing the repatriation of Meskhetians to Georgia — and expelling those now living in Georgia — are classic examples of the essentialist discourse one finds across post-Soviet space, and especially in relation to transnational minorities such as deported peoples, refugees, forced migrants, or internally displaced persons.

*Just look at Ianeti, where the Meskhetians live. That is a perfect example of a village where people don't speak a word of Georgian! They tell their children 'don't learn the Georgian language, you are Turks!' The Meskhetian parents do not want their children to integrate into Georgian society. They are not future citizens of Georgia. They are future citizens of the Turkish republic of Meskhetia!*³⁰

Sharadze's myths about the language of the Meskhetian minority echo the diatribes against Meskhetians in Krasnodar krai. If only he had known that every single Meskhetian I interviewed under the age of 20 in Georgia spoke with me exclusively in Georgian!

Almost Home: Meskhetian Settlements in Western Georgia

If one ventures farther into the debate over transnational identity, it is clear that the two or three possible orientations of ethnicity vying for support among the Meskhetians often obscure the reality of individual identity. The Meskhetian communities of Western Georgia offer interesting examples of how identity and the "homeland" project may develop over time and in relation to the level of the group's relative security. In addition, the experience of these Meskhetians in Georgia provides useful examples of the dynamics of the integration process for those who are repatriated. The experience of the "Geor-

gian” Meskhetians illuminate the vulnerability and fragility of identity that prevents many from speaking out about the human rights abuse they endure on a regular basis.

Nasakirali and Ianeti are the last two compact settlements of Meskhetians in Georgia and are made up mostly of the families belonging to *Khsna*. The majority of families arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the help of the Georgian intelligentsia and then First Secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze. These were men and women who risked everything to follow their dream of returning to Georgia.

*You could say that the core group of people you see here came illegally to Georgia in 1977. The KGB somehow let it go or did not catch it completely when they crossed the border from Kabardino-Balkaria [neighboring province in the Northern Caucasus]. The local Sovkhoz director in Nasakirali needed a work force and they came here to work on it. It was a tea plantation. For five years they were here illegally and even though people tried to force us to leave. The local KGB tried to get them to leave but they stayed. It was with the help of the Georgian intelligentsia that they managed to stay, such as Merab Kostava, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Bakradze. They supported us and thanks to the humanity of Eduard Shevardnadze a decree was passed in 1981 allowing for the eventual return of the Meskhetians. I was personally in Kazakhstan and we worked very hard for this goal at this time.*³¹

A resident of Ianeti related to me how he was willing to give up financial stability, even physical safety, in order to be on his “own” soil:

*I was living first in Kazakhstan, then in Azerbaijan, and I was making a good living. But I always felt a hole in my life. Let me be poor and return to a country with so much instability but let it be my homeland, Georgia.*³²

But the homeland they came to has not been the paradise many expected. These Meskhetians lead extremely isolated lives from the rest of Georgian society and find themselves in an increasingly difficult socioeconomic position. There are severe water sanitation problems in their rural villages and there have been numerous problems with registering land ownership. The tea plantations they worked on during Soviet times have collapsed and now three-fourths of the male population is seasonally employed in Turkey for half the year. Many Meskhetians, especially women, remain without any type of legal status, and isolation from other Meskhetian communities around the former Soviet Union has taken its toll. For example, I interviewed one woman whose mother is now in Russia, and whose father is in Kyrgyzstan.

Despite the dramatic isolation of these Meskhetian settlements from the neighboring Gurian and Ajar settlements around them, the younger generation is well integrated into Georgian life. Georgian is the primary language of communication. Several students are currently enrolled in institutions of higher education in Tbilisi and Batumi.

The aspirations of these communities to resettle in Samtskhe-Javakheti (Meskhetia) have been tempered by the violence of the early 1990s. Many recognize that it may never be safe to return *en masse*.

Q: *Would you want to go back to Meskhetia now if you could?*

A: *If my family really wanted to we could risk it, but would I really want to risk having my children attacked?*³³

And more often than not, the question of identity was associated with fear of retribution rather than a deep commitment to cultural roots. The 400 Meskhetians³⁴ who managed to survive and stay in Georgia through the nationalism of the 1990s lived through the nightmare of identity. “I remember Gamsakhurdia’s men came to our village and asked each individual person ‘Are you a Turk or a Georgian?’ Those who answered they felt themselves to be Turks were put in cars and deported.³⁵” It is possible to see how classifying Meskhetians into either a pro-Georgian or pro-Turkish orientation would not only be counter-productive and inaccurate. In addition, such an approach can ignore the intense politicization and terror that has been associated with the question of identity for victims of nationalism.

Hemshin Voices: Denial of Fundamental Rights

After the Meskhetians, Hemshins are one of the most vulnerable groups in Krasnodar krai. Denied residence permits, most Hemshins, like Meskhetians, are stateless persons, which translates into abuses of almost every fundamental right. Hemshins and many other migrants do not have the right to vote or run for office, to buy or sell property, to be officially employed, to receive pensions or subsidies, medical care, to officially register marriages, or the birth of their children. To add insult to injury, ‘illegal migrants’ must pay taxes on property they do not own. The absence of citizenship and the *propiska* (although this term is officially no longer used) leads to comprehensive disenfranchisement of basic human rights. To name just a couple of examples, I asked a man about his experience being stopped regularly by the police (*militsia*) and traffic patrollers (*gaiishchniki*).

Q: *Do they stop you on the street?*

A: Yes. *They catch me as soon as I leave my house or when I am working at the market. They look at my temporary registration and tell me it has expired. I have to pay a fine or they'll detain me.*

Hemshins are most often detained for not having the proper registration or residence permit. There is of course a financial stimulus for police departments to engage in this practice. Fines now range from 3000 to 10,000 Russian Rubles (approximately \$100 to \$300 US dollars), many times more than an average monthly salary. Very often, the victim's family and friends must collect these "ransoms" from members of the community in order to have enough to acquire the victim's release.

*We are sitting ducks for the police (militia). Why don't they want to give us a propiska? Because then our tax money will go to the official government organs rather than straight into the pockets of these police officers that stop us.*³⁶

Hemshin women described to me the harassment they face trading in the market place:

*A police officer will come to check documents. We stand there alongside the Russian vendors but every time they only approach us. Every time they want to see our license (spravka) and if we don't have it they fine us. Can you really be expected to bring all your documents with you to work every day?*³⁷

Fortunately, by virtue of living in a district of Krasnodar krai³⁸ with less active Cossack formations, Hemshins have been touched less by the violence of vigilantes, although they have not escaped passport checks, known as "*proverka passportnogo rezhima*." These are routinely carried out in concert with law enforcement organs and often end in brutal beatings.

Minority among the Minority: Hemshins among Meskhetians and Armenians

Turning to a discussion of the nexus between human rights and ethnic identity in the context of the Hemshins, it is important to examine how ethnic discrimination manifested in normative legal acts and pervasive xenophobic discourse strips a community not only of basic human rights, but subverts its own conception of self-identity. Displacement and human rights abuse shape ideas about the past, the project of the "homeland", and a group's social and political affiliations. My fieldwork with several ethnic groups in Krasnodar krai demonstrated that moods and practices in mass media, academia, in-

dividual groups, and the regional authorities regarding minorities aim far beyond the comprehensive disenfranchisement of basic human rights for ethnic minorities but towards these groups' expulsion or cultural extinction. Very early in my fieldwork I also learned that studying ethnic minorities was an extremely suspect activity automatically classifying me as an "agent of western influence" in the eyes of local security organs.³⁹

The Hemshins' conversion to Islam — most likely brought on through direct contact with Turkic tribes about 300 to 500 years ago — effectively severed their ties with a common Armenian cultural continuum. Yet it was the very preservation of the Armenian language that distinguished them from Turks, making them a unique hybrid or even "trybrid." Surprisingly, other examples of ethnic groups of this type are found from the Black Sea-Pontus region, such as the Tskhalka Greeks who are Orthodox Christians but speak an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish or the Greek-speaking Muslims of Machki. Perhaps most interesting about the Hemshins is the combination of Turkish and Armenian identities in one ethnicity, and that these identities, often so antagonistic to one another, may coexist relatively harmoniously within one of the most vulnerable transnational minorities. Nonetheless, the Hemshins' Armeno-Turkic hybridity has created many complications for Hemshin identity in the present environment, where both Armenians and Turks are targeted by the xenophobia of the krai government and mass media.

Hemshins dominant cultural identity is Turkish and there are several reasons behind this. Most fundamentally, there is an authentic historical and cultural affinity, including with the Meskhetians of Krasnodar krai. They inhabited similar cultural geographies along the Black Sea and in Meskhetia, but this affinity acquired new significance over the past 14 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Living in Krasnodar, Meskhetians and Hemshins stand out against the surrounding Christian and Russian/Cossack population. Furthermore, Hemshins and Meskhetians are subjected essentially to the same legal dilemmas and disenfranchisement in society, which in turn unifies many of their political interests. Both groups are refugees deprived of the most fundamental human rights. In much of the regional administration's discourse on the problem of migration, Hemshins have been considered a subdivision of the Meskhetians. In the fall of 1994 several Hemshins planned to form a special committee to examine abuses against the Hemshins but this was shelved and they decided

it would be more fruitful to reach their goals working with “Vatan,” the organization representing the Meskhetians in Krasnodar krai.⁴⁰

In this exceedingly predatory cultural and political environment, the Hemshins are not quite sure to which ethnicity they should belong. While many consider themselves Turks, others see themselves both as Turks and Hemshins simultaneously. Some believe themselves to be related to the Kurds. In addition, identity was profoundly confounded by classification in the official Soviet censuses. Some Hemshins carry the designation “Turk” in the fifth ledger (*piataia grafa*) of their old Soviet passports. [These cannot be replaced without citizenship or a *propiska*.] Others carry the uniquely Soviet innovation of “Turk-Hemshin.” The surrounding Russian population commonly mistakes the Hemshins for the Meskhetians, as occurs with local Azeris and Kurds.

Turks or Armenians?

The Hemshin dilemma extends further than the problems associated with Turkophobia in Krasnodar. If it was not difficult enough to be associated with the Meskhetians, the most persecuted group in the Krasnodar region, Hemshins discovered that their own identity was far more complex than they had previously imagined. In the early nineties, when Hemshins landed in Krasnodar Krai, they came into contact with a sizable Armenian community for the first time and realized that the native language they speak is *not* Turkish, or even related to a Turkic linguistic group, but in fact *Armenian*. Homshetsma is related to a dialect of Western Armenian common to the Pontus-Black Sea regions of Armenian settlement in present-day northeast Turkey. This has had far-reaching implications for such a tiny Muslim minority, especially for a group of people who had considered themselves part of a common Turkish culture. This revelation also meant that now, by virtue of their native tongue, they belonged to not one but *two* of the krai’s most despised minorities: both “Turks” *and* Armenians.

The Hemshins in Krasnodar are not limited to simply bilingual but multilingual. If one was ever able to find an advantage to being deported across entire continents and back again, it would probably be that ability to learn and speak a multiplicity of languages. Depending on age, social strata, and context, Hemshins speak Armenian, Turkish, Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Georgian, and some Arabic. While the majority of the Hemshins speak Turkish and Armenian with the same degree of comfort, Armenian (Homshetsma) is the language used most often.

Hemshins and Hamshen Armenians live close to each other in nearby villages but to the present time there has been little contact. Not one mixed marriage between them has been recorded nor have there been any organized efforts in which the leaders of the communities have worked together. On several occasions, individual activists from local Hamshen Armenian movements have attempted to arrange discussions or roundtables with different members of Hemshin society. The main idea behind such efforts was to “enlighten” the Hemshins by demonstrating that their ancestors were once Armenian and that it is a “miracle” that they may finally leave behind Islam and “return” to the Armenian Church.

Not surprisingly, many Hemshin have downplayed the significance of their language. When I asked Kamil Tatar-Oghly, the head of the Hemshin cultural society to explain the closeness of the languages he retorted: “The languages are similar. That’s the extent of it. They are Christians and we are Muslims but we don’t have a direct relationship to them.”⁴¹ This is simply because of resistance within the Hemshin community to coming to terms with their unique background and ethnic hybridity, it is also due to the fact that they may see ‘Armenianness’ as jeopardizing or eclipsing their Turkish identity. In the context of Turkish-Armenian relations since the modern period, this insecurity is quite justified and must be taken into account by scholars and human rights activists who work with the Hemshins.

Three Generations, Many Homelands

Particularly illuminating in the case of the Hemshins is the amount of unanswered questions about past, present, and future that an ethnic minority must answer if it is to survive in adversity. Isolated from and largely disinterested in the data “discovered” about them by Soviet, post-Soviet and now, Western scholars, the Hemshins are asking *themselves*: What are our true origins? Why is our language so unique? Why were we deported? Where is our homeland: Georgia, Central Asia, Russia, or Turkey? Why must we live again without dignity or basic human rights?

In my interviews with many Hemshins, I found that identity, history, and political opinions primarily depended upon age. This makes sense because of the remarkable diversity in experiences of the last three generations.

People who were children or teenagers during the deportation from the Georgian SSR have vivid

recollections of their first homes in the hills of Western Ajara, of the mandarin orchards their families tilled, of the cattle that grazed there. Many of them speak Georgian and have Georgian last names.⁴² Obviously, it is this segment of the population that was able to recount in great detail the terror of the deportations the Hemshins have endured. This is the generation that recovered their people from the brink of destruction and spent an entire 46 years of their life in Central Asia before the pogroms that forced them to flee. While this generation is rapidly dying off, the elders are still the most responsible for the groups' political stance on many issues. Naturally, they have been the most outspoken advocates for a return to Ajara, Georgia, for official rehabilitation by the Russian government, and for material compensation. When I asked a 69 year-old woman I met at a Hemshin wedding about her memories of the deportation she cried:

*We were deported to Kyrgyzia when I was 11 years old. Four of my brother starved during the journey. We left everything, everything...all our cattle, our farms, everything! And then we had to leave everything in Kyrgyzia. There and back, there and back again! (Tuda, syuda, tuda, syuda!) Now Ajars are sitting in our homes. They would never give them back to us.*⁴³

Family head and a community leader of the Hemshins, Hasan Salih-Oghly, traveled to the Ajar SSR from Central Asia three times in 1964, 1968, and 1972 with Hemshin activists. They met with the regional authorities in Batumi with the aim of gaining the right of return. These efforts were met only by refusals.⁴⁴

After so many efforts and persistent visits to Tbilisi and Batumi, all Hasan received was a document listing an inventory of what he, or rather his father, already owned at the time of deportation.⁴⁵ It became clear to Hasan that he would need to find a different haven for the Hemshins. What this haven would be depended on the answer to a seemingly simple question: Who are we?

The generation of middle-aged Hemshins, now parents and the heads of households, came of age in Kyrgyzstan and holds its own variety of theories and conceptions of identity. While deportation for them was far less real, similar to a legend of a biblical exodus, it forms an important basis of self-perception. In our conversations they connected the first exodus with their escape from the violent pogroms of the Ferghana valley, which drove them to Krasnodar in 1989-1990 and subsequently into their status as stateless persons.

While the speculations of one American graduate student may be worth little, I emphasize that

in almost all of my interviews with the Hemshins, I encountered a profound yearning for a place and a culture to belong to, unlike the identity of the equally vulnerable Armenians or Georgians with more "established identity." This lack of confidence is easy to understand. Almost weekly the governor has threatened to deport "illegal migrants" and more than half the Hemshins fall into this category, as they have not received residence permits.

Some Hemshins have gone searching in a different direction, discovering the cultural connection in the language they share with Armenians. A middle-aged Hemshin woman living now in Voronezh told me that Hemshin youth tend to identify themselves with Armenians. "The younger kids feel it's the same language. The older ones are Muslim. They don't understand. My generation feels closer to Armenians. We are living among Armenians now. We have so many cultural similarities."⁴⁶ Unfortunately for both the Hemshins and Armenians of Krasnodar krai, they indeed have countless abuses of their human rights in common. Due to the fact that many of the first refugees to arrive were survivors of the 1988 earthquake in Armenia, Cossack groups lumped together many Caucasians, calling them Armenians, and focused many of their "raids" on the so-called "Armenian invasion" of Krasnodar. "Armenophobia" became one of the leading human rights problems of the region in the 1990s and culminated in the form of organized anti-Armenian violence in 1998 in Slavyansk-na-Kubani.

Other Hemshins, however, react extremely negatively to the idea that they ever had any connection to Armenia. "If anyone tries to tell me I am descended from Armenians, I'll shut him up with a knife," exclaimed a young man when I asked him about the similarities in language. When I asked him if he wanted to return to Georgia if allowed, he answered:

*We won't survive there. No one will give us the chance to return to Ajara. But Turkey is our only chance. Our homes can also be in Turkey. We came from there. In Turkey there is more land. Some of our relatives are there and doing better. We don't demand much from Turkey. Most importantly, they'll give us registration. You ask the question, do we want to go to Turkey? Yes we want to go to Turkey. I'd say that 90% of our younger generation wants to go to Turkey.*⁴⁷

Whether his opinion was true for every young person, I wasn't able to confirm. However, he was certainly correct in one respect: the Hemshins of Turkey and Ajara were divided with the establishment of Soviet power and estimates of the Hem-

shin population in Northeastern Turkey range from 30,000 to 100,000. As has been the case with several peoples of the Caucasus such as Azeris, Lezgins, and Ossetians, the Hemshin community had its own “Berlin wall” erected when thousands of Hemshins ended up on both sides of the Russian-Turkish border in 1878 and 1921. Due to Stalin’s Turkophobia, the border was closed for good in the late thirties. Some have estimated that up to 100,000 Hemshins live in the whole of Turkey today.⁴³

In summary, it became clear that there exists a profound lack of cohesion among the generations, even within each age group, about what is meant by the “homeland.” Kyrgyzstan, for example, had been home for the Hemshins for the past half century and yet most understood there was no going back.

One man explained the situation that led to the violence in Central Asia more clearly: “I lived in Kyrgyzia. I am 40 years old now. I lived my formative and most interesting years there. My homeland in principle should be there. But I know that, in any case, I won’t be able to live there. If Russia is unstable, Central Asia is a hundred times worse... I understood in Kyrgyzia in the 70s and 80s that a shift was taking place, that minorities gradually weren’t allowed to get prestigious positions of employment. I couldn’t receive the benefits given to most [ethnic Kyrgyz] workers because I was of a different ethnicity.”⁴⁹ This consciousness combined with no political rehabilitation, and the knowledge that it is unlikely the regional authorities will end the on-going campaign of xenophobia and human rights abuses is a source of immense frustration.

A Hemshin Future or An Endangered Species?

I was most privileged to spend time with the youth — a generation of Hemshins who face an increasingly bleak future living in a society that does not accept them. Unfortunately many may have to choose between preserving a language and cultural identity increasingly irrelevant to their lives outside the villages or remaining clear targets of xenophobia and racism. Anti-Caucasian hysteria makes it very tempting to “become Russian.” This means not speaking in your language in public places outside the immediate community and trying not to be “noticed” by the police when you are crossing the highway. As the Israeli journalist Yo’av Karny wrote about another ethnic minority of the Caucasus, “they are no more likely to preserve their vernacular than any endangered species is likely to survive outside of its natural habitat.”⁵⁰ Facing a rapidly approaching modernity and continuing human rights abuses, the Hemshins will continue to be “a small nation hang-

ing by a thread, unsure whether a generation hence they will still have a discernible identity... a historical memory, and a viable language.”⁵¹

Regarding the question of the homeland, it was clear to me that most of the youth are anxious not to return to Ajara, but to become accepted members of Russian society, to become full-fledged citizens, and to serve in the army. This will only happen if Russia fulfills its obligations under its own constitution, European community law, and international law.

The reality is that the Krasnodar authorities may never allow thousands of individuals to become citizens of Russia and will only comply with the Russian Constitution as well as international law, if Moscow takes steps to enforce it. In the worst case scenario, the Hemshins could be forced to endure another deportation — which in light of recent statements by the Governor and actions by Cossack groups this past month — seems well within the realm of possibility.⁵²

For many, the situation has become so hopeless that they have lowered their expectations and now pray to maintain the status quo. As one woman expressed to me in:

*It will horrible if they deport us again. Let us live in peace. We want to live in one place in peace. We don't even need compensation for the last deportation, just the security of knowing that we won't be forced to leave again.*⁵³

After our interview had finished she implored me: “Someone should help us. I want people to think about the fate of other small peoples such as us.”

Like the Roma, the Hemshins embody all the problems associated with statelessness both politically and culturally. Their identity is truly transnational — at once Georgian, Turk, Armenian, Russian, Kyrgyz, Central Asian, Muslim, Caucasian, and other still. At the same time, they must pay a double price for being connected to so many worlds. They are a fascinating example of the cultural amalgamations that exist like nowhere else than in the Caucasus, forged both in tragedy and harmony, so often forgotten and hidden from the outside world. Although Krasnodar krai is comparably one of the most diverse areas in Russia, the Russian conquests of the 19th century helped obliterate entire peoples from the pages of history such as the Ubykhs, a mountain people related to the Circassians. It will be a sad twist of fate if Krasnodar krai again becomes a burial ground for the unique Caucasian peoples like the Hemshins.

Illuminating Moments of Otherness: Ajars Meet Meskhetians

A recent episode taken from a meeting between repatriated Meskhetians (living already 20 years in Georgia) and Ajar religious leaders in Batumi in February 2002 is particularly illustrative of

how transnationality excludes groups from larger dominant national, ethnic, or religious identities that would otherwise appear to be the most 'appropriate' or 'accepting' cultural affiliation.⁵⁴ A roundtable discussion sponsored by the "International Non-Violence Project" was arranged to allow Ajar religious and community leaders the chance to get acquainted with repatriated Meskhetians of Georgia, in order to demystify stereotypes of the Meskhetians as "enemies of the people," and discuss commonalities between the Ajar and Meskhetian experiences. Indeed, Ajars have much in common with Meskhetians. The territory of Ajara in which Georgians, and Laz lived were also conquered by Ottoman Turkey and converted to Islam, although most Ajars retained the Georgian language. During the deportations of 1944, Hemshins, Kurds, Karapapakhs, Tarakama, and pockets of Turkish-speaking Ajars were deported along with the Meskhetians in the neighboring province. However, consistent with the prevailing nationality policy for most peoples in Soviet space, the majority of Ajars were classified as Georgians, because they speak the Georgian language, although they share Islamic faith with the Meskhetians. Even so, the Ajar Muslim identity, similar to the position of Georgian Catholics, was never fully integrated into the Georgian national paradigm. The nationalizing period of the 1980s and 1990s threatened the possibility of an ethno-religious conflict in Ajara with the rest of Georgia. Considering the place of Ajara in the nationalist paradigm, one would imagine this community's ability to identify with the Meskhetian dilemma, and especially with Meskhetians who affirmed their Georgian orientation.

At this meeting the Meskhetians, who had lived in the neighboring Guria province for over twenty years began to explain the shared identity they imagine having with Ajars:

Deep roots connect us to each other, and our ethnos is one and the same. That is, before deportation, the Meskhetians lived in the valleys, the Ajars lived in the mountains, but this was all a single Georgian ethnos...We originate from here. My grandfather explained to me how during Ramadan Ajars would come to our villages to paint their faces and carry out their rituals. There was always more religiosity in Ajara [than in Meskhetia]. Especially the Adigeni region and Ajara had much in common. Many Meskhetian families had so-called 'Meskhabla,' Ajar brides...the international organization for Roma rights has written a letter to us saying they would like to lend their support. That's the kind of desperate situation we are in today. Various people of various ethnicities are holding out their hands to us. But from our own people, there is a

*very cold feeling.*⁵⁵

The Head Mufti of Ajara, and an Imam of Batumi's largest mosque were completely lost for words and unable to see any cultural or national Georgian link between their communities. Moreover, there was a lack of recognition even that Meskhetians had shared alongside them a common Soviet past. For these Ajars, the Meskhetians carried with them the stigma of traitors and complete otherness. "We have *heard* about you people. We saw when people picketed against your return in Akhaltsikhe. Are your people planning to come and settle in Ajara? If many come, we do not want to know them." Neither geographic closeness nor Islam could be a basis for connection, as Meskhetians were associated with an intrusion of what is foreign, forbidden, and forlorn. In an astonishing statement, which illuminates the fear that transnationality can produce, one of the Imams calmly asked: "After the September events Islam has become connected with terrorism in many people's minds, and you people have lived *over there*. Can you really be sure there are no Wahhabi extremists among you? Are you sure you haven't been *contaminated* and will bring this *infection* into Georgia?" In this reasoning appear many of the common elements of the dichotomizing discourse of otherness: foreignness, danger, and impurity. This is the tragedy of being transnational.

It is important to recognize where these discourses flourish best in post-Soviet space. This is not Moscow, nor Tbilisi. They are places like Krasnodar krai, Ajara, Javakheti — peripheries that are themselves socially, economically, and politically marginalized, preparing fertile ground for reactionary discourse.

The Danger of Colonizing Transnational Minorities

Another difficulty that exists for transnational groups is what one may call a constant danger of "colonization" not only by the nationalizing policies of post-Soviet elites, but also by scholars and human rights activists who seek to explain their plight and protect their interests. Because groups like the Meskhetians and Hemshins are such quintessential minorities, with uncertain identities, they are vulnerable to being co-opted by even those who are trying to help them.

For the Meskhetians, the 'paper wars' between academics on the pro-Turkish and pro-Georgian camps have caused terrific confusion. One area where this is particularly apparent is in the changing of family names of Meskhetians upon return to

Georgia. Activists on both sides of the ethno-genesis debate paint a complex and muddled picture. The pro-Turkish scholars insist that the Turkic names of the Meskhetians were artificially Georgianized during and directly after the first period of Georgian independence (1918-1920) while the Georgian side insists on the Turkicization of names in deportation. The family names' issue illustrates a Georgian biased approach to the whole Meskhetian issue. Even at the present time, Georgian authorities have forced Meskhetian repatriate families to choose from a list of pre-approved Georgian names for their newborn children. If they refuse to give the child a Georgian name, they will not receive the birth certificate.⁵⁶

This dilemma exists equally in the human rights/NGO community. An NGO delegation that defends migrants' rights in Krasnodar krai met in July 2002 with Tbilisi-based Meskhetian NGOs to coordinate their efforts. The Union of Georgian Repatriates asked the Russian NGO activists to use the phrase 'deported Meskhetian population' established by the Council of Europe in 1999 over the designation 'Meskhetian Turks,' when publishing reports about human rights violations in Krasnodar. "We couldn't do that because the communities we work with see themselves as Turks, and *Vatan* [Meskhetian Turk organization] would not agree to work with us." NGOs genuinely aiming to defend the human rights of transnational minorities must often walk a fine line such as this.

Sometimes the colonizing can be done by the organizations representing the minority itself. As with the family name issue, I sometimes encountered a paternalistic attitude when asking members of *Khsna* about how they would attempt to work with repatriated Meskhetians that have a Turkish identity:

Q: *Your community will likely be instrumental in helping new repatriates to adapt to Georgia in the future. How will you work with Meskhetians who see themselves as Turks?*

A: *We want to teach them. Let them come here to us. We will explain why his destiny turned out the way he did. We'll tell him: You are on the wrong path, we will give him the diagnosis, like a doctor and explain that as long as he does not know why he has been used as a work force then he will be pushed around like in Krasnodar or in Ferghana. He should find himself. He needs one small key to open the door to a huge castle.*⁵⁷

The same attitude can be found among the pro-Turkish organizations in Azerbaijan, Russia, and

Turkey.

I would argue that Hemshins, as a transnational minority, are in an even more vulnerable position regarding identity. As they struggle to balance a Turkish-Armenian identity, they are persecuted in Krasnodar krai largely because of their perceived closeness to the Meskhetians. At the same time, they have become a subject of interest for local and international Armenian ethnographers, some with nationalistic approaches, which have pushed them towards an Armenian identity. At the time of writing, attacks on Meskhetians have become so frequent that the head of the Hemshin cultural society appealed to the Armenian organization *Yerkramas* to consider changing their mostly Turkic last names to Armenian ones.⁵⁸ The debate on identity for transnational minorities can often have detrimental effects and must be taken into account in both the scholarly and human rights communities.

From Magomed to Mamuka: The "First" Meskhetian Back in Meskhetia

One extraordinary privilege that accompanies this kind of research is the opportunity to witness amazing acts of courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable oppression. One of these moments came when I met the "first" Meskhetian of Meskhetia, who I will call simply 'Mamuka.' Here I use quotations marks to emphasize that Mamuka became the first Meskhetian to move to Samtskhe-Javakheti (the modern province of Georgia which encompasses Soviet and Russian Meskhetia) after the expulsions and Zviadist pogroms of the early nineties, and who remains there to the present day. About 25 people have moved to Akhaltsikhe, the capital of the province, since his arrival in 1997.

Mamuka exemplifies the courage, the pride, and the unrelenting will to survive that has for so long characterized the peoples of the Caucasus. Mamuka was very cautious in meeting with me because of the radicalized and tense atmosphere of the city in regards to the Meskhetian issue. Local politician and activist Anzor Tamarashvili and Tamar Samsonidze⁵⁹, radical nationalists and staunch opponents of repatriation, have often organized violent anti-Meskhetian demonstrations within hours of foreign reporters coming to conduct local research. Notwithstanding this climate, Mamuka was explicit about his political beliefs and his Meskhetian heritage. "I consider myself a full-fledged citizen of Georgia. It is my duty as a citizen to think of the welfare of the Georgian state. It is important that

we create some warmth for the Meskhetians living throughout the Diaspora and defend human rights where they live.”

Mamuka was born as ‘Magomed’ in 1964 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan and entered the Leningrad Railway Engineering Academy. After graduation, he became the director of the railroad service in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya staying on in his position throughout the first Chechen war. He was stoic in a traditional Caucasian sense when I asked him about the chaos of those years he spent in Chechnya. “It was fine. I managed a staff of both Russians and Chechens and saved a lot of money during that time. But I didn’t want to buy a house. I waited and waited until the time was right to return to my homeland. I got a copy of the Georgian constitution on a visit to Tbilisi in 1997 and decided it was time to bring my family.”

Mamuka arrived and immediately sought consultation with Guram Mamulia, then the Head of the Repatriation Service, and a long-time proponent of returning the Meskhetians to Georgia. Mamulia helped ‘Magomed’ change his name to ‘Mamuka’ but warned it would be very difficult to move to Akhaltsikhe, a city with an overwhelmingly negative view of the Meskhetians. In fact, many active extremist groups had expelled Meskhetians from Akhaltsikhe half a dozen years earlier, such as Marat Baratashvili, son of activist Latifshah Baratashvili, who was then working as an ethnographer at the Akhaltsikhe state museum, and is now the president of the Union of Georgian Repatriates. But Mamuka went anyways. Because the local authorities refused to register him officially he started by renting an apartment in a predominantly Armenian area of the city:

The first day I moved to Akhaltsikhe the threats began. It was Georgians, Armenians, all kinds of people. The first night they set fire to my roof and threatened to throw grenades at us. I had to hold my little girls to shop shaking all through the night...Before I had bought the apartment I went straight to the Governor’s office to announce my intention to move here. I was told: ‘you cannot live here’ (tebye zdes’ ne zhit’). Everyone in this community was shocked that I was so decisive. They were afraid I would bring all the Meskhetians with me.

Despite the threats, attacks, and enormous psychological pressure inflicted on him, Mamuka decided to stay. He opened up a butcher shop and acquired a reputation as a hard-working man, and a very successful local entrepreneur. ‘Now everyone knows me here. My orientation is towards Georgia and I have no problems.’ Of course, this is not entirely true. Mamuka’s brother’s family has not been

able to register their property for over three years, nor has his father received his pension. Mamuka emphasizes that he holds no affiliations with any Meskhetian organizations, pro-Georgian, or otherwise, even though he believes firmly in his Georgian Meskhetian heritage. “The Meskhs defended Georgia for centuries and marched with the Meskhetian flag during the crusades.” Mamuka’s family practices Islam but is less religious than most Meskhetian families I have observed. For them, being reconnected to a common Georgian culture is more important than religion.

I see now how my children are getting back in touch with their roots and culture and I see this already as a victory. My coming here has done so much. I have visited with every member of this community and taught people the true history of our people. Now everyone knows and respects me.

When I asked him if he was angry with the individuals who had terrorized him and his family, he responded: “you cannot blame these people who don’t understand the truth.” The tiny Meskhetian community of Akhaltsikhe still lives under extraordinary psychological pressure and a denial of a variety of human rights. One woman I met, a widower who had lived through the Ferghana massacre of 1989, and then had lived in Chechnya up until the beginning of the second Chechen war (1999) had still not received citizenship, had absolutely no documents verifying her identity nor residence.

But a small miracle was uncovered in Akhaltsikhe that may lead Meskhetians, and those promoting human rights, towards a multicultural solution. A shared language and cultural heritage that existed in the region before deportation still lives on in the older generation of Georgian Catholics, Armenians, Greeks, Jews and others, and could be discovered and explored by the present population. For example, the Georgian government often refers to the Javakheti Armenian community as the main obstacle to the return of Muslim Meskhetians. However, many older Armenians still speak the Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish and remember fondly their exiled neighbors. Another Meskhetian resettled in Akhaltsikhe, whose sons are currently serving in the Georgian army explained, “All the local Armenians our age or over, they all know our language [Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish]. They speak it better than we do.” Even in the most reactionary, anti-Meskhetian Georgian villages in Samtskhe-Javakheti, one can uncover these multicultural bonds still intact.

Shortly after moving to Akhaltsikhe with his parents, Mamuka and his father traveled to the vil-

lage of Tskhani, his father's home up until deportation. They came to their family's house and asked the Georgians now living there — Georgian Catholics originally from the village of Ude in Meskhetia — if they could stay in their old home for one night. "At first it was very tense, but we let them know we were not intending to kick them out and they were relieved. My father and the old woman there began speaking their common language and we quickly became very close. We were even invited back by the family to attend a funeral."

Conclusions: Listening to an 'Underground' Multiculturalism

The bond discovered between Mamuka and his new community indicates the existence of a deeper multiculturalism that has outlived the nationalism of the last decade. In this paper, we have examined the unique vulnerability of transnational minorities and the tragic consequences of their ambiguous status under Soviet nationality policy. Observing the experience of two deported peoples of the Pontus region, we have come into contact with various discourses of exclusion from the blatant xenophobia of nationalist ideologues to the fear of otherness transnationality can engender in surrounding communities. However, transnational groups also carry a richness rooted in the culture and memory that they share with more dominant 'established' identities, be they Georgian, Turkish, Armenian, or other. The complexity of identity among groups like the Meskhetians and Hemshins also reveal the limitations of theories on the formation of nationalism. While this paper has not focused on the multitude of human rights instruments available under international law for promoting the protection of minorities⁶⁰, I hope it has demonstrated the importance of understanding the connection between human rights abuse and identity formation. For Meskhetians and Hemshins, barriers of identity and belonging such as language, intersect with unresolved legal and political issues. Multicultural approaches to these problems are valuable for scholars and practitioners, and may be incorporated into the work of international and non-governmental organizations based in the Caucasus. In fact, examples of a multicultural approach can already be found in the Pontus itself, among several grassroots organizations in Krasnodar krai and southern Georgia. It would be helpful to conclude by recognizing these efforts.

Tsira Meskhishvili, is an ethnographer and the director of the grassroots educational NGO 'Tolerant.' Her organization lobbies for the integration of ethnic minorities, including Meskhetian students, into Georgian universities and organizes Georgian

language immersion courses for Armenians, Russians, and Meskhetians in Akhaltsikhe. Based on this model, the Akhaltsikhe branch of Tbilisi State University has initiated a program for Meskhetian and Armenian students, and trains Georgian graduate students in minority languages and culture of the region. Recognizing the importance of creating dialogue, 'Tolerant' also organizes youth training seminars on topics of human rights, diversity, and history.

*Akhaltsikhe is a crossroads of every ethnicity: Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Jews, and Meskhetians. There were always many mixed marriages and a unique local culture made up of all of us. In fact, Georgians speak a local dialect that includes many Armenian phrases. Our goal is to help every child at least speak Georgian on a conversational level, but also to feel proud of his or her own cultural heritage. Nationalism increased group consciousness in some positive ways but ended up splitting us apart. And if we let radical voices paint us a violent picture of our multicultural history it will lead to our own self-destruction.*⁶¹

In Krasnodar, the Center for Pontic-Caucasian Studies concentrates its efforts on monitoring xenophobia and racism in academia and publishes journals and organizes roundtables that promote the multiethnic heritage of the Kuban. In addition, the Novorossisk Committee for Human Rights has been a steadfast defender of the Meskhetians in Krasnodar, becoming the first visible local Russian human rights group to display solidarity with the Meskhetians, especially during the dramatic hunger strike carried out in June 2002.

These local grassroots organizations are pioneers of a discourse of diversity badly needed throughout the entire Caucasus region and crucial for the development of tolerance towards transnational minorities. But this multiculturalism is still very much an underground discourse, one that has not yet resonated with the majority, or which has simply been silenced by the threat of being labeled a traitor. But Mamuka and others such as he are living proof that bridges will be built, and that the rich multiculturalism of the Caucasus can triumph over the nationalizing discourse of the past decades. "An elderly Georgian man learned I had moved to Akhaltsikhe and came over to my house in secret to welcome me. We sang songs in our language and he began to cry, remembering all the friends he had lost in the deportation. When he left, he embraced me and whispered, 'please don't let anyone here know how much I have missed your people.'"

Chronology

- 1783** Irakli II (King of Kartli-Kakheti) asks the Tsarina of Russia, Catherine II, for protection against Ottoman invasions. (Eastern) Georgia becomes a Russian protectorate through the Treaty of Georgievsk.
- 1801** Tsar Alexander I turns most of Georgia into a Russian province.
- 1828-29** Russian-Ottoman War. Northern part of Meskhetia is annexed by Russia. Large population of Armenians (many Hamshen communities) emigrate to the Kuban and Abkhazia. Large Armenian community from Erzerum is resettled by the Russian empire in the province of Javakheti (now part of Samtskhe-Javakheti).
- 1877-78** Russian-Ottoman War. Remaining parts of Meskhetia are annexed by Russia (the districts of Kars, Ardahan). Large emigration of Muslims from the Russian empire into Turkey.
- 1917** *October*. Bolsheviks come to power.
- 1918** *April*. Under immediate threat of Ottoman invasion, creation of the independent Democratic Federative Republic of Transcaucasia (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia).
May 26. Georgia declares its independence in response to offers of German aid to face an Ottoman invasion. Georgia begins a policy of cultural assimilation towards its minorities.
December. Georgian-Armenian war in Southern Georgia.
- 1921** *February*. XIIth Red Army invades Georgia, while Turkish troops enter southern Georgia.
May. Georgia becomes a Soviet Socialist Republic.
October. Treaty of Kars defines the border between Bolshevik Russia and Turkey. Kars and Ardahan are returned to Turkey. Kars and Ardahan go back to Turkey, and Batumi goes to Georgia.
- 1941** Beginning of World War II.
- 1944** *November*. Deportation of Muslim population from Meskhetia to Central Asia. They are collectively accused of disloyalty by the Soviet authorities.
- 1956** *February*. Khrushchev denounces Stalin's crimes in his "secret speech." Some deported peoples are rehabilitated and allowed to return to their homeland.
March. Student demonstrations in Georgia against the "secret speech." Violent intervention by Soviet forces.
April. A decree frees Meskhetians and Hemshins from the special settlement's regime, but they are denied the right to return to Georgia.
- 1957** First Meskhetians resettle in Azerbaijan.
- 1961-62** Creation of the first Meskhetian associations which reflect the cleavage between the Meskhetians' pro-Georgian and pro-Turkish identity.
- 1968** Decree allowing Meskhetians and Hemshins to leave their places of residence in Central Asia.
- 1970** Some Meskhetians appeal to Turkish embassy in Moscow for right to emigrate to Turkey.
- 1982-83** Head of RAIKOM of the Krymsk district in Krasnodar krai invites Hemshins and Meskhetians to settle in the region as a work force... (The man who had initiated the invitation would later become one of the leaders of the xenophobic anti-migrant campaign against Meskhetians, Hemshins, Kurds, and others.)
- 1988** Meskhetians hold "Congress of Unity." Pro-Turkish faction moves for Turkish identity to be made official.
- 1989** *April 9*. Soviet troops intervene against nationalist demonstrations in Tbilisi; 20 killed, hundreds injured.
June. Pogroms in Ferghana valley target Meskhetians. The population is evacuated *en masse*, followed by other ethnic minorities such as Hemshins.
November. The Supreme Soviet of the USSR recognizes the "unlawful and criminal character of forcible transfers of populations committed during WWII."
- 1990** *October*. Nationalist forces led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia win the first pluralist parliamentary elections in Georgia. In the next few months, in a situation of anti-Meskhetian paranoia, Georgian nationalists forcibly evict, and expel over a thousand Meskhetian families from all over Western Georgia to Russia or Azerbaijan.

- 1991** *March.* The decrees concerning the Meskhetians' deportation are declared null and void by the federal authorities in Moscow.
December. Georgia becomes independent following the break-up of the Soviet Union.
- 1992** *February.* Following the military putsch against Gamsakhurdia in January, Eduard Shevardnadze returns to Georgia to chair the State Council.
October. The CIS agreement "on questions related to the restoration of the rights of deported persons, national minorities, and peoples" (Bishkek agreement) is adopted.
- 1994** *November.* Russian-Georgian inter-governmental agreement on the Meskhetians' repatriation.
- 1996** *June.* A "Regional conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the CIS and Relevant Neighboring States" is initiated by UNHCR, IOM, and the OSCE.
December. Georgian Presidential decree on the Meskhetians' repatriation of their rights and gradual repatriation.
- 1998** *September.* International consultations on the Meskhetian issue are held in The Hague under the auspices of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities.
- 1999** *March 14.* New Georgian presidential decree replaces the one of 1996 and provides for the creation of a "governmental commissions on repatriation and rehabilitation of the population deported in the 1940s from southern Georgia."
March. HCNM-led negotiations on the Meskhetian issue, held in Vienna
April. Georgia becomes a member of the Council of Europe with the condition that Meskhetians be repatriated within 12 years.
June. Creation of a working group on formerly deported peoples in the framework of the CIS Conference follow-up meeting.
- 2002** *March 18.* Governor of Krasnodar krai, Aleksandr Tkachev begins a policy of "starving Meskhetians out of the region." Announces the opening of filtration camps for non-Slavic migrants whose surnames end in: *dze, shvili, ian, or Oghly.*
April. According to the timeline set by CoE, the deadline for beginning the process of Meskhetian repatriation by the Republic of Georgia.
July. Group of several dozens of Meskhetians take up hunger strike in Krasnodar krai in a desperate measure to attract world attention.
Fall. US embassy sends fact-finding mission to Krasnodar krai to consider resettling the Krasnodar Meskhetians in the United States.

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Notes

¹ *Izvestiya*, March 20, 2002. In Russian: «Кубань -

- это казачья земля, и все об этом должны знать. Мы увеличим в ближайшие дни штрафы за отсутствие регистрации до 6 тыс. рублей. Это будет способствовать тому, что незаконные мигранты станут уезжать с территории края. Мы будем смотреть, кто с кем дружит, и на окончания фамилий!..»
- ² Research for this study was funded by the generous support of the Institute for International Education, the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, and the IREX Young Leadership Fellows for Public Service Program. Interviews, fieldwork, and training seminars were carried out in Krasnodar between August 2000-2001 and in Georgia from May 2002 through August 2002.
 - ³ Chairman's Statement on the Vienna meeting on the Meskhetian Issue, *OSCE HCNM*, 17 March 1999.
 - ⁴ Members of the pro-Georgian Meskhetian organization *Khsna* argue that 30% of their vocabulary is Kartvelian.
 - ⁵ Many scholars have written about the Armenians of the Black Sea-Pontus region, or Hamshen Armenians. One tremendously illuminating anthropological study of Hamshen Armenian culture and semiotics is Russian Anthropologist Igor Kuznetsov's *Odezhdna Armian Ponta*.
 - ⁶ For the historical discussion of the region, I am particularly indebted to the Adam Segolene's work, *The Meskhetian Issue: Coping with the Soviet Legacy*.
 - ⁷ See the works of Anderson, Benedict, Gellner, Ernest, Hobsbawm, Eric, and others.
 - ⁸ The Meskhs are alluded to in the greatest epic of Georgian medieval literature "The Knight in Panther's Skin," composed by Shota Rustaveli sometime between 1100 and 1125 AD.
 - ⁹ See for example, Baratashvili, M. *Legal State of Meskh Repatriates in Georgia*, Tbilisi, Pirvelli Stamba, 1998.
 - ¹⁰ Khazanov, A., "Meskhi (Etnograficheskii ocherk)", in *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, no. 3, Moscow, 1891.
 - ¹¹ See Ossipov, *Osnovnye napravleniia izmenenii v samosoznanii i kulture akhalsikhskikh (meskhetinskikh) turok. 20-e gody XIX-90-e gody XX v.* (The Main Trends in the Self-Identification and Culture of the Akhalsikhe (Meskhetian) Turks, p. 7.
 - ¹² See Yunusov, *Dvazhdy Deportirovannyi Narod*, in *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, no. 1(2), 1999, pp. 161-172.
 - ¹³ Ossipov, *The Meskhetian Turks: Current Situation and Perspectives*, p. 2.
 - ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 - ¹⁵ Khazanov, A., M., "Meskhetian Turks in Search of Self-Identity," in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1992, pp. 1-16.
 - ¹⁶ Sheehy, Ann, and Nahajlo, Bohdan, *The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and Meskhetians: Soviet Treatment of Some National Minorities*, London, Minority Rights Group, Report no. 6, 1980, p. 24.
 - ¹⁷ Ossipov, A., *The Meskhetian Turks: Current Situation and Perspectives*, p. 6.
 - ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 - ¹⁹ Interview in the village of Vpered, Krasnodar krai, October 2000.
 - ²⁰ 53, 133 were resettled in Uzbekistan, 28, 598 in Kazakhstan, and 10, 546 in Kyrgyzstan, Marie, *Op. Cit.*, p. 114.
 - ²¹ This system of forced labor had been created in 1929 for the peasants deported according to the policy of *dekulakization*. See Marie, Jean-Jacques, *Les peuples deportes d'Union Sovietique*, Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1995, p. 14.
 - ²² *Ibid.*
 - ²³ Vaux, Bert, «The Forgotten Black Sea Armenians», Manuscript of lecture delivered at Columbia University, March 1996.
 - ²⁴ Brubaker, R., *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 54
 - ²⁵ Brubaker, R., p. 54.
 - ²⁶ For an extensive look at human rights abuse and xenophobia in Krasnodar krai. See *Transnational Identity and Ethnic Discrimination: The Hemshins of Krasnodar Krai*, Steve Swerdlow, delivered at ASN conference, April 2002.
 - ²⁷ *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, April 25, 2001. Also, in January, 2002, Vladimir Beketov — chairman of the regional legislature — argued that Meskhetian Turks are trying to seize control of parts of the region in order to one day create an "Islamic Republic of the Kuban." In a March 2001 interview with a local paper, printed under the hysterical title "Are We a Country or a Revolving Door?" (*Eto Strana ili Prokhodnoi Dvor?*) Mr. Beketov speculated on what he sees as sinister motives behind the fact that many migrants have settled near tunnels, railway lines and oil pipelines.
 - ²⁸ Interview with M. Baratashvili, June 2002.
 - ²⁹ Baratashvili, M., *Legal State of Meskh Repatriates in Georgia*, pp. 22-36. The fate of Akhalsheni was met by many other Meskhetian settlements such as Tskhramukha, (Khashuri region).
 - ³⁰ Interview with Guram Sharadze, August 2002.
 - ³¹ Interview in Nasakirali, July 2002.
 - ³² Interview in Ianeti, August 2002.
 - ³³ Interview in Nsakirali, July 2002.
 - ³⁴ At the time of this research on August 2002, the total number of Meskhetians living in Georgia was approximately 700 individuals.
 - ³⁵ Interview in Nasakirali, Ozurgeti region, Guria province, July 2002.
 - ³⁶ Interview in village of Kalinin, March 2001.
 - ³⁷ Interview in the village of Vpered, July 24, 2001.
 - ³⁸ Known as the Apsheronsk district.
 - ³⁹ Indeed, in order to interview Meskhetian Turk leaders, I had to be shuttled to three unknown locations in order to be certain we had eluded the rogue Cossack militias known to have roughed up or deported foreign journalists attempting to conduct research visits. In order to protect respondents from any repercussions, the names of those I interviewed are altered or not used.
 - ⁴⁰ Kuznetsov, I. V., *Turki-Khemshily ili Islamizirovannye Armiane? (Sluchai 'Neiasnoi' Etnicheskoi Identichnosti)*, In: *Diaspory*, 2000, no. 1-2.
 - ⁴¹ Interview with Kamil Tatar-Oghly, village Kalinin, July 25, 2001.
 - ⁴² In the period of independence 1918-1921 and in the 1920s, the campaign to 'Georgianize' many minorities living in the regions of the Georgian SSR bordering Turkey was already being practiced. Georgian was

taught in schools and many were pressured to change Turkish last names to Georgian ones. One such name I encountered among the Hemshins was Koshanidze.

⁴³ Interview in the village Kim, July 25, 2001.

⁴⁴ Interview in village Vpered, March 2001. Also to my surprise, during one interview, it was revealed that there had been a group of Hemshins and Kurds who tried to return to Ajara in 1956 but were denied registration and forced into a province 50 kilometers away inside Georgia. Two years later they were compelled to leave Georgia altogether and returned to Kyrgyzia.

⁴⁵ An *Arkhivnaia Spravka* from the Batumi authorities.

⁴⁶ Interview with Hemshin woman from Voronezh in the village of Yerik, July 25, 2001.

⁴⁷ Interview in the village of Yerik, July 25, 2001.

⁴⁸ Simonian, Hovann, 24 June 2002 (Haigazian University Department of Armenian Studies Press Release).

⁴⁹ Interview in Vpered, July 24, 2001.

⁵⁰ Karny, Yo'av, *Highlanders: Journeys to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, 2000. p. 123.

⁵¹ Karny, p. 190.

⁵² Other groups have been deported by the krai authorities in the last year. According to RFERL, "More than 100 people – the members of some 16 Romany families — were expelled from a village in Oktyabrskii Prikubanskii Raion on 12 October. The Roma are being sent to another village in Voronezh Oblast, where they are officially registered. The deputy head of the Krasnodar administration said that the Roma were being deported because they had seized land on the territory of Krasnodar and built homes without permission. According to the

correspondent, the families had constructed some 20 different buildings not far from the Krasnodar-Rostov highway. A family head, Vyacheslav Mikhail, explained that they had left Voronezh because their children were becoming sick due to the radiation from a nearby nuclear plant. According to the correspondent, the families were loaded into two buses and their belongings quickly packed into 12 trucks with the assistance of more than 200 policemen.

⁵³ Interview in the village Kalinin, July, 27, 2001.

⁵⁴ Baratashvili, M., *Pogovorim, brat (Let's talk, Brother)*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁵⁶ Baratashvili, M., *The Legal State of Meskh Repatriates in Georgia*, p. 46.

⁵⁷ Interview in the village of Nasakirali, Guria province, Georgia with *Khsna*, July 2002.

⁵⁸ Recent communication by email from local human rights activists.

⁵⁹ Tamar Samsonidze is a close relative of the Gamgebeli (Mayor) of Akhaltsikhe, Rasul Samsonidze. During the parliamentary elections of June 2002, Tamarashvili appeared on television advocating against candidate Mikheil Saakashvili, "because his party would bring back the Meskhetians Turks to Samtskhe-Javakheti!" (local interview).

⁶⁰ Framework Convention for National Minorities, Regional Charter on Minority Languages, Art. 27, ICCPR, UDHR and many others.

⁶¹ Interview in Akhaltsikhe, August 2002.

Стив Свєрдлоу

Рефлексии на тему этнические меньшинства и права человека: мєсхєтинцы и хємшилы в Грузии и Краснодаре

В этой статье, Стив Свєрдлоу, магистр искусств Колумбийского университета (США), рассуждает о проблеме прав человека и этнических меньшинств на пост-советском пространстве, в России и Грузии. В качестве примера, он берет две группы - турок-мєсхєтинцев и хємшилов, которые уже больше десяти лет являются объектом для политических интриг и манипуляций в отношениях между двумя этими государствами. Автор пишет об исторических условиях, в которых шло развитие идентичности этих групп, о современных процессах, происходящих с их представителями в Краснодарском крае и Грузии, а также о возможных сценариях будущего. Особый интерес у автора вызывает развитие идентичности хємшилов, которых он называет «меньшинствами в меньшинстве».

