

# Repatriation of Meskhetian Turks and Their Acceptance in a Local Community

## Focusing on the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia

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Place of Fieldwork: Georgia  
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### Research Background

The historical region of Meskheti includes territory now located in Turkey and Georgia and the northern part of it constitutes part of the Georgian administrative territory of Samtskhe-Javakheti. In 1944, about 10,000 Muslims living in Meskheti were deported to Central Asia. They are commonly known as 'Meskhetian Turks'. They were prohibited from returning to their homeland during the Soviet Period even after the death of Stalin, who ordered their deportation.



During the spring of 1989, Uzbek hostilities toward **(↑ A Meskhetian woman praying in an abandoned Mosque)**



Meskhetian Turks caused dozens of Meskhetian Turk casualties throughout the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan. Following these riots, about 17,000 Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan moved, voluntarily or involuntarily, to other regions of the Soviet Union. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia only started to formulate a legal framework through which this diaspora could return to their homeland in 1999. After the adoption of a repatriation law in 2007, but fewer than 10,000 people—out of the estimated 420,000 Meskhetian Turks dispersed throughout the world—applied for repatriation to Georgia. Today only about **(← Meskhetian Turk women gathering for dinner during Ramadan)**

1,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Georgia.

## Research Purpose and Aim

Meskhethian Turk repatriates confront a difficult political, economic and social situation in Georgia. This is especially true on the social level, as the majority of the Georgian population opposes their repatriation and looks upon repatriates with distrust. Clarifying the daily relationship between the local host population and the repatriates is the purpose of my fieldwork. I discuss the result of the fieldwork in the broader context of what the issue of Meskhethian Turks repatriation indicates about the process of nation-state building in Georgia.

## Results and Achievements of Fieldwork

I stayed in Georgia from June 2 to August 1 in 2015. In Tbilisi I spent time collecting reference materials about the issue of Meskhethian Turks repatriation and meeting researchers working on this topic. While in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the region from which the Meskhethian Turks were



(↑ The view of Akhaltsikhe, the capital of Samtskhe-Javakheti)

deported from, I conducted participatory fieldwork among the local population, including the Meskhethian Turks. (The majority of the population of Samtskhe-Javakheti is Armenian.) At first, the host local population and the Meskhethian Turks appeared to get along with each other due to their shared knowledge of Russian, the common language of the Soviet Union. However, after a couple of weeks, I found that their relationship was generally limited to transactions, such as exchanging

borrowing daily goods. The host population, which consisted mostly of Armenians, called Meskhethian Turks just “Turks” or “Tatars” and treated them as new comers with a heterogeneous culture. The Meskhethian Turks appeared to maintain their own community ties through religious events and visits by Meskhethian Turks from neighboring countries who travel to Samtskhe-Javakheti during and just after Ramadan. These observations reveal that the rift between the two groups may be deeper and Meskhethian Turks have many obstacles



(↑ Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti) to participation in civil society as Georgian citizens.

### **Implications and Impacts on Future Research**

The return of a diaspora to the homeland usually means becoming part of the majority again, but the case of the Meskhetian Turks does not follow that pattern. The Georgian nationalism that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union promoted the creation of “the land for Georgians.” In this nationalist context, the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks is treated the same as the immigration of stateless people and Meskhetian Turks have to live as a minority. The issue of Meskhetian Turk repatriation will provide an opportunity to reconsider what it means to be Georgian and who Georgian citizens are.