

THE REPATRIATION PROCESS OF MESKHETIAN/AHISKA TURKS TO
THEIR HOMELAND IN GEORGIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

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Meskhethian/Ahıska Turks are a Sunni Muslim, Turkish-speaking community, whose homeland is Akhaltsikhe (known as Samtskhe-Javakheti) in southern Georgia. They were deported by Stalin from their homeland to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 1944, and apart from some who managed to settle in Georgia, they have been unable to repatriate due to the preventive policies of the Soviet Union. When Georgia became a conditional member of the Council of Europe in 1999, the condition on organization of the repatriation of Ahıska Turks was imposed. Although Georgia enacted a law in 2007 related to the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, there has been little progress since that date. Based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Azerbaijan (Baku, Saatlı, and Sabirabad) and Georgia (Nasakirali, Tbilisi and Tsitelubani) in 2015 and 2016, this thesis aims to analyze the repatriation process Ahıska Turks to their homeland following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and explain why this process has been ineffective. It is argued that the analysis of the related problems is threefold: passive role of the Council of Europe in monitoring the repatriation process, problems related to the implementation of the law of 2007, and concerns about a potential ethnic tension with the Armenians who lived in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. In short, this thesis argues that the

ethno-religious nature of the Georgian nationalism and national identity have made the repatriation and integration of Ahıska Turks difficult.

Keywords: Georgia, Meskhetian/Ahıska Turks, Repatriation, Council of Europe, Ethno-religious Nationalism

ÖZ

AHISKA TÜRKLERİNİN GÜRCİSTAN'DAKİ ANA VATANLARINA GERİ DÖNÜŞ SÜRECİ: ZORLUKLAR VE BEKLENTİLER

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Ana vatanları, Gürcistan'ın güneyinde Ahıska bölgesi (Samsthe-Cavahetya) olarak bilinen Ahıska Türkleri Sünni Müslüman, Türk dilli bir topluluktur. Stalin tarafından 1944 yılında ana vatanlarından Kazakistan, Kırgızistan ve Özbekistan'a sürülmüşlerdir. Gürcistan'a yerleşmeyi başaranların dışında, Sovyetler Birliği'nin engelleyici politikaları nedeniyle ana vatanlarına geri dönememişlerdir. Gürcistan 1999 yılında Avrupa Konseyi'ne şartlı üye olduğunda, şart olarak Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünün düzenlenmesi talep edildi. Gürcistan her ne kadar Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne ilişkin yasayı 2007 yılında yürürlüğe koyduysa da, bu tarihten itibaren çok az ilerleme kaydedildi. 2015 ve 2016 yıllarında Azerbaycan'da (Bakü, Saatlı ve Sabirabad) ve Gürcistan'da (Nasakirali, Tiflis ve Tsitelubani) gerçekleştirilen saha araştırmaları ve mülakatlara dayanan bu tez, Ahıska Türklerinin Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonraki geri dönüş sürecini analiz etmeyi ve bu sürecin neden etkin olmadığını açıklamayı amaçlamaktadır. Tezde, geri dönüşle ilgili problemlerin analizinin üç boyutlu olduğu savunulmaktadır: Avrupa Konseyi'nin geri dönüş sürecinin izlemedeki pasif rolü, 2007 Yasası'nın uygulanmasındaki problemler ve Samtshe-Cavahetya bölgesinde

yaşayan Ermenilerle olası etnik bir gerginliğe dair endişeler. Kısaca, bu tez, Gürcistan milliyetçiliğinin ve Gürcü ulusal kimliğinin etno-dinî yapısının, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünü ve entegrasyonunu zorlaştırdığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Gürcistan, Ahıska Türkleri, Ana Vatana Geri Dönüş, Avrupa Konseyi, Etno-dinî Milliyetçilik

To My Family

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introducing the Study

The main aim of this thesis is to analyze the repatriation process of Meskhetian/Ahıska Turks¹ to their homeland in Georgia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and explain why only very few of them have managed to return. Ahıska Turks are a Sunni Muslim, Turkish-speaking community, whose homeland is Ahıska/Akhaltsikhe (known as Samtskhe-Javakheti in Georgia). During the Second World War, they were one of Soviet Union communities the Soviet regime mistrusted the most because of their close ties with Turkey and their attachment to Turkishness. Ahıska Turks were accused of smuggling and espionage in collaboration with their relatives across the Turkish border. Therefore, nearly 100,000 Ahıska Turks were deported from their homeland to Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in November 1944 by Stalin. Like other deported communities, they had been subjected to a ‘Special Settlement Regime’ until 1956. After Stalin’s death, Khrushchev removed the restrictions on deported communities in 1956 and allowed five of the eight deported communities -Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Karachais- to return to their homeland within the context of the de-Stalinization policy. Volga Germans were allowed to

¹ It is noteworthy that the naming of this community is a controversial issue. They have been referred to as “Meskhetian Turks” in official communications following the Lahey Negotiations, organized by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 1998. While this group is widely known as “Meskhetian Turks” in Western literature, most of the community identified themselves as “Ahıska Turks” during the fieldwork in Azerbaijan, as is the case for the large majority living in different countries around the world (post-Soviet and other). However, most of those who live in Georgia, in line with the Georgian orientation, stress that they have Georgian origins and refer to themselves as “Meskhetian”. Of these, this thesis uses “Ahıska Turk” as it is the term used by the large majority of the community.

migrate to Germany and Crimean Tatars began to return their homeland starting with 1989. Ahıska Turks, despite a number of individual return attempts, were not allowed to return to Georgia until the end of the Soviet regime. Their deportation remained unknown to the world for many decades as they had no autonomous republic territory at the time of their deportation (Kreindler, 1986: 388-391). In addition, Armenians, who are known as anti-Turkish and considered by the Soviet regime as a trustworthy nation, were encouraged to settle in the villages of Ahıska Turks after their deportation. What is more, following the Ferghana Events -clashes that broke out between Ahıska Turks and Uzbeks in 1989- in Uzbekistan, Ahıska Turks were once more forced to migrate. Most of those who lived in Ferghana were settled in the Russian Federation by the Soviet government. Many others who lived in other parts of Uzbekistan left the country by their own means. Azerbaijan was their first destination (Baydar-Aydingün, 2001: 77-78). Some Ahıska Turks initiated return attempts and struggled for return to their homeland in Georgia throughout the Soviet period only to fail and be strongly rejected by Moscow and especially by the Georgian SSR.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Georgia became the subject for repatriation demands of Ahıska Turks. However, Georgia did not introduce effective legal regulations for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks in the 1990s because of tumultuous situation, economic instabilities, growing Georgian nationalism, and ethnic conflicts within the country (Trier et al., 2011: 2). Despite Georgia's reluctance to repatriation demands, Georgia's conditional membership to the Council of Europe in 1999 obliged the country to take the legal responsibility of repatriating the Ahıska Turks as one of the conditions of the Council of Europe membership was to organize the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. Complying with the agenda of the Council of Europe, the Georgian government promised to complete the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks within 12 years.

Nevertheless, the Georgian government stressed the difficulties of accepting Ahıska Turks, referring to the internal refugee crisis caused by the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In addition, Georgia claimed that the return of Ahıska Turks may result in an ethnic conflict with Armenians living in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (Aydingün et. al, 2006: 12). Due to Georgia's approach to the repatriation and rising discriminations against Ahıska Turks, who moved to Krasnodar (Russian Federation) years after their settlement to different parts of the Russian Federation such as Kursk, Belgorod, Rostov, and Sevastopol following the Ferghana events, international organizations tried to find an effective solution for Ahıska Turks. As a result, in 2004, the US government accepted Ahıska Turks, who came from Uzbekistan and lived in Krasnodar as refugees of "special humanitarian concern" with the status of Priority-2 (P-2). Nearly 15,000 Ahıska Turks were granted with refugee status and settled in different cities of the US such as Pennsylvania, Washington, Illinois, and Kentucky (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014; Aydingün et. al, 2006: 14).²

At the time of the migration from Krasnodar to the USA, Georgia promulgated the "Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from Georgian SSR by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century" in 2007 (Hereafter 2007 Repatriation Law) as a result of constant pressure of the Council of Europe. While this law set the legal framework for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, its implementation was ineffective and consequently Ahıska Turks, who lived in different post-Soviet countries, especially in Azerbaijan, applied to return and faced significant problems.

² For more detailed information about the US settlement see, (Swerdlow, 2006).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey also became an important destination for many Ahıska Turks. Thousands of them migrated to Turkey as free and settled migrants. Most of the Ahıska Turks who came to Turkey by their own means settled in Bursa, Antalya, and İstanbul. The first settled migration of Ahıska Turks occurred in 1992. A total of 150 families were settled in Iğdır (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 90). The second one began at the end of 2015. Based on the April 27, 2015 decision of the Council of Ministers, 2,252 Ahıska Turks who stayed in the conflict zone in the Eastern part of Ukraine³ were allowed to settle in Üzümlü (Erzincan) and Ahlat (Bitlis) (Aydingün, 2017: 305). According to current official figures, nearly 3,000 registered Ahıska Turks came to Turkey from Ukraine. Today, nearly 600,000 Ahıska Turks live in ten different countries: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the United States.

Based on the results of fieldworks and in-depth interviews conducted in Azerbaijan (Baku, Saatlı and Sabirabad) in 2015 and in Georgia⁴ (Nasakirali, Tbilisi and Tsitelubani) in 2015 and 2016, in this thesis it is argued that the repatriation has failed and there are three main reasons for the relative failure of the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. First, the monitoring of the Council of Europe remained ineffective. Although the Council of Europe had a crucial role in enacting the 2007 Repatriation Law in Georgia, it somewhat failed to monitor the process. Second, the difficulties faced during the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law and the uncertainties related to the granting of

³After the Euro-Maidan events in 2013, the Russian Federation invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014. Following these, the armed conflict between Russian separatists and Ukrainian army started in the Eastern part of Ukraine, especially in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This war posed a threat to Ahıska Turks in the conflict zone. Thus, many of them had to leave their homes, and they became internally displaced people. As mentioned above, a part of those were settled in Turkey as of 2015.

⁴ The Ahıska Turks from Georgia are mostly settled in Nasakirali, Laneti, Tbilisi, Ozurgeti, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Tsitelubani. Their estimated total population is around 1,000.

Georgian citizenship discouraged many Ahıska Turks from migrating to Georgia. During the fieldworks in Azerbaijan and Georgia, many interviewees stated that 2007 Repatriation Law made the return of Ahıska Turks to their homeland almost impossible and that this was a result of the growing Georgian nationalism at the state level. Third, although Ahıska Turks were officially defined as ethnic Georgians, they were known as Turks by the Georgian society. Accordingly, some interviewees referred to the fear in the society related to the return of Ahıska Turks as they thought that it could result in an ethnic tension with the Armenians who lived in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. This view was also put forward by some government officials. In short, this thesis argues that the ethno-religious nature of the Georgian nationalism and national identity have made the repatriation and integration of Ahıska Turks difficult. Furthermore, the weak monitoring of the Council of Europe caused the Georgian nationalist stance to influence the return process of Ahıska Turks.

1.2. The Development of the Ethno-religious Georgian Nationalism in post-Soviet Georgia and Its Impact on the Return of the Ahıska Turks

Before discussing the basic components of post-Soviet Georgian nationalism and major obstacles to the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, the Soviet heritage of ethnic diversity in Georgia should be examined. Although all the Soviet republics were affected by the Soviet nationalities policy and became multi-ethnic societies, Georgia seems to be the most affected one. Small population as it has, Georgia is ethnically and religiously one of the most diverse countries of the post-Soviet space.⁵

Soviet political structure was federal. It had four levels of regional, ethnically-based administrative units. Only Russian had federative administrative unit. There were fifty-three titular nationalities in the Soviet Union. Fifteen of them

⁵“2014 General Population Census”, Accessed: June 15, 2019, http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf

had the status of Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), twenty that of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs), eight Autonomous Region (Oblasti), and ten Autonomous Area (Okruga). Besides these autonomous units, many ethnic groups, e.g. the Abkhaz Turks, did not possess their own territory. Thus, they were not regarded as nations and they were not granted any political status. Indeed, these nationalities were at the very bottom of the Soviet political structure (Bremmer, 1993: 5 as cited in Baydar-Aydingün, 2001: 84). In this system, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic not only contained the communities without any political status and territory but also autonomous republics and oblasts. These were Abkhazian ASSR, South Osetian Autonomous Oblast, and Adjarian ASSR throughout Soviet regime. Although these administrative units were a part of Georgian SSR, they had to some extent their own social-cultural rights. The establishment of these administrative units strengthened the separate Abkhaz, South Osetian and Adjarian identities, and the communities who are not ethnically Georgian such as Abkhazs and Osetians strengthened their national identities. This entailed the development of two distinct nationalisms other than Georgian nationalism, which over time challenged the Georgian identity and, with the strategic support provided by Moscow, evolved to separatist nationalisms, conflict, and the creation of *de facto* states (Blakkisrud and Kolstø, 2012).

Towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Union suffered from severe economic, social, and political problems. The Georgian SSR was not an exception. Although significant reforms were implemented by Gorbachev during the last years of the Soviet Union, they did not solve the problems of the Georgian SSR. Nonetheless, these reforms secured an atmosphere of relative freedom in Georgia when compared to its past in the Soviet time. Taking advantage of this relatively free atmosphere, Georgian nationalist movement gained power in politics, so Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991 (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 130). However, as

mentioned above, different ethnic minorities in Georgia, Abkhazians and South Ossetians, claimed their right to be independent by referring to the Constitution of Georgia of 1921. These two secessionist movements became the major problems in the early years of independent Georgia.⁶

In the early years, independent Georgia went through an ideological vacuum due to the collapse of the Soviet structures. Georgian political elites tried to fill this ideological vacuum by forming a Western style of liberal democratic and secular state. However, economic and social problems of the country, as well as ethnic conflicts, prevented politicians from implementing the reforms. Thus, Georgian politicians largely failed to legitimize their political power. At this point, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) proved to be the most stable and trusted institution, which was a strong defender of the Georgian nation in history and a counter power to Soviet regime's discriminative policies towards the Georgian identity. Therefore, the GOC became a source of political legitimization. In other words, Georgian leaders and politicians gained political legitimacy by showing their attachment to the Orthodox Christianity and Georgianness and later to the GOC. This attachment became the main element in the post-Soviet nation building process, providing the GOC a significant place at the state and societal levels (Keskin, 2017; Aydıngün, 2013).

For Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia, being ethnically Georgian and a believer in Orthodox Christianity are the two important requirements of being a 'proper Georgian'. He used the GOC to gain political support during the severe ethnic conflicts in the country and promoted the Georgian ethno-religious nationalism to protect the territorial integrity of Georgia. In practice, however, this policy backfired, triggering minority nationalisms. This rigid discourse softened to some extent in the Shevardnaze

⁶ For more detailed information about the conflicts in the early years of independent Georgia, see (Hille, 2010)

period (1993-2003) and remained important in state politics, aiming at putting an end to the ongoing ethnic conflicts in the country. What is more, the special role of the GOC was recognized in the 1995 Constitution of Georgia, and the GOC was defined as a legal entity granting crucial privileges in 2002 with the Constitutional Agreement, known as *Concordat* (Chitanava, 2015: 42).

After the Rose Revolution in 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili, a politician different from the two former post-Soviet presidents, who were a member of the Soviet nomenklatura, came to power in 2004. In his period (2004- 2013), he made significant reforms related to ethnic minorities. The implementation of the pro-Western policies and the development of the ethnic community rights in his period could be seen as attempts at transition from ethno-religious nationalism to a civic nationalism. However, despite these attempts, the problems of ethnic minorities in Georgia continued.⁷ What is more, the ongoing ethnic tension in South Ossetia was raised by Saakashvili's claim on the necessity of reintegration of South Ossetia into Georgia. The Russian intervention in 2008 brought an end to this atmosphere. After Abkhazia, South Ossetia too declared independence, and they were recognized by the Russian Federation, despite the refusal of Georgia. Under these circumstances, Saakashvili lost his political power and promoted ethno-religious nationalism in Georgia in his second term. After Saakashvili, Giorgi Margvelashvili came to power in 2012. He also emphasized the historical significance of the GOC in Georgian history and its close ties to Georgianness (Keskin, 2017: 51-54). Salome Zourabichvili was elected as the fifth president of Georgia at the end of 2018. It is yet too early to comment on the newly elected president's approach.

⁷ For more detailed information about Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia under Saakashvili, see (Freni, 2011).

It appears that all post-Soviet political leaders in Georgia had to recognize the significance of Orthodox Christianity for Georgianness and the GOC. The growing power of the GOC in the post-Soviet period and its growing impact on the society contributed to the flourishing of an ethno-religious nationalism, which excluded the non-Georgian and non-Orthodox Christian minorities within the country, rendering their integration to the society difficult. This is especially true for the Ahıska Turks who wanted to return to Georgia after more than 70 years. As explained above, ethno-religious nationalism is dominant in Georgia. According to the findings of the fieldwork in Georgia, it is hard to claim that Ahıska Turks as a Muslim and ethnically Turkish community can integrate with the Georgian society despite the so called monitoring of the Council of Europe.

1.3. Methods

This thesis employs the data collection tools of documentary research, field research, and in-depth interviews to understand the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks and the reasons for the relative failure of it. As regards documentary research, besides an extensive analysis of related literature, non-governmental and international organizations' reports on the topic were analyzed. Also, the 2007 Repatriation Law was examined. Within the scope of the field study, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Azerbaijan's was included in the field study as it was the main source of repatriation applications. Of the 5,841 applications, 5,389 were from Azerbaijan, and it is thanks to the fieldwork in Azerbaijan that the problems in the implementation of the repatriation law of Ahıska Turks are comprehensively understood. The fieldwork in Georgia, on the other hand, provided a wealth of data on the difficulties experienced by Ahıska Turks in both the repatriation and integration Georgian society, and the nature of the growing Georgian ethno-religious nationalism.

Although most of the interviews were elite and expert interviews, a number of interviews were conducted with members of the Ahıska Turks community. The first research was carried out in September 2015 in Azerbaijan (Baku, Saatlı and Sabirabad), where 8 interviews were conducted. The second field research was carried out in Georgia (Nasakirali, Tbilisi and Tsitelubani) in October and November 2015, during which 7 in-depth interviews were conducted. Later, in April 2016, a third field study was conducted again in Georgia, where 7 in-depth interviews were carried out. As a result, a total of 22 in-depth interviews were conducted during the field research with government officials, non-governmental organization representatives, representatives of the Ahıska Turk organizations, and members of the community. In addition to these interviews, these field studies shed light onto the life of the members of the Ahıska Turk community both in Azerbaijan and Georgia, their current situation in Georgia (in Nasakirali and Tsitelubani), and their views of and expectations from the return process and integration to the Georgian society.

The main objectives of the elite and expert interviews were to understand the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and they probed various aspects such as views on the repatriation process, government policies about repatriation in different time periods, the significance of the 2007 Repatriation Law, common problems faced by Ahıska Turks in the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law, official regulations put into practice following the 2007 Law, current social and economic integration of Ahıska Turks into Georgian society, growing Georgian ethno-religious nationalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its effects on the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. The interviews with the members of the Ahıska Turk community in Georgia primarily aimed to understand the difficulties, life conditions in Georgia, major problems of they experienced during integration, their expectations from the Georgian government, their

perception towards the Georgian society and the Armenian minority in Georgia. The objectives of the interviews in Azerbaijan with members of the Ahıska Turk community were to understand the problems experienced in the application process, conflicts of the 2007 Repatriation Law, difficulties in getting the Georgian citizenship, and the reasons for the general reluctance to migrate to Georgia.

1.4. Chapters of the Thesis

This thesis is composed of five chapters. The first chapter includes introduction to the study, the development of Georgian ethno-religious nationalism, and methods used in the thesis. The second chapter presents a brief overview of the history of Ahıska Turks and their repatriation efforts in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The third chapter focuses on post-Soviet Georgian ethno-religious nationalism, state policies, and their effects on the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. Based on field studies, in-depth interviews, and related reports produced by national and international organizations, the fourth chapter discusses the reasons for the relative failure of the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. The concluding chapter analyzes the findings of the research concerning the Georgian ethno-religious nationalism.

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORY OF AHISKA TURKS

2.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to give brief information about the history of Ahıska Turks, particularly the period before, during, and after the Soviet era. The first section gives historical information on the homeland of the Ahıska Turks, which is the Ahıska region (Akhaltsikhe). The Empires and states that ruled over the region throughout history are presented in chronological order. In the second section, reasons for different appellations given to Ahıska Turks and the choice of the appellation Ahıska Turks in this thesis are discussed. These two sections explain how the debate on their ethnic origin and the naming issue of this community have become a barrier to their repatriation in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. The third section covers the discriminations faced by the Ahıska Turks in the early years of the Soviet regime, the 1944 Deportation, and various human rights violations under the ‘Special Settlement Regime’ until 1956. In the fourth section, Ahıska Turks’ efforts to return to homeland during the Soviet regime and civil society organizations dedicated to their repatriation are analyzed. The last section focuses on the post-Soviet period, the Ahıska Turks’ struggle to return to their villages, their attempts to put the repatriation issue on the international agenda, and the 2007 Repatriation Law, which is the result of the Georgia’s conditional membership to the Council of Europe in 1999. Throughout this organization, their history and struggle for the repatriation is described comprehensively. This chapter prepares the reader for the next chapter, which analyzes of the independent Georgia’s legislative frameworks of the repatriation of Ahıska Turks and the growing Georgian ethno-religious nationalism as the barrier for their repatriation.

2.2. A Brief History of Ahıska

The term “Meskhetia” used by Georgians is the historical name of the region which is located in the present-day southern Georgia bordering Turkey. Today, it is in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Regional Administration, which is one of the twelve regional administrations of Georgia. Ahıska is the capital city of it. At the time of the deportation of Ahıska Turks, this region consisted of five important districts, namely Adigheni, Aspindza, Akhalkhalaki (Ahılkelek in Turkish), Ahıska, and Bogdanovka (now Ninotsminda), having more than 200 villages. However, the Ahıska Turk population concentrated mainly in Ahıska, Adigheni, and Aspindza at the time of their deportation (Üren, 2015: 73).

As part of the South Caucasus, Ahıska region was located on significant trade and migration routes in the history, and so it was the scene to many battles among empires competing to rule this region (Swerdlow, 2006: 1833). Kipchaks played an important role in the Turkification of the region (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 37). Upon Ahıska and its surroundings’ being conquered by Sultan Alp Arslan in 1068, this region became a part of the Seljuk Empire. Georgian King David II invited the Kipchaks, who are ethnic Turks, Orthodox Christians, and known as warriors, to his country in 1118 to have them fight Seljuks. Consequently, nearly 45,000 Kipchak families from the North Caucasus were settled by King David II in Georgia (Demiray, 2012: 879). With their help, the King managed to expel Seljuks and took the control of Tbilisi from the Muslims (Üren, 2015: 89-90). However, the majority of the Kipchaks did not leave the region after the war, and they settled there permanently. What is more, they became increasingly more influential in the Georgian state due to their strong military force and the affiliation to Orthodox Christianity, similar to Georgians. Finally, they declared their independence from the Georgian state in 1267 and founded the Atabeg state in Ahıska. This state survived until the second half of the 16th century under the rule of the Akkoyunlu state,

Karakoyunlu state, and the Safavid Empire (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 37-38; Demiray, 2012: 879).

The Ottoman Empire took Atabeg state in 1578. Ahıska became the capital of the newly established Çıldır Province of the Empire. The majority of the Kipchaks, who were Orthodox Christians, converted to Islam by their own consent. Furthermore, the Oghuz Turks from Anatolia, especially Konya, Tokat, and Yozgat, were settled in Ahıska in accordance with the population transfer policy of the Ottoman Empire. Thereby, Oghuz Turks from Anatolia began to live in this region with Kurds, Karapapakhs, and other ethnic groups. The Kurds, which were already fewer, lived in the Turkish population (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 38; Avşar and Tunçalp, 1994: 6).

Ahıska region was completely under the control of the Ottoman Empire from 1578 to 1829. Following the war between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire (1828-1829), the Treaty of Adrianople was signed in 1829. By this treaty, the Russian Empire was entitled to rule this region and Ahıska was made a district province of the Tbilisi. After the Russian domination, the Turkish population started to decrease rapidly in this region as they were forced to migrate. They came to Ottoman lands and settled especially in Kars and Ardahan. As a result of the population transfer policy of the Russian Empire, in addition to 50,000 Armenians that settled in the region in 1828, around 100,000 more Armenians from the Eastern Anatolia settled in Akhalkhalaki and Ahıska (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 39). Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, or the 93 War in the literature in Turkish, which refers to old calendar, the Russian Empire seized power in Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi. While many Ahıska Turks had to migrate to Anatolia again, a significant number of Armenians were resettled in Ahıska. According to the first census of the Russian Empire in 1897, while 53% of the population of Ahıska was Turkish speaking groups, the 72% of the population of

Akhalkhalaki was composed of Armenians. Towards 1913, the Armenian population was nearly twice as large as the Ahıska Turk population (Yunusov, 2000: 22). Thus, the demographic structure of Ahıska and Akhalkhalaki changed, and the Armenian population became dominant in the region as a result of Russian Empire's policies.

The Russian Empire came to end with the October Revolution in 1917 fomented by the Bolsheviks. Newly established Bolshevik government withdrew from the First World War by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918. By this treaty, Kars, Ardahan, and Batumi were given back to the Ottoman Empire (Demiray, 2012: 879; Hille, 2010: 53). After the breakdown of the Russian Empire, a civil war broke between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, which lasted nearly three years. Meanwhile, the Republic of Armenia, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Georgia formed Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic in 1918. According to the Treaty of Batumi signed on June 4, 1918, the Ottoman Empire regained Ahıska with this federative republic. Nonetheless, on October 30, 1918, the Mudros Armistice marked the end of the Ottoman Empire's involvement in the First World War. As a result of this armistice, the Ottoman Empire had to leave Ahıska (Üren, 2015: 102). Although Ahıska Turks established their 'Temporary Government of Ahıska' and demanded to join the Ottoman Empire in 1918, the Democratic Republic of Georgia took over this region (Yunusov, 2000: 24). However, its domination did not last long. Bolsheviks annexed Georgia in 1921 and took control of Georgia.

Similar to the aforementioned political changes in the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire went through important political transformation. Officially defeated in the First World War, the Ottoman Empire signed Mudros Armistice in 1918. Turkish National Movement started as a reaction to the victorious Allied powers' plan to share the territory of the Ottoman Empire and their

initial annexations. To guarantee the national sovereignty, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey was established on April 23, 1920, and it became the pioneer in the Turkish War of Independence. Meanwhile, the Turkish Parliament fostered political relations with neighboring countries so as to set the country's borders. The eastern border of Turkey was finalized by the Treaty of Moscow and Kars signed in 1921 between the Turkish Parliament and the Bolsheviks. Ahıska, Akhalkhalaki, and Batumi returned to the Bolsheviks, but Kars and Ardahan was given to Turkey (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 39-40)⁸. From 1921 to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the homeland of Ahıska Turks was ruled by the Soviet regime.

2.3. Ahıska Turks: Different Names for the Same Ethnic Community

As mentioned in the previous section, Ahıska Turks were living in Adigheni, Aspindza, Akhalkhalaki, Ahıska, and Bogdanovka at the time of their deportation in 1944, and their population mainly concentrated in Ahıska, Adigheni, and Aspindza. They speak the East Anatolian dialect of Turkish. Although they are culturally very close to Anatolian Turks, they have some cultural features in common with Caucasian communities, especially with Georgians (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 10). The majority of the community members name themselves as 'Ahıska Turks', and stick to Turkish identity (Yunusov, 2000; Aydingün, 2001; Buntürk, 2001, Buntürk, 2007; Demiray, 2012, Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014, Üren, 2015). Only few name themselves as 'Meskhetians' and stick to Georgian identity. Nonetheless, the naming of Ahıska community is still a controversial issue. Indeed, there is no consensus on the exact ethnic origin of the Ahıska Turks. The naming of this community also differs parallel to the debate related to their ethnic origin and historical homeland. The naming issue is a consequence of two important and conflicting perspectives:

⁸ For more detailed information about Kars and Moscow Treaties, see (Hille, 2010: 100-102).

Turkish people and the majority of the Ahıska Turks have commonly adopted the first perspective on their ethnic origin and naming. According to this perspective, the ethnic origin of the Ahıska Turks dates back to Bun-Turks and Scythians, who are the ancestors of Kıpçaks. Kırzioğlu (1992: 32) confirms the existence of the Scythians and Bun-Turks in the region in 720 B.C. (cited in Üren, 2015: 88). The existence of Turkic tribes in ancient Georgia is also mentioned in the Georgian annals (Yunusov, 2000: 10). In this regard, the ethnic origin of the Ahıska Turks is accepted as local Turkic tribes, which puts Ahıska Turks' region into perspective. Ahıska is accepted as the historical homeland of Ahıska Turks, and the appellation Ahıska Turks includes Turks, Kurds, and Karapapakhs living in the region until the Soviet Union was founded in 1921. Although there was a small Kurdish population, this community united under the Turkish identity over time. Thus, the term Ahıska Turk does not refer to a homogeneous ethnic community, but to an ethnically heterogeneous group.

The second perspective on the ethnic origin and naming of Ahıska Turk is provided by Georgia and the Russian Federation. Here, the region is named as 'Meskhetia'. Both countries reject the existence of ethnic Turks in this region. According to them, they are Georgians, and their origin goes back to 'Meskhs', which is one of the oldest Georgian tribes (Blandy, 1998: 8-12). However, this claim is lacking scientific evidence. Although some historical sources state that the region is named after the Meskh tribe, there is no clear information about the origin (Demiray, 2012). This view also supports that ethnic Georgians who lived in Meskhetia were forcibly converted to Islam and Turkified during the Ottoman Empire period, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries (Sumbadze, 2007). Thus, the appellations 'Meskhi' 'Meskhetian', and 'Muslim Meskhetian', referring to Meskhetia region, are used by the Georgian officials.

Before the 1944 Deportation, there were not any appellations such as Ahıska Turks or Meskhetians. Communities living in Ahıska and its surroundings were named as Kurds, Turks, Karapapakhs, and Khemshins in the early Soviet censuses. Since 1920s, those registered as Turk were subjected to various discriminations and forced to take Georgian surnames. They were registered as ‘Azeri’ in the 1939 census (Trier, et. al., 2011: 10). Georgian and Soviet authorities have named the Ahıska Turks as ‘Meskhetians’ or ‘Muslim Meskhetians’ since 1960s. The appellation ‘Ahıska Turk’ has been widely used since 1980s (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 36). Ahıska Turks have been referred to as ‘Meskhetian Turks’ in the Lahey Negotiations in 1998 (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 10).

The use of all these different namings for this community has political reasons. It is mainly related to the potential return of the Ahıska Turks to the region. While Turkey usually emphasizes their Turkic origin, Georgia advocates the idea that they are ethnic Georgians. Throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, Georgia has covertly imposed the acceptance of the Georgian origin as a condition for the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. However, the possibility of a combined view is ignored by both sides. In fact, the ethnic origin of Ahıska Turks can be seen as a combination of the Turkic ancient tribes, Oghuz Turks from Anatolia, and the ethnic Georgians who accepted Islam during Ottoman period.

In this thesis, as a sociologist, the appellation of ‘Ahıska Turks’ is used in order to respect to the self-identification of community members. In the interviews conducted in Azerbaijan, they identified themselves as Ahıska Turks and emphasized their Turkish identity.⁹ However, in Georgia, most of the

⁹ Research demonstrates that in all countries they live, except Georgia, they identify themselves as ‘Ahıska Turks’ or just ‘Turks’.

community members in line with Georgian orientation introduced themselves as Meskhetians and stressed their Georgian origins. Considering especially the repatriation efforts in 1970s and 1980s and data obtained from interviews and observations, it seems that they used this naming as a strategy for settling in Georgia. Moreover, this group, which presents themselves as Georgian, may have felt obliged by the Georgian state to name themselves so. One of the interviewees in Georgia (Tsitelubani) stated that the debate on their naming and ethnicity damages their life in Georgia.¹⁰ For this reason, most of them hesitate to talk about this topic.

2.4. Before the 1944 Deportation (1921-1944)

As mentioned earlier, Georgia's first period of independence was in 1918 following the collapse of the Russian Empire. The Democratic Republic of Georgia continued to exist till 1921, when the Bolsheviks seized the power. It became one of the republics of the Soviet Union in 1922. However, the repressions and various human right violations in the period of the Russian Empire kept on going in the Soviet Union. Especially Stalin implemented discriminative policies to consolidate his power and the socialist regime. Under his rule from 1922 to 1953, nearly six million people were deported from their homelands to different parts of the Soviet Union with various reasons such as labor force transfer, disloyalty to socialist regime, treason, collaboration with Germany during the Second World War, and untrustworthiness because of ethnic origin. Ahıska Turks was one of the communities which were prone to Soviet discriminations and subjected to deportation. They were considered as untrustworthy from the early years of the Soviet regime due to their close ethnic ties with Turkey. Especially in the 1930s, Soviet regime's repressive policies against Ahıska Turks forced many to flee to Turkey (Buntürk, 2007).

¹⁰ Interview, Tsitelubani (Georgia), April 4, 2016.

The policies pursued by the Soviet Union towards the Ahıska Turks from 1920s to 1944 can be analyzed twofold. First one is related to *korenizatsiya* (indigenization or nativization) policies initiated by Lenin in 1923. As there were massive Russification policies put pressure on non-Russian ethnic communities during the Russian Empire period. After its collapse, the newly established Soviet regime adopted the right of self-determination to all communities to convince the formerly oppressed minorities to join the Soviet Union. This granted the officially recognized nationalities relatively free administrative units. For instance, they had the right to use their own national language. However, following Lenin, this policy no longer served its purpose. Stalin's nationalities policy resulted in merging of many groups. Thus, the number of ethnic groups diminished. He ceased to recognize the existence of certain communities which were considered as 'dangerous' to the socialist regime. His aim was to melt the unrecognized nations into recognized ones (Baydar-Aydingün, 2001) and probably to merge the Muslim Turkish population with other Muslim Turkic Central Asian communities. This policy explains one of the reasons for the deportation of Ahıska Turks.

Briefly, Ahıska Turks were not regarded as one of the officially recognized nationalities according to the Soviet Nationalities Policy. They were deprived of the right to an autonomous administration in line with the merging policy. They were called 'Azerbaijani', and the Soviet regime attempted to dissolve them under the 'Azerbaijani' identity. In the 1939 census, those who were identified as "Turk" in their passports were registered as 'Azerbaijani' (Conquest, 1970: 48). As an unrecognized nationality in the Soviet Union, they could not benefit from the *korenizatsiya* policy, e.g., they could not study in Turkish language (Keskin and Gürsoy, 2017: 19).

Another discriminatory policy of the Soviet Regime against the Ahıska Turks is the collectivization policy. The aim of collectivization was to integrate

individual farms into state-owned collective farms, called as *kolkhozes*. While it aimed to increase food supply, it also intended to decrease the power of the prosperous peasants known as *kulaks*. The collectivization process, wherein the individual farmers were forced to join *kolkhozy* and their lands were confiscated by the regime, began in the Ahıska region in 1929. Like all other communities within the Soviet Union, Ahıska Turks were severely affected by this. Leaders of the Ahıska Turks who opposed to collectivization were labelled as ‘enemies of the Soviet regime’. Thus, they were deported to *gulags*, forced labor camps (Buntürk, 2007: 190). Thus, some Ahıska Turks were deprived of their leaders and elites in the early years of the Stalin period (Aliyeva, 2013, 2691).

With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, life for Ahıska Turks got more difficult. Furthermore, nearly 40,000 Ahıska Turkish men, whose age range is 15 to 55, were recruited to Soviet army, and they were sent to the German front. Children, women, and the elderly who stayed at home were employed in the construction of the railway from Ahıska to Borjomi (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 276; Buntürk, 2007: 197). Ironically, in 1944, they were deported by the same railway.

2.5. The 1944 Deportation and Life under the ‘Special Settlement Regime’ till 1956

The Soviet Union State Committee of Defense took the decision to deport Turks, Kurds, and Khemshins (in total 86,000 people) from Ahıska, Adigheni, Aspindza, Akhalkhalaki, and Bogdanovka regions, and the Adjarian Autonomous Republic on July 31, 1944. Consequently, nearly 100,000 Ahıska Turks were deported from their homeland to the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan on November 14, 1944. Furthermore, Turks, Kurds, Khemshins¹¹ who lived in Adjarian Autonomous Republic were

¹¹ There was no mention of Karapapakhs in the deportation order.

deported to the same republics in the Central Asia on November 25-26 in the same year (Trier et.al. 2011: 12). There is a little consensus on the reasons for the deportation of Ahıska Turks. The common view among academicians is that Ahıska Turks were perceived as an untrustworthy community by the Soviet regime due to their ethnic and religious proximity to Turkey. Thus, they were suspected of espionage in the border of Turkey. Therefore, the cleansing of them would eliminate potential risks in case of Turkey's attack to the Soviet Union during the Second World War (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 276-277). In addition, Zeyrek (1995:25) argues that Stalin aimed to annex Ardahan in Turkey. To this end, he deported pro-Turkish communities along the border. According to the Soviet official purpose, the reason for the deportation of Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars, who were also deported during the Second World War, was their collaboration with the Germans. However, this cannot apply to the deportation of the Ahıska Turks. At that time, Germans were far away from the Ahıska region, and at that time German troops were in retreat (Baydar-Aydingün, 1998).

There are different estimations of the exact number of deported Ahıska Turks. They vary between 80,000 and 200,000. For example, according to Khazanov (1995:198), the total number of deported Ahıska Turks was 81,026. Pentikainen and Trier (2004: 11) argue that 90,000-120.000 Ahıska Turks were deported. Conquest (1987: 183) states that 200,000 Ahıska Turks were deported. Among them, there were 3,000 Kurds and 1,000 Khemshins. The number of deported Ahıska Turks is also different in the Soviet official document: 91,095 Ahıska Turks were deported on November 28, 1944. According to another Soviet official document, in 1944 December, 92,307 Ahıska Turks were deported from Georgia. The report prepared in 1949 by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Justice declares that 94,955 Ahıska Turks were forced to move from their homeland (Uravelli, 2009: 8-11). Beyond these figures, nearly 10-15,000 Ahıska Turkish men who managed to

return from the front following the end of the war were denied permission to reside in Ahıska (Oh, 2006: 127), so they had to search their relatives in Central Asia. The figures for the Ahıska Turks who died during the deportation also tend to vary in different sources. Although the number of the deaths was relatively low in the Soviet official documents, it varies between 15,000 and 50.000 (Baydar-Aydingün, 2001: 63).

Ahıska Turks had to live under the Special Settlement Regime in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. From the 1944 Deportation until the abolishment of the ‘Special Settlement Regime’ in 1956, they were deprived of their fundamental rights. For example, they were obliged to live in restricted areas designated by Moscow. It was forbidden for them to leave these restricted areas without the permission of the local officials. The head of the family was obliged to periodically check in with local officials. In other words, Ahıska Turks had to go to local authorities to sign a document once a month in order to prove that they still reside in their address. The head of the family also had to register any changes in the family such as birth, death, or escape. Marriage with people who live in other restricted areas was also banned. Punishment for violations of these regulations was 15 to 20 years in the *gulag* camps, which made it impossible for Ahıska Turks to meet their relatives in other restricted areas. They were detached from their relatives during the Special Settlement Regime. They mostly worked as agricultural laborers under poor working conditions (Keskin and Gürsoy, 2017: 21-22; Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 278-270, Trier, et. al., 2011: 14; Buntürk, 2007: 216; Oh, 2006: 129). Because of the low living standards in the restricted areas, the death rate of the Ahıska Turks was very high. According to Tolz (1991: 19), the birthrate in deported Ahıska Turks could exceed the death rate only after the first five years under the ‘Special Settlement Regime’. In addition to poor life conditions, the internal conflicts in the countries they were deported to and hostility of some local groups seriously affected Ahıska Turks. They worked hard to survive and adapt to the regions to

which they were deported. As a result, the national consciousness of Ahıska Turks strengthened in exile, and a large number of ethnic groups such as Kurds, Karapapakhs, and some Khemshins unified under the Ahıska Turk identity (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 1, 46).

2.6. The Removal of the Special Settlement Regime in 1956 and the Efforts of Ahıska Turks to Return to their Homeland during the Soviet Regime (1956-1991)

After Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev came to power in 1956. In his speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress held on February 14-25, 1956, Khrushchev criticized the policies of Stalin, and drew attention to the crimes he committed. In this speech, he also brought up the rehabilitation of five deported nationalities, namely Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, and Karachais and declared that they were allowed to return to their homeland. However, he did not mention the Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Ahıska Turks. After two months, with the decree of April 28, 1956, he lifted the 'Special Settlement Regime', freeing all the deported nationalities. Still, the removal of the 'Special Settlement Regime' did not cover the repatriation of Volga Germans, Crimean Tatars, and Ahıska Turks (Kreindler, 395-396). Among the three, only Ahıska Turks had not had an autonomous administrative unit before the deportation, so they were not officially recognized as a nationality. Furthermore, the majority of Georgian political elites opposed the repatriation of Ahıska Turks due to the possibility of ethnic conflict between Ahıska Turks and local population resettled following the deportation in 1944. In addition, the homeland of Ahıska Turks was a highly strategic region as it has a common border with Turkey, which is a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Thus, Ahıska Turks' returning to their homeland was strictly prohibited. (Trier et. al., 2011: 18). There, they established organizations to return to their homeland shortly after the abolishment of the 'Special Settlement Regime'.

Returning to homeland was the top of Ahıska Turks' first meeting held in Uzbekistan shortly after the speech of Khrushchev at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress. In this meeting, it was decided that a delegation would be sent to Moscow to make a demand for repatriation. However, Ahıska Turks' delegation did not receive any response. What is more, Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR enacted a decree on October 31, 1957. According to this decree, Ahıska Turks were acknowledged as Azerbaijanis. It was stated that Azerbaijanis were mistakenly deported from Georgian SSR to the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek SSR. Due to the incapability of Georgian SSR to accept them, they were free to resettle in the Azerbaijan SSR (Yunusov, 2007: 175). For many Ahıska Turks who were registered as Azerbaijanis and granted passports, Azerbaijan SSR was an attractive destination compared to Central Asian republics. They felt closer to Azeris because of the ethnical and cultural proximity. Azerbaijan SSR was also geographically near their homeland in Georgia. In addition, Azerbaijani authorities welcomed their migration to the Azerbaijan SSR. In 1958, First Secretary of Azerbaijan Communist Party, Imam Mustafayev passed a special decree for Ahıska Turks' settlement in Azerbaijan. Subsequently, 10,000 Ahıska Turks moved to the country between 1958 and 1961. The number of Ahıska Turks who resettled in Azerbaijan reached 25,000 at the end of the 1960s. They mainly settled in Saatlı and Sabirabad districts. They gave the names of their former villages to their new villages in Azerbaijan (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 286).

Ahıska Turks continued their organized activities with increasing perseverance to return to homeland since the early 1960s. Throughout this time, two main ideological orientations stood out. The first one supported the view that the Ahıska Turks have Georgian origins. As mentioned before, this view supported that Ahıska Turks were in fact Georgians, and they had been forcibly converted to Islam during the Ottoman's period. They needed to return to Georgia, which

was their original homeland. This perspective won adherents in the mid-1960s, at the end of the 1970s, and the early 1980s. The second ideological orientation emphasized the Turkish identity of Ahıska Turks. It asserted that Ahıska Turks who identify themselves as Georgian are traitors. Their homeland is not the entire Georgia, but just the Ahıska region. This view became popular at the end of the 1960s, in the early 1970s, and at the end of the 1980s. However, the boundary between these two ideological orientations was blurred. The leaders known as the supporter of the Turkish orientation claimed their Georgian origin, and vice versa. They worked together and participated in organizations issuing the repatriation of Ahıska Turks (Osipov and Swerdlow, 2007: 571). Consequently, the group defending the idea that Ahıska Turks were ethnically Turkish was much more strongly supported by the members of the community (Panesh and Ermolov, 1994: 595). Nonetheless, it is obvious that the conflicts on the ethnic origin and returning strategies to homeland undermined their effort to be repatriated.

Ahıska Turks held a congress in 1964. In this congress, they decided to establish the Turkish Society for the Defense of National Rights of the Turkish People in Exile with a Provisional Organizing Committee for the Return of the People to the Homeland. Enver Odabashev, supporter of the Turkish orientation, was selected as the chairman of the committee (Osipov and Swerdlow, 2007: 566). Their constant initiatives to return to homeland were ignored or rejected by the authorities in Moscow (Buntürk, 2007: 233).

The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR took the decision on May 30, 1968: like all Soviet citizens, “Turks, Kurds, Khemhsins, Azerbaijanis” who were deported from Georgian SSR have the right to reside anywhere in the Soviet Union in conformity with existing regulations on employment and passports. This decision, in a way, stated that Ahıska Turks may permanently live in Central Asian Republics. Thus, the restrictions on their return to their

original villages were not lifted in practice (Khazanov, 1995: 199-200). What is more, the Soviet authorities increased pressure on the Ahıska Turk organizations upon several protests against the 1968 decision of the Soviet Union. Although this decision did not allow the Ahıska Turks to return to their homeland, it earned them official recognition by the Soviet regime (Üren, 2015: 173). Ultimately, the efforts of Ahıska Turks to return to homeland gained new impetus, with organizations fighting for repatriation increasing.

In the beginning of 1970s, Ahıska Turks continued their protests against the Soviet government, which repeatedly rejected their repatriation demands. Enver Odabashev and other important Ahıska Turk leaders applied to Turkish Embassy in Moscow to obtain permission to migrate to Turkey. This was finally approved in the ‘All People’s Congress’ of Ahıska Turks on May 2, 1970. Having also declared a manifesto starting with the ‘We are Turks’, Ahıska Turks requested punishment of the officials who are responsible for the deportation, compensation of the damages caused by the deportation, the establishment of Ahıska Turks autonomous republic or province within the Georgian SSR, and return to their homeland. They also stated that even if these demands were not satisfied, their migration to Turkey should be permitted. However, Ahıska Turks did not receive a response from the Soviet authorities (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 281). Thus, Ahıska Turk delegation visited the Turkish Embassy in Moscow once again in 1971 to express their demand to migrate to Turkey. Following this, the leaders of Ahıska Turks who were in the delegation visiting the Embassy were sentenced to from 8 months to 3,5 years imprisonment with various pretexts such as illegal occupation of state land, opposition to Soviet regime, and hooliganism. This remarkably declined Ahıska Turks’ activism for repatriation. However, new leaders such as Yusuf Sarvarov continued to organize meetings so as to reiterate their repatriation demands to Soviet authorities (Osipov and Swerdlow, 2007: 568).

The Eighth Congress took place in Kabardino-Balkaria ASSR on June 18, 1976. In this congress, as mentioned previously, two groups were formed. The first group was strategically accepting the Georgian origin because Georgian SSR allowed their repatriation on the single condition that Ahıska Turks recognize Georgian ethnic roots and change their surnames. The second group rejected any tactical denial of their Turkish identity. Thus, the congress clearly polarized in their endeavor towards repatriation of Ahıska Turks. What is more, following the local conventions in Azerbaijan, Yusuf Sarvarov was arrested in 1982, and he was sentenced to two years of imprisonment (Osipov and Swerdlow, 2007: 568). Just as in the Eighth Congress, the tactics for returning to Georgia were debated in Ninth Congress held in 1988 in Baku, but the decision to continue the struggle for unconditional return, without compromising Turkishness, was taken (Baydar-Aydingün, 2001: 67). This congress was called the ‘Congress of Unification’ (Yunusov, 2000: 35).

Hopes grew for Ahıska Turks’ return to Georgia after Gorbachev’s policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* starting in 1985. However, these policies triggered titular group nationalism throughout the Soviet Union. Georgian SSR was not an exception. Feelings of Georgian nationalism were burgeoning, and Georgia was perceived by non-titular groups as a threat to national security. Ahıska Turks were also adversely affected by this. In addition, ethnic clashes occurred between Uzbeks and Ahıska Turks in 1989, particularly in Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan. Ahıska Turks who lived in Uzbekistan were subjected to pogrom and persecutions in the Ferghana Valley. A total of 52 Ahıska Turks died, and nearly 1,000 were wounded, not to mention their homes damaged. Nearly 17,000 Ahıska Turks were evacuated by the Soviet army to the Russian Federation. When violence against Ahıska Turks spread, many Ahıska Turks from other regions of Uzbekistan had to leave the country. Thus, nearly 90,000 Ahıska Turks had to migrate to other Soviet Socialist Republics, especially to Azerbaijan, Russia, and Ukraine (Trier, et. al., 2011: 27). Following these

migrations, the population of Ahıska Turks became more dispersed. Furthermore, the Turkishness of Ahıska Turks became agenda, and the view that they can be a source of conflict in Georgia strengthened (Baydar-Aydingün, 2001). At this point, the Soviet Union could not remain indifferent to the problems of the Ahıska Turks because the Ferghana Events of 1989 attracted worldwide attention, making this community visible to the outer world.

Following the Ferghana Events, Ahıska Turks took a more rigid stance in their return struggle. They organized the first official meeting permitted by the Soviet authorities. At the meeting organized in 1990, Provisional Organizing Committee for the Return of the People to the Homeland changed its name to *Vatan* (Homeland in English). The newly named organization was officially recognized by the Soviet regime in 1991 (Yunusov, 2007: 37).

Towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Soviet regime issued a new decree on March 7, 1991 referring to the law of 1989 ‘On the Recognition as unlawful and Criminal of Repressive Measures against People Subjected to Forced Deportation and on the Guaranteeing of their Rights’. According to this decree, all deported communities had the right to return to their homeland regardless of whether they had an autonomous administration unit at the time of their deportation or not. This decree also ensured the compensation of material loss during deportation. In addition, it guaranteed the social, cultural, and economic rehabilitation of deported people who wish to return to their homeland. More interestingly, this decree was enforcing the punishment of those who try to hinder the rehabilitation of deported people (Bougai, 1996). Ahıska Turks, like other deported people, were entitled to return to their homeland. However, this legislation was not implemented by the Soviet authorities due to the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

Consequently, Ahıska Turks' movement of return to their homeland entered a far more complex phase (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 283; Yunusov, 2000: 37).

From 1962 to 1989, Ahıska Turks held ten congresses. The main purpose of these congresses was to discuss and decide on the return strategies. Despite the fact that many Ahıska Turk delegations were sent to both Moscow and Tbilisi several times and many initiatives were undertaken to appeal the attention of the international organizations, the Soviet regime did not produce effective policies for their rehabilitation. What is more, the recognition of the historical Georgian identity, which is one of the tactics to return to the homeland, has weakened the repatriation efforts of Ahıska Turks, breaking unity among community members (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 282; Aydıngün ve Aydıngün, 2014: 53; Panesh ve Ermolov, 1994: 592-596).

Briefly, shortly after the removal of the Special Settlement Regime in 1956, Ahıska Turks attempted to return to Georgia. As mentioned above, the 1968 Decision was a turning point on their repatriation demand. Indeed, it could be considered as the beginning of a more substantial repatriation. From 1956 to early 1970s, many Ahıska Turks managed to settle in Georgia. However, they were exposed to pressure from the Georgian authorities, so they had to leave the country. For example, six or seven Ahıska Turks families settled in Georgia following the resettlement in Azerbaijan in 1958. However, Georgian SSR expelled these families from the country and took additional precautions to prevent Ahıska Turks from making further settlement attempts. Moreover, 245 Ahıska Turks families who broke the ban on resettlement in Georgia were also expelled from the country in July 1960 and February 1961. In 1969, nearly 500 Ahıska Turk families, who settled in the coastal plain in Georgia and who were welcomed by the local population, were also forced to move from the region by the Georgian authorities (Sheehy and Nahaylo, 1980: 25). Similarly, in 1977, nine families who lived in the North Caucasus and managed to settle in

Nasakirali in Georgia, were also forced to move from Georgia when they were identified as the deported Ahıska Turks (Baratashvili, 1998). As mentioned before, especially Georgian SSR rejected their repatriation demands. According to Zeyrek (1995), Yusuf Sarvarov claimed that there were at least seven decisions taken by the Soviet government related to repatriation of Ahıska Turks between 1968 to 1987 (as cited in Baydar-Aydingün, 2001: 69). Nonetheless, Georgian SSR deliberately put forward several reasons for denying their repatriation. The harsh attitude of the Georgian SSR on their repatriation softened only when Ahıska Turks identified themselves as Muslim Georgians. From 1982 to 1988, 380 families (1,972 people) came to Georgia with the help of the *Hsna* (Salvation in English) association, which promoted Georgian identity. However, 218 families (1,132 people) were forced to leave Georgia despite their acceptance of Georgianness. There were only 162 Ahıska Turk families (840 people) left within the borders of Georgia in 1988 (Yunusov, 2000).

Consequently, many Ahıska Turks officially or informally had the opportunity to settle in Georgia. Although some of them continued to live in Georgia, others were forced to leave Georgia as a result of repressions from the Georgian authorities. The attempts at resettlement in Georgia largely failed throughout the Soviet regime for two main reasons: the different ideologies in the Ahıska Turks organizations and the possibility of the ethnic conflict between Armenians and Ahıska Turks in Samtskhe-Javakheti, which was promoted by the Georgian authorities in the Soviet period.

2.7. The Repatriation Efforts of Ahıska Turks after the Dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991-2019)

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new independent Georgia was established with the mission of integrating to the West, promoting democratization, and ensuring the minority rights within the country. In accordance with these purposes, Georgia attempted to be part of the international organizations in the very early years of independence. The new attitude of Georgia raised hopes that Ahıska Turks' unsolved repatriation problems could come to an end. Nonetheless, the hopes of Ahıska Turks to return to their homeland dashed due to economic, social, and political problems of Georgia. Especially the growing ethno-religious Georgian nationalism created ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As a matter of fact, Georgian officials fueled the fear that Ahıska Turks would be a new source of ethnic conflict in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where Armenian population is concentrated (Aydingün, 2002). While expecting the regulation which renders repatriation possible, many Ahıska Turks who had formerly settled in Georgia were expelled in 1992. Georgia was indeed reluctant to solve the repatriation problem and held the Russian Federation, the successor state of the Soviet Union, responsible for solving this problem. The Russian Federation, however, took no responsibility for their repatriation and blamed the Georgian authorities. In brief, the Ahıska Turks could not find the lawful authority to solve their problems after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Therefore, Ahıska Turk organizations tried to bring the repatriation issue on the international agenda to force Georgia to adopt the necessary policies (Keskin and Gürsoy, 2017: 34).

Vatan Society especially focused on this aim by stressing the Turkish roots of Ahıska Turks. Meanwhile, *Hsna* established in 1992 with support of Georgia (Trier et. al., 2011: 32) and succeeded by the Union of Georgian Repatriates in

1999, worked actively for the resettlement of Ahıska Turks in Georgia by recognizing Georgian roots. As mentioned previously, the members of this association accepted the Georgian roots for their ethnic identity. Furthermore, according to this association, Georgia, not only the Ahıska region, was entirely the homeland of the Ahıska Turks. In fact, *Hsna* became the voice of Georgian official propaganda in the internal platforms. Although this association received considerable support from Georgia and actively continued to its activities, it could not get extensive support from the Ahıska Turks in general (Yunusov, 2000: 40). In other words, the efforts for repatriation process were predominantly organized by Vatan Society.

As mentioned in the previous section, Vatan Society was founded in 1990, and it was officially recognized by the Soviet regime in 1991. Its name was changed to International Vatan Society in the first Congress, which was held on November 20-21, 1992. Yusuf Sarvarov was elected as the president of this association. This association pursued two primary aims: the formal recognition of the unlawful deportation of Ahıska Turks in 1944 and attainment of the official right to return to their original villages without pressure to accept Georgian ethnic roots (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 27). After completing the organizational structure of the association, the International Vatan Society endeavored to carry the repatriation issue to the international platform: Having the issue of refugee problems and displaced persons handled at the Commonwealth of Independent State Conference in 1996 was the first achievement of involvement in the international platforms. Thanks to this meeting, the repatriation issue of Ahıska Turks was officially recognized (Swerdlow, 2006: 1849). Following this meeting, the issue of repatriation attracted considerable attention of international organizations.

The International Vatan Society also succeeded to become a member of the 41st Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN) Congress held in Romania in

1996. With these two significant achievements, the reports prepared by international organizations such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) regularly included the problems of Ahıska Turks and suggested Georgia on what needs to be done. On September 7-10, 1998, the International Vatan Society participated in the Hague Meeting organized by OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, UNHCR, and the Forced Migration Projects of the Open Society Institute (FMP-OSI). The representatives of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, and Georgia also attended this meeting. Preparing documents on the exact population on Ahıska Turks in different countries, information sharing among diverse stakeholders, drawing the attention of the international community to the repatriation issue, stressing the rehabilitation of Ahıska Turks within the framework of human rights, and taking action to prevent possible ethnic conflicts in the historical homeland of Ahıska Turks were the significant outcomes of the Hague Meeting (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 31-32). The most important result of the meeting was the acceptance of the term ‘Meskhetian Turks’ for Ahıska Turks on the international platforms (Kütükçü, 2005: 275). The acceptance of this appellation satisfied Georgia to some extent as Meskhetia was emphasized, and Turkey as Turkishness was stressed.

Following the Hague meeting, Vienna meeting was organized on 15-17 March 1999 by the OSCE, the UNHCR, and the FMP-OSI. In addition to former participants, the delegations from Turkey, Ukraine, the USA, and the Council of Europe attended meeting. The usual problems of Ahıska Turks were discussed. Furthermore, the subject of legal repatriation or integration of Ahıska Turks to the Russian Federation was raised by Georgian officials, but the representatives of Russian Federation clamorously refused it (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 33-34). Due to the outbreak of the Kosovo crisis and shift of international attention to it, this meeting failed to produce an effective solution for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks (Üren, 2015: 335).

The International Vatan Society persevered with the work towards Ahıska Turks' repatriation. These constant attempts produced results when Georgia became a conditional member of the Council of Europe in 1999. The condition that Georgia should fulfill was to prepare a legal framework for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks to negotiate with the Council of Europe. This legal framework, including granting citizenship of Georgia, had to be prepared within two years following the membership (2001). The repatriation and integration of Ahıska Turks were to be completed by 2011. Nonetheless, political and economic instability in Georgia hindered the fulfillment of this condition. Although positive steps were taken by Saakashvili following the Rose Revolution in 2003, the legal framework for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks was not prepared. Thanks to warnings issued by the Council of Europe, Georgia promulgated the "Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from Georgian SSR by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century" in 2007. Nonetheless, the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law was delayed due to the August War between Georgia and Russia in 2008. Although many Ahıska Turks tried to apply for the repatriation, the difficulties in the application process and the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law made the repatriation almost impossible. Furthermore, unsolved integration problems posed a challenge for the Ahıska Turks who managed to settle in, or wished to return to, Georgia (Keskin et. al., 2016).

In 1999, following Georgia's membership to the Council of Europe, only 643 Ahıska Turks were registered in the country. They settled mostly in Nasakirali, İaneti, Tbilisi, and Javakheti. By 2005, the number of Ahıska Turks registered in Georgia had reached 755. Of them, 163 were temporarily settled in Georgia. Consequently, 113 Ahıska Turks could repatriate to Georgia between 1991 and 2005 (Sumbadze, 2007). Although there are no exact figures concerning how

many Ahıska Turks benefited from the 2007 Repatriation Law, according to official statistics, only seven Ahıska Turks could manage to acquire Georgian citizenship after this law.

As well as Georgia's reluctance and social, economic, and political problems of country, the organizational problems in the Ahıska Turks associations constituted a challenge for their repatriation. The population of Ahıska Turks was geographically dispersed, and thus many different associations were founded in different countries where Ahıska Turks lived. They were also divided by different ideological orientations on their identification. These different organizations had met on common ground for enticing Georgia to promulgate the legal framework on the repatriation since the mid-1990s. The achievements of the International Vatan Society in the international platforms encouraged the local associations to cooperate with each other. However, the death of Yusuf Sarvarov in 2003 launched a competition for leadership, and this sparked the existing fragmentation within community again, while Georgia had to pressed more to prepare and implement an effective legal framework.

In order to solve mentioned organizational problems, the World Union of Ahıska Turks (Dünya Ahıska Türkleri Birliği- DATÜB) was founded in İstanbul on May 24, 2010 based on the Article 1 of the Turkish Law 3335 on Establishment of International Organizations. The primary aim of this Union is to gather different Ahıska Turks associations in the world under a single roof, and continue to struggle for the repatriation in an organized manner. In addition, the Union aimed at developing action plans to improve the conditions of Ahıska Turks wherever they live. To achieve these objectives, DATÜB met several times with officials from Turkey and Georgia as well as the international organizations' officials. It has brought all problems encountered by Ahıska Turks on the international agenda. Becoming a competent authority for Ahıska Turks having trouble all over the world, this Union plays an active

role in fighting for the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks and finding solutions to their problems (Keskin and Anaç, 2016: 286).

2.8. Migration to Turkey after the Dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991-2019)

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, Turkey became a preferred destination of immigration for the victims of post-Soviet discriminative policies, wishing to escape from the growing ethnic tension and to overcome economic problems. Many of them perceived Turkey as their homeland, and they thought that they would not be subjected to ethnic discrimination in Turkey as they were Turks. Therefore, for them, Turkey was an important option for a better life. Due to the 1989 pogrom that occurred in Uzbekistan and severe human right violations that took place in Krasnodar, many Ahıska Turks decided to migrate to Turkey. In addition, problems caused by growing nationalisms in the post-Soviet countries where Ahıska Turks lived and the worsening economic conditions significantly influenced their decision to migrate to Turkey (Aydingün, 2007: 341). As a result of both settled and free migrations since 1991, more than 100,000 Ahıska Turks have now settled in Turkey. There are also irregular migrants who come to Turkey to work seasonally. Neither does the above estimation reflect the number of Ahıska Turks who and settled mainly in Kars and Ardahan from the mid-1800s to the Second World War.¹²

Ahıska Turks, facing severe problems in the former Soviet space, persistently demanded to migrate to Turkey between 1989 and 1993. As the migration of Turks from Bulgaria was on the agenda of Turkey, the migration demands of Ahıska Turks could not be handled by Turkish government. However, by the

¹² “30 binden fazla Ahıska Türkünün vatandaşlık işlemleri tamamlandı.”, Accessed: July 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/30-binden-fazla-ahiska-turkunun-vatandaslik-islemleri-tamamlandi/1372147>

initiatives of President Turgut Özal in 1992, the Turkish government adopted the Law 3835 that allowed the resettlement of Ahıska Turks in Turkey. According to this law, 500 Ahıska Turk families were settled in Iğdır. Iğdır was chosen as it was expected to be an easy integration site because many Ahıska Turks had come to region in the 1930s during oppressive Soviet policies. As a first step, 150 Ahıska Turk families were settled in Iğdır. They were immediately given Turkish citizenship, and many of them were provided employment compatible with their qualifications. However, the Turkish government had to cease settled migrations due to financial problems in the first half of the 1990s, economic burden of the fighting against terrorism, growing number of refugees from the North Iraq, and Muslim refugees escaping from Bosna War between 1992 and 1995. Potential migration of thousands of Ahıska Turks from the Central Asian Republics to Turkey can also be considered as one of the reasons why settled migration was ceased (Aydingün ve Aydingün, 2014: 90-91).

As mentioned, the second settled migration of Ahıska Turks to Turkey started at the end of 2014 from the Eastern part Ukraine. Following the Euro-Maidan events in 2013, Crimea was invaded and annexed by the Russian Federation in 2014. After the annexation of Crimea, the armed conflict between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian Army began in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. This conflict erupted into a war, and Ahıska Turks who were living in these oblasts found themselves in the middle of the conflict zone. Consequently, many of them had to leave their home and were obliged to go to other parts of Ukraine. As a result of the developments and the demands of Ahıska Turk organizations, on April 27, 2015, the Council of Ministers in Turkey took a decision about the settlement of Ahıska Turks referring to the Law 3835 in 1992. According to this decision, 677 Ahıska Turk families were settled in Turkey, with priority given to those who are under the most difficult conditions in the conflict zones of Ukraine. In this regard, 2,252 Ahıska Turks were

settled in Üzümlü (Erzincan) and Ahlat (Bitlis) at the end of the 2016 with the status of settled migrants (Aydingün, 2017: 309-310). Now, the population of Ahıska Turks in both Üzümlü and Ahlat is estimated to be around 3,000.

In addition to settled migrations, a significant number of Ahıska Turks came to Turkey as free migrants and settled in Bursa, Antalya, İstanbul, and other cities by their own means. While the industrial cities of Bursa and Istanbul were preferred for settlement because of employment opportunities, Antalya later, with wide range of jobs in tourism, became more attractive for Ahıska Turks, who spoke Russian fluently (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014; Aydingün, et. al., 2006: 14). In general, Ahıska Turks have been welcomed by the Turkish state and society. They managed to establish several civil society organizations in cities where their population is concentrated. However, most of free settled Ahıska Turks come to Turkey with tourist visa. For this reason, they face several problems such as finding employment, obtaining working permit, and getting permanent residence.

From 1992 to today, several decrees regarding residence and work permits of Ahıska Turks have been promulgated by the Council of Minister and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Until 2002, Ahıska Turks were considered as ‘national refugees’ by the existing Turkish Law on Settlement (No. 2510). According to this law, people who had Turkish origin could migrate to Turkey and receive Turkish citizenship. Thus, obtaining official permission for work and stay in Turkey was relatively easy for Ahıska Turks. However, this policy has partially changed after 2002. Work and residence permits were given separately. Instead of the Ahıska Turks associations’ list of applications, personal applications for taking residence and work permits as well as getting Turkish citizenship were encouraged by the Turkish government. Ahıska Turks who could not afford to pay the cost of personal applications were unable to get official permissions to stay in Turkey (Aydingün, 2007: 342). Although

important decrees were passed to overcome the problems of Ahıska Turks, this trouble continued to large extent until 2017. The Ministry of Internal Affairs adopted the Law 104662 on September 08, 2017. According to this law, Ahıska Turks who came to Turkey before 2017 regardless of having work or residence permit were given the right to apply for Turkish citizenship. Consequently, more than 30,000 Ahıska Turks were granted Turkish citizenship in the first months of 2019.¹³ To conclude, having taken Turkish citizenship, major problems of Ahıska Turks were solved by Turkish authorities.

2.9. Migration of Ahıska Turks from Krasnodar (Russian Federation) to the United States (US)

Following the Ferghana Events in 1989, as mentioned earlier, nearly 17,000 Ahıska Turks were involuntarily settled in Central Russia by the Soviet regime. Due to the unfamiliar climate, difficult living conditions of Central Russia, and ineffectiveness of settlement programs, approximately 7,000 Ahıska Turks moved to elsewhere in the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan. Those who migrated within the Russian Federation settled mostly in Krasnodar and Stavropol *Krais* (Kuznetsov, 2007: 199). There were several reasons for their choice of these regions, especially Krasnodar *Krai*. First, nearly 3,000 Ahıska Turks had already been settled in Krasnodar before 1989 (Pentikainen and Trier, 2004: 22). Thus, many of those in Central Russia preferred to live nearby. In addition, Krasnodar, which had arable land with empty settlement areas and favorable climate, attracted Ahıska Turks. Finally, Krasnodar was very close to Georgia, and Ahıska Turks wished also to be close to their homeland (Osipov and Cherepova, 1996: 8-9, Aydıngün and Aydıngün, 2014:

¹³ “30 binden fazla Ahıska Türkünün vatandaşlık işlemleri tamamlandı.”, Accessed: July 17, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/30-binden-fazla-ahiska-turkunun-vatandaslik-islemleri-tamamlandi/1372147>

107). Consequently, a total of 13,600 Ahıska Turks, who were settled by the Soviet regime, migrated in Central Russia by their own means to Krasnodar and started to live there (Pentaikainen and Trier, 2004: 22).

During 1990s, minorities in Krasnodar experienced severe discriminations. Although a considerable level of discrimination towards ethnic minorities prevailed in post-Soviet countries, the discriminations in Krasnodar *Krai* are described as a “soft ethnic cleansing.” Xenophobia against non-Slavic and stateless people was very common, and it was promoted by the regional authorities (Osipov, 2006: 1838-1839). While, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation significantly changed the federal laws on citizenship regarding ethnic communities, regional government of Krasnodar did not comply with the law, rejecting to register non-Slavic ethnic groups including Ahıska Turks. Especially, Ahıska Turks who came to the region after the Ferghana Events in 1989 became stateless. Thus, Ahıska Turks were deprived of the fundamental rights provided by the state such as residence permit (Russian. *propiska*) and consequently access to education, social and health services (Aydingün et al., 2006: 8-9).

Having lived under these conditions for more than ten years, the tragedy of Ahıska Turks attracted the attention of human right organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, International Organization for Migration, and Memorial Human Rights Center based at the time in Moscow. Despite annual reports prepared by international organizations regarding the discriminations towards Ahıska Turks in Krasnodar, the Russian Federation did not produce solutions to human rights violations. As a result of the efforts of International Organization for Migration aiming at finding durable solutions to the problems of Ahıska Turks in Krasnodar, in 2004 US decided to accept Ahıska Turks who came to Central Russia from Uzbekistan after 1989 and who then moved to Krasnodar and lived there without *propiska*

as refugees of “special humanitarian concern” with status of Priority- 2 (P-2) (Swerdlow, 2006: 1857). When this program was ended in 2007, approximately 12,500 Ahıska Turks had settled in the US. In recent years, nearly 15,000 Ahıska Turks have taken the refugee status in the US (Bilge, 2012: 1). The population of Ahıska Turks in the US has grown gradually. As a result of this migration, the population of Ahıska Turks became more dispersed.

On the one hand, it can be argued that there are no obvious obstacles to structural integration of Ahıska Turks in the US. The rights provided by the Refugee Program, the role of local refugee resettlement agencies, and easy access to social services ensured by the permanent resident status and the US citizenship obviously facilitate their structural integration process. However, speaking Turkish, especially the elderly’s having difficulties to learn English, socializing with Turkish or Russian speaking people, and having patriarchal extended families posed a challenge to the socio-cultural integration of Ahıska Turks. Nearly 15 years have passed since they came to the US, and thus it appears too early to make a comprehensive analysis of their integration to the US, but apparently they still suffer from various challenges. Although they think that it is almost impossible to return to Georgia, Turkey is still a potential destination for many of them.¹⁴

As mentioned throughout this chapter, Ahıska Turks were mainly engaged in collective action to make themselves heard. However, they were mostly ineffectual in terms of collective organization. Although the struggle for return to original villages became intensified from time to time, their effects on both the Soviet authorities and Georgian officials were not far reaching enough. This situation has also continued after the demise of the Soviet Union. Even

¹⁴ For more detailed information about life in the US, see (Aydingün and Aydingün, 2014: 121-137).

though the International Vatan Society has gained significant achievements in the international platforms and attracted attention on the repatriation issue especially after the mid-1990s, it lost its force while Georgia was preparing the 2007 Repatriation Law. Thus, organizational problems prevented Ahıska Turks from proclaiming their problems. The competition for leadership in the community, the debate on the naming issue of the community, existence of local organizations in different countries, and migrations which took place mostly as a result of discriminations and oppressive policies (such as migration to the US between 2004 and 2007) could be considered as reasons for the weakness of organizational structure. The establishment of the World Union of Ahıska Turks has been an important step towards overcoming these problems. However, it is obvious that the dispersed population of Ahıska Turks and conflicts within the community have posed a challenge to the Union to achieve its goals. Finally, it is noteworthy that Turkey is still a potential destination for all Ahıska Turks living in different countries.

CHAPTER 3

THE GEORGIAN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RETURN OF AHISKA TURKS

3.1. Introduction

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union faced severe problems such as economic stagnation, poor foreign relations, weak central authority, and exacerbated ethnic conflicts across the Soviet Union. As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, when Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985, he realized that repressions increase problems, rather than alleviating them. In addition, he came to realize that minor reforms could not be the solution to these problems. Thus, he initiated structural reforms called *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) to modernize the socialist regime and liberalize the Soviet policies. However, these remedial reforms largely failed to solve the existing problems of the Soviet Union. This failure resulted in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Following the 70-year Soviet regime, newly independent states encountered various problems, which are the legacy of the Soviet regime, such as ethnic conflicts, political instability, and corruption. Almost all of them dedicated their efforts to overcome these problems and engaged in nation and state building endeavors. The nation building process required the creation of new symbols, values, myths, and traditions that are to replace the Soviet ones. The state building process required the establishment of a functioning state, and the consolidation of state institutions. Although the difference between the nation building and the state building is subtle, their parallel development is critical to

a sustainable nation-state building. In other words, the inconsistency between them can hinder the effective nation-state building, so it can cause instabilities in the country.

In post-Soviet Georgia, the ancient Georgian princedoms, the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921), the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), and Western oriented policies were the important political and social elements of the nation and state building process. Playing a critical role in opposition, the role of GOC, in particular, was important for the Georgian identity and state. In Georgia, Christianity started to spread in the 1st century, and it became the state religion in the 4th century. Georgia was the second state to declare the Orthodox Christianity as a state religion after Armenia. The GOC was under the Antioch Church until having an autocephalous status in the 11th century, while the ancient Georgian Kingdoms were fragmented except in the Golden Age, which lasted from the 11th century to 13th century. Georgia was under the rule of the Ottomans and Iranians throughout significant part of their medieval history. Until the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire in 1801, the GOC had functioned as the defender of Georgian identity and language against these two Muslim Empires. Following the domination of the Russian Empire in Georgia, the autocephaly of the GOC was removed in 1811, and it became a part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian Empire implemented Russification policies to diminish the social, economic, and political power of the GOC, yet the Church resisted these policies and struggled to preserve the Georgian identity and culture. Therefore, as in the time of Muslim domination, the GOC became a symbol of the opposition to the Russian Empire in the late 19th century (Köksal et.al., 2019: 321-323; Keskin, 2017: 2-6).

The Georgian nationalism emerged in the mid-19th century with the efforts of the young and educated men known as the “Georgian Enlighteners” (Georgian *Tergdaleulebi*). These intellectuals were educated in Saint Petersburg and

returned to Georgia aiming to create a unified Georgian identity and modernize the Georgian culture. Their primary aim was to modernize Georgian traditions because they mostly believed that Georgian patriarchal traditions obstruct the unification of people with Georgian identity. Ilia Chavchavadze was one of the prominent figures of the Georgian nationalism. He raised the idea of “Fatherland, Language, and Faith”. In his idea, “Fatherland” means the territory where Georgian-Speaking people live, “Language” native language for all Georgians, and “Faith” religions in general, not specifically the Orthodox Christianity. This notion for the Georgian nationalism was fairly common in that period (Kekelia, 2015: 122-123). Thus, early modern Georgian nationalism could somewhat be described as civic. The Orthodox Christianity was not the number one element of the newly emerged modern Georgian nationalism. However, the GOC continued to be the symbol of the Georgian culture against the Russian Empire.

Following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, the GOC declared its independence and restored its autocephalous status before Georgia declared its independence from the Russian Empire (Serrano, 2014: 76). However, the GOC lost its autocephaly when the Soviet Union was established in 1922. During the Soviet period, except during the Second World War and the 1980s, the GOC was repressed like other churches in the Soviet Union due to Soviet atheistic policies. The assets of the GOC were appropriated, and its financial resources were confiscated by the Soviet State. Churches were closed, and many priests and believers were arrested. Thus, practicing religion became impossible. As a result of these policies, the GOC had been greatly damaged, and it lost its strong link with the Georgian society. However, the GOC began to consolidate its power in the 1980s especially during the Gorbachev’s period (Jones, 1989a: 187-189). This period is when the GOC housed those protesting the Soviet policies and Georgian nationalists. In other words, it became an opposing voice against the Soviet regime. For example, religious symbols

forbidden by the Soviet authorities were used by the priests in the nationalist demonstrations. Doing so, while the GOC protested the atheistic policies, it also reacted to the Soviet regime hindering the development of the Georgian nationalism.

Unlike the early modern Georgian nationalism, the new Georgian nationalism under the Soviet regime began to give more importance to Georgian traditions, Georgian Orthodoxy became the most important traditional symbol. Thus, the Georgian nationalism and Georgian Orthodoxy went hand-in-hand towards the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Georgians were also aware of the GOC's historical efforts into protecting the Georgian identity. Thus, after the demise of the Soviet Union, the GOC was the only institution that Georgians trusted (Serrano, 2014).

The political elite of the independent Georgia used the Georgian Orthodoxy and the GOC to fill the ideological vacuum left behind by de-legitimised communist regime. To gain public support for their authority, the politicians emphasized the historical significance of the GOC for the Georgian identity. In other words, they considered the GOC as a means of legitimatizing their political power. This was how the GOC entered the political domain in Georgia. In this atmosphere, it was able to enhance its influence on the Georgian society, which consolidated the ethno-religious nationalism in Georgia (Keskin, 2017; Aydingün, 2013).

The use of the ethno-religious rhetoric in the nation building process of Georgia, however, was an obstacle to the inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in the country. The term 'proper Georgian' was emphasized by some interviewees, and it refers to an ethnic Georgian who believes in Orthodox Christianity.¹⁵ This view excluded the non-Orthodox Georgians and ethnically non-Georgian minorities of the country. In a way, Georgian politicians in

¹⁵ Interview, Tbilisi, April, 2016.

power promoted Western orientated norms and values during the state-building process, while an ethno-religious approach dominated the nation building process. This inconsistency posed a challenge to a sustainable nation-state building as previously pointed out.

As well as a brief interpretation of the development of ethno-religious nationalism in post-Soviet Georgia, a short social, political, and economic description of Georgia in different presidential periods will help understand why Georgia could not develop effective legislative frameworks regarding the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.

3.2. The Rise of Gamsakhurdia and the Effects of the Georgian Ethno-Religious Nationalism on the Repatriation of Ahıska Turks

Gamsakhurdia was one of the leading figures in Georgian Nationalist Movement in the 1970s. He and Merab Kostava became members of the *International Amnesty* defending human rights in 1975. He was also one of the founders of the Georgian Helsinki Group established in 1976 similar to the Moscow Helsinki Group. While the Moscow Helsinki Group was monitoring the human rights violations in the Soviet Union, the Georgian Helsinki Group was giving priority to the defense of Georgian identity and to its protection from the Russification policies of the Soviet Union. This group published illegal opposing magazines such as *The Golden Fleece* and *The Georgian Bulletin*. Gamsakhurdia published *Gulag Archipelago*, the opposing Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book criticizing the forced labor camp in the Soviet Union.¹⁶ Although the Georgian Helsinki Group suffered from severe repressions of the Soviet Union, it continued to raise voice against the regime.

¹⁶ "Zviad Gamsakhurdia: The President of Georgia in 1991-1992", Accessed: June 02, 2019, <https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/Zviad-Gamsakhurdia-en.aspx>

Being a pioneer in the Group, Gamsakhurdia organized mass protests in Georgia towards the end of the Soviet Union.¹⁷

As mentioned previously, when Gorbachev took the lead in 1985, *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms were adopted. Conservative socialist groups considered these reforms as liberal and in conflict with the fundamental principles of the socialist regime. Thus, they vehemently objected to their implementation. At that time, Jumber Patiashvili was appointed to the First Secretary of the Communist Party in Georgia when Shevardnadze, the former leader of Georgia for 13 years, became the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union in 1985. Patiashvili carried out conservative socialist policies and put pressure on the Georgian nationalist movement, but he failed (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 130-131). In 1988, Gamsakhurdia and his followers managed to found the Popular Front based on the model implemented in Baltic States. Although other Popular Fronts within the Soviet Union composed of relatively liberal members of the Communist Party aimed at promoting *perestroika* and undermining reactionary movements towards it, Georgia's Popular Front, like in the Baltic States, became a serious challenge to the Soviet regime (Gürsoy, 2011: 41-42). Especially when the Soviet Union lost its legitimacy in the eyes of Georgians, Georgian Popular Front strengthened its position and gained extensive support from Georgians. This was one of the events that added to Gamsakhurdia's force in Georgia.

Another factor that increased Gamsakhurdia's power was the April 9 Events. As mentioned before, Georgian nationalism as titular group nationalism seized a great opportunity to increase its influence in Georgia. However, this triggered the minority nationalisms across the country. One of these was the Abkhazian nationalist movement. The Abkhaz gained the status of the Soviet Socialist Republic in 1921. However, Stalin downgraded their status to an autonomous

¹⁷ "Zviad Gamsakhurdia: The President of Georgia in 1991-1992", Accessed: June 02, 2019, <https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/Zviad-Gamsakhurdia-en.aspx>

Republic within Georgia in 1931. With the onset of Gorbachev reforms, the Abkhaz leaders started to strive for regaining their status of Soviet Socialist Republic they had in 1921. Thus, the leading figures of the Abkhazian nationalism demanded that Gorbachev return their administrative status on June 17, 1988. This demand increased the Georgia SSR's pressure on the Abkhazian nationalists. Still, the Abkhazian nationalists repeated their demands. To press their independence demand, many Georgians came together on March 18, 1988 in Tbilisi under the leadership of the Georgian nationalists such as Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava. Nonetheless, Soviet troops brutally intervened the peaceful protest on April 9, 1989, killing 20 people injuring hundreds, and arresting many. This intervention surged oppositions against the Soviet regime in Georgia. The Georgian nationalism also began to radicalize (Jones, 1989b). When Merab Kostava was killed in a car accident in October 1989, Gamsakhurdia rose as the leader of the Georgian Nationalist Movement. In addition, even if the Soviet regime softened its policies in Georgia after the April 9 Events, the Communist Party in Georgia began to lose its power.

At that time, the Round Table Coalition was founded under the leadership of Gamsakhurdia. He succeeded in mobilizing the Georgian political elite and having them join his party. Thus, in October 28, 1990, he won the parliamentary elections against the Communist Party in Georgia. Then, he was elected as the President of the Georgian Supreme Soviet. Meanwhile, South Ossetia demanded that their autonomous oblast status be upgraded to the autonomous republic within the Soviet Union. Due to their persistent efforts to be independent of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia removed their status of the autonomous oblast within Georgia on December 11, 1990. As a result, the relation between Georgia and South Ossetia broke down, and the widespread armed conflicts started (Slider, 1991).

Since Gamsakhurdia was elected as the chairman of the Georgian Supreme Soviet, he opposed the Soviet regime. The Soviet Union applied to Unity Referendum concerning the preservation of the USSR as a federation of equal republics for finding a solution to the increasing problems within the Soviet Union. Georgia was one of the Soviet Republics refusing to hold the Referendum. However, Abkhazia voted for remaining within the Soviet Union on March 17, 1991. Therefore, in addition to South Ossetia, Abkhazia boycotted the Georgia's independence vote (Hille, 2010: 225).

Gamsakhurdia declared Georgia's independence from the Soviet Union on April 9, 1991, in the second anniversary of the April 9 events. On May 26, 1991, presidential elections were held in Georgia. Gamsakhurdia became the first president of the independent Georgia by getting the 86.5% of the votes. During his presidency, Gamsakhurdia not only implemented harsh policies against ethnic minorities but also put pressure on dissident politicians. As a result, the country drifted into a civil war. Thus, he had to leave the country at the turn of 1992 following the military coup in Georgia (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 134-135).

During the Gamsakhurdia's short period of presidency, the Soviet legacy of secessionist movements in the country descended to a political turmoil, hindering the implementation of the remedial reforms to solve Georgia's problems. Therefore, in the early years of independence, Gamsakhurdia sought legitimation for his political power. At this point, the Georgian Orthodoxy and the GOC, which became a symbol of opposition against the Soviet regime, were promoted by Gamsakhurdia. In his first speech as the President of Georgia, he glorified the Georgian Orthodoxy and emphasized the unity of the Georgian national movement and the Georgian Orthodoxy. Moreover, he announced that he considered the Georgian Orthodoxy as a major element in the restoration of Georgians' morale. Doing so, he stressed that the Orthodox

Christianity must be declared as state religion of Georgia. At this point, it should be noted that Gamsakhurdia, as a follower of the Illia Chavcavadze, perceived Georgianness and Christianity as one. For him, Orthodox Christianity is not only a religion for Georgians, but also a matter of identity. However, Gamsakhurdia emphasized the importance of not only Orthodoxy but also opposition to both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union for the Georgian identity. His was not an unconditional support for the church. Indeed, he maintained a stance against the ‘red priests’ in the church and the corruption caused by them (Aydingün, 2016: 8). Therefore, while Gamsakhurdia emphasized the significance of Orthodoxy for the Georgian identity, he opposed Illia II, Patriarch of the GOC since 1977, because of perceiving him as an agent of the Soviet regime (Chitanava, 2015). Nonetheless, the growing Georgian ethno-religious nationalism both in the final phase of the Soviet Union and the early years of independent Georgia enabled the GOC to increase its influence on both state and societal level.

As regards the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, no progress was achieved in Gamsakhurdia’s period. Although he had approached to the repatriation of Ahıska Turks quite positively before his presidency, he changed his opinion when he became the president (Trier, et. al., 2011: 28). In fact, politicians were particularly concerned about the consequences of the possible return of Ahıska Turks to their original villages. The belief that this return would create an ethnic conflict with Armenians who resided in Samtskhe-Javakheti region was voiced by many. Although this region could not have an autonomous status during the Soviet period, Armenians obviously had power in the region challenging the central authority of Tbilisi following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The southern region of Javakheti, districts of Akhalkhalaki and Ninotsminda, were under the control of the *Javakhk* organization, which was composed of Armenian nationalists struggling to obtain an autonomous status in Georgia. Thus, the central authority of Georgia could not step in the region.

In addition, Georgian language was not known well, but the majority of them spoke Armenian. Armenian money was also the currency in their trade (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 154). Thus, Georgian authorities were worried that the repatriation of Ahıska Turks would increase the tension and encourage the secessionist movement in the region. Roadblocks were built at the entrance points to Georgia by the Georgian officials to prevent the return of Ahıska Turks (Slider, 1991: 74). What is more, many Ahıska Turks who previously settled in Georgia had to leave the country due to ethno-religious policies of Gamsakhurdia.

3.3. The Eduard Shevardnadze Period and the Effects of the Georgian Ethno-Religious Nationalism on the Repatriation of Ahıska Turks

Following the 1992 military coup staged by the communist *nomenklatura*, leaders of paramilitary groups, liberals, and the Military Council invited Shevardnadze, the former Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs and the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (1972–1985) from Moscow to Georgia. Shevardnadze became the chairman of the governing body called State Council established after the military coup. A leader who could improve relations with both the Russian Federation and the West was needed; Shevardnadze was appointed as the president by the government in 1992. Then, he was elected as the second president of Georgia in 1993 (Hille, 2010: 243). However, the leading figures in the military coup such as the former defense ministers Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani and the leader of the armed organization *Mkhedrioni* still had power (Wheatley, 2009: 123). Nonetheless, as soon as Shevardnadze came to power, he successfully used his political skills and improved relations within the country, with the neighboring countries in the region, and with the global powers. Developing a policy of a balance was the priority target of Shevardnadze in his early period.

Georgia became a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1993. As a result of this membership, Shevardnadze gave allowed Russian military forces to enter Georgia and take control of civil war within the country. This decision did not only strengthen his political position toward paramilitary groups in Georgia but also brought immediate solution to the ongoing ethnic conflicts in Georgia (Kakachia and Minesashvili, 2015: 174). In addition to Russian Federation's contribution to the solution of the internal conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Shevardnadze gave special importance to economic relations with the Russian Federation because, to him, poor economic relations with the Russian Federation would be a challenge to the sustainable economic development in Georgia. However, at the same time Shevardnadze developed close relations with the West and the US not to be totally dependent on Russia. For example, in the Shevardnadze period, Georgia became one of the countries that benefitted the most from the US financial assistance. Germany was another important financial resource for Georgia in his period. Shevardnaze's political role in the unification process of Germany while he was the president of the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs helped him develop good economic relations with Germany. Furthermore, his pro-Western orientation attracted European Union investment in Georgia through various EU programs such as humanitarian assistance, food security, and technical assistance for infrastructure. With the political support of the US, Shevardnadze initiated two major global investments, namely the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline. In addition to realizing economic gains, these global projects contributed to political stability in Georgia. Thus, global powers especially the US started to make military investments in Georgia (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006: 33-35).

In the Shevardnadze period, Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe in 1999. This was a turning point in the history of Georgia after the demise of the Soviet Union. The Georgian society considered Georgia's entry

to the Council of Europe as recognition of Georgia's European orientation. Shevardnadze's pursuing improved collaborations with NATO was another significant political manoeuvre aiming at protecting the country from the domination of the Russian Federation. Most Georgian political figures considered these international alliances as important in earning worldwide recognition and becoming closer to the West, thus in guaranteeing the country's security, stability, and development. At the societal level, these pro-Western orientations strengthened Georgians' attachment to Europe (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006: 34).

Shevardnadze also took important steps to protect country's territorial integrity and to keep the ethnic conflicts under control. By effective policies, Shevardnadze partially reduced the ethnic conflicts in the country and, in June 1992, stopped the war in South Ossetia. Nonetheless, Tengiz Kitovani used military force to intervene in Abkhazia without informing Shevardnadze. This intervention ended by the Georgian troops' failure, so Georgia completely lost its control inside and lost the war. Abkhazia gained *de facto* independence in 1992. Then, nearly two hundred thousand Georgians had to leave Abkhazia, and they were settled in different parts of Georgia (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 135-136). Later on, this situation led to the problem of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Georgia. Although many Georgian politicians assumed that this defeat was caused by the Russian domination, Shevardnadze declared the Russian Federation as a strategic partner and recognized the Russian Federation's role as the sole peacekeeper in Abkhazia. What is more, Shevardnadze introduced regulations legitimizing the existence of the Russian force in Georgia. In return of these attempts, Shevardnadze expected Russia to solve the ethnic conflicts (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006: 35).

The general condition of Georgia towards the end of 1995 was not very bright. The central authority in the country was quite weak then. Shevardnadze was

incapable of ensuring security in the country. Crime rate was very high, and paramilitary groups seized the control of local places. Tengiz Kitovani's paramilitary groups namely *National Guard and the Mkhedrioni* systematically confiscated to private and state properties. In addition, Gamsakhurdia's armed supporters kept the control of western Samegrelo. The southern region of Javakheti, mainly the districts of Akhalkhalaki and Ninotsminda, were under the control of the Armenian organization named *Javakh*. Georgian and Azerbaijani gangs took control of southeastern Kvemo Kartli, where they were doing cross-border smuggling. In addition, Aslan Abashidze, the President of the Adjarian Autonomous Republic, did not promote any secessionist movement, but he was not keeping up with Tbilisi. While problems related to Javakheti and Aslan Abashidze continued, Shevardnadze consolidated his power. Tengiz Kitovani was arrested in 1995, and his paramilitary groups were largely removed. New police force, regained the control of most regions in the country (Wheatley, 2009: 123-124).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Shevardnadze paid considerable efforts into ensuring the territorial integrity of Georgia. Besides making concrete attempts at ceasing secessionist movements and eliminating the illegal quasi-state mafia organizations, he started to work towards the establishment of a Western type of constitution. In 1993, Shevardnadze founded a State Constitutional Commission, which presented a draft of new Constitution based on the 1921 Constitution of Georgia. However, it was rejected because there were disagreements about whether the new constitution of Georgia should be regulated in compliance with the parliamentary or presidential republic. The second draft of the new Constitution was based on a semi-presidential model. Nonetheless, Shevardnadze opposed this model because of the limited power of the president in the constitution. As a result of the pressure from Shevardnadze, the draft that empowers the president was accepted by the State Constitutional Commission. The new Constitution of Georgia was put into

effect on October 17, 1995 (Wheatley, 2017). While this Constitution ensured fundamental human rights such as civil and political rights, freedom of conscience, and freedom of speech, it gave limited space to political competition and participation. Power was not distributed equally; instead, it largely delegated power to Shevardnadze and the clientelistic networks around him (Nodia and Scholtbach, 2006: 35).

Although this constitution aimed to bring a solution to many problems in the country and promote universal human rights, it largely failed. Poverty, unemployment, poor living conditions of IDPs, bribery, and corruption became widespread problems of Georgia during the second term of Shevardnadze in 1995. Shevardnadze was convicted of Soviet-era corruption (Cheterian, 2008: 693). Therefore, his popularity began to decline in the Georgian society. Despite all, Shevardnadze was re-elected in the 2000 presidential elections in Georgia. However, it was reported by many international observers that there was fraud and violation in the election process (Gürsoy, 2011: 50-51). Following the claims that Shevardnadze cheated at the presidential election, Western financial supports decreased.

It is somewhat true that the early period of Shevardnadze was characterized by significant successes in implementing liberal and Western policies and establishing a democratic regime in Georgia. Having participated in international organizations, he must have recognized the minorities' rights, establishing a transition from an ethnic nationalism to civil nationalism in his early years. He was also successful in ceasing ongoing ethnic conflicts within the country and ensuring the territorial integrity to a certain extent. Thanks to these achievements, he managed to attract international financial support to Georgia. However, this positive atmosphere began to reverse in the last years of his presidency. He became more authoritarian, while Georgia suffered from economic hardships, corruption, and clientelism.

Shevardnadze considerably emphasized patriotism in the nation building process rather than religion (Aydınün, 2016: 49). However, like Gamsakhurdia, he saw the GOC as a source of his political legitimacy. As a matter of fact, the 1995 Constitution of Georgia and the Constitutional Agreement, *Concordat*, signed between the Georgian state and the GOC in 2002 completed the constitutional status of the GOC by giving significant privileges to it that no other religion enjoys. Article 9 of the 1995 Constitution guaranteed the freedom of belief and religion in Georgia. At the same time, the Constitution recognized the special role of the GOC and its independence from the state.¹⁸ Ensuring the freedom of belief and religion in Georgia, this Constitution fulfills one of the requirements of the secular-state. Nonetheless, recognition of the special role of the GOC and lack of reference to other religions contradict with the secular-state formation, and it poses a threat to equal treatment of all religions in Georgia. In addition to the 1995 Constitution, the *Concordat* is also another legal regulation that widens the gap between the GOC and other religions consolidating privileged position of the GOC in Georgia. With the *Concordat*, the Georgian state agrees to compensate the material and moral damage of the GOC during the Soviet period.¹⁹ Thanks to the *Concordat*, the clergy of the GOC enjoy the exemption from compulsory military service and the right to establish chaplaincies in the military, prison, and custody. Furthermore, it is given the right to buy state property, declare religious holidays as public holidays, take consultative role in education, organize official wedding ceremonies, and most importantly, to be exempt from tax (Keskin, 2017: 70-71).²⁰ It can thus be concluded that even

¹⁸“The Constitution of Georgia”, Accessed: July 20, 2019, http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf

¹⁹ “Constitutional Agreement between State of Georgia and Georgian Apostolic Autocephaly Orthodox Church”, Accessed: July 20, 2019, <https://forbcaucasus.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/concordat.pdf>

²⁰“Religious Minorities in Georgia: Report”, Accessed: July 20, 2019, http://religiebi.info/admin/editor/uploads/files/REPORTS/Religious_Minorities_Final.pdf

Shevardnadze, who was cautious about promoting ethno-religious nationalism, introduced constitutional regulations giving privileges to the GOC because his fragile authority needed its support, thereby allowing the GOC to intervene the politics in Georgia. As a result, the voice of the Georgian ethno-religious nationalism entrenched its influence not only at the societal but also at the state level.

Regarding the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, Shevardnadze seems to have changed Georgia's official attitude towards the return of Ahıska when compared with the Gamsakhurdia period. The desire to integrate with the West and participate in international organizations made the repatriation problem of Ahıska Turks a priority to be handled. For this reason, Shevardnadze issued a decree "On the Settlement of Some of the Social Problems of the Deported Meskhetians", upon which Georgia prepared a legal regulation to give benefits to Ahıska Turks who lived in Georgia. Although this decree and regulation aimed to solve the problems of Ahıska Turks, no relevant progress was made. In December 1996, a Presidential Decree was adopted, "On the State Program on Solving Legal and Social Problems of the Meskhetian Turks. As hereby stated, 5,000 Ahıska Turks would settle in Georgia as of the date of the decree to 2000, with social benefits granted. However, only a limited step related to the Presidential Decree was performed (Baydar-Aydınün, 2001: 200-202). In 1999, another Presidential Decree "On Creation of the Governmental Commission on Repatriation and Rehabilitation of the Population Deported in 1940s from Southern Georgia" was issued. It also failed to bring a solution the repatriation problems of Ahıska Turks. Even though three decrees were issued by the Presidency between 1993 and 1999 and many programs were prepared for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, the Georgian authorities failed to put them in practice. Political problems, financial difficulties, existing problems of IDPs within country, the fear of possible ethnic tension in the Javakheti region, and its potential threat to the security of the Baku-Tibilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline can

be considered as barriers to the return of Ahıska Turks. Besides, Aydıngün (2002: 56) argued that Georgia considered Ahıska Turks as ethnic Georgians and that these decrees promoted the rehabilitation of pro-Georgian oriented groups within the Ahıska Turk community. Although some Ahıska Turk families applied to settle in Georgia and get the Georgian citizenship by accepting Georgian ethnic identity, they were not welcomed by the society, and they largely failed to acquire Georgian citizenship. This can be explained by the growing ethno-religious nationalism in Georgia arising from the policies of Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze.

As mentioned previously, Georgia's conditional membership of the Council of Europe in 1999 was a turning point in the Ahıska Turks' struggle for the repatriation. The Council of Europe accepted the membership of Georgia on the condition that the government adopts effective laws to organize the return of Ahıska Turks within two years (2001). Georgia was obliged to begin the implementation of the repatriation and integration process in three years (2002) and complete it within twelve years (2011). However, these obligations could not be fulfilled in the Shevardnadze period, and Ahıska Turks' repatriation prospects remained uncertain. Due to allegations of vote fraud in 2003 parliamentary elections, thousands protested Shevardnadze and asked for fair elections in Georgia. As a result of the growing protests, Shevardnadze promised that he would schedule the presidential elections to an earlier time. However, the dissident leader Saakashvili, the former Minister of Justice in Shevardnadze's government, entered the parliament with protesters holding a rose in his hand. Then, Shevardnadze left the parliament. Following this event, called as "Rose Revolution" (Keskin, 2017: 41; Aydıngün and Asker, 2012: 139; Hille, 2010: 244-245), the new election was held on January 4, 2004. In this election, 96% of the voters cast their votes for Saakashvili, and he became the new president of Georgia in 2004 (Mitchell, 2006: 674). This election was considered as fair. However, 75% of the Adjara region did not participate in

the election, and the election was not held in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gürsoy, 2011: 55).

3.4. The Saakashvili Period and Afterwards: Effects on Georgian Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Repatriation of Ahıska Turks

As mentioned in the previous section, Saakashvili succeeded in organizing the protestors who were restless about the ruling of Shevardnadze and demanded democratic elections. Being supported by Western countries, especially by the US, Saakashvili became the third president of the post-Soviet Georgia receiving great public support. As soon as Saakashvili became the president, he declared that Georgia was to follow the Western path to democracy, and he promoted Western norms and values to secure democratization in Georgia. In addition, starting with 2004, he began to prepare structural reforms to eliminate long-term problems such as corruption. Besides, Saakashvili developed an anti-Russian discourse, and he increased collaboration with Western countries and NATO. As a result of this policy, relations between Georgia and Russia began to deteriorate, especially when Saakashvili reclaimed Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Furthermore, in 2005, Saakashvili demanded that Russia remove its two military bases located in Batumi and Ahalkhalaki. While Russia accepted this demand and closed down its military bases, political relation between the two countries further deteriorated (Keskin, 2017; Aydingün and Asker, 2012).

Although Saakashvili claimed to promote the Western norms and values, paradoxically, some of his actions and decisions in his first year of presidency posed a serious challenge to the consolidation of civic nationalism. In fact, he symbolically advocated ethno-religious Georgian nationalism. For instance, Saakashvili, after being the president, was blessed by Illia II at the Gelati Monastery in 2004. In a way, he made himself blessed like medieval Georgian kings. By doing so, he demonstrated that his political authority acknowledged the Church. Furthermore, the church he chose for the ceremony had symbolic

meaning. It was built by King David, known as the builder of unified Georgian Kingdoms, and his grave is in the Gelati Monastery. Apparently, like a builder of modern Georgia, he swore in the presence of King David. It is noteworthy that Saakashvili was not really in need of the Church's support as he had considerable public support during the Rose Revolution, but organizing a ceremony at Gelati Monastery and promising to secure the territorial unity of Georgia bore special types of symbolisms that further consolidated his authority. Besides, Saakashvili changed Georgia's flag in 2004. The new flag was the same with that of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, which lasted from 1918 to 1921. The flag had one large Red Cross dividing the white background into four parts, each containing smaller red crosses. This flag used by the Georgian National Movement was also the flag of Georgian Kings during middle ages. The use of this flag in post-Soviet Georgia highlighted Georgia's Christian past and aspiration to return to its significant place in the Christian World (Keskin, 2017: 51; Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 141-142; Cheterian, 2008: 696). It was obvious that this flag excluded the religious and ethnic minorities in Georgia. Georgia's chosen state emblem was also contradicting with his narrative promoting inclusive western values as it did not embrace minorities within the country. The new state emblem accepted on December 1, 2004 is very similar to the emblem of the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty, which ruled Georgia from the middle ages till the domination of the Russian Empire in the early 19th century.²¹ This Georgian dynasty was also one of the oldest Christian dynasties.²² Saakashvili might have symbolically emphasized the ancient Georgian Christian identity, as in the case of flag (Aydingün and Asker, 2012: 142). Thus, while Saakashvili aimed to promote the Western values, he at the same time used strong ethno-religious symbols,

²¹ "Georgian Nationalism and the idea of Georgian Nation", Accessed: June 02, 2019, http://atlas.usv.ro/www/codru_net/CC19/2/georgian.pdf

²² "Dynasty", Accessed: June 02, 2019, <http://www.royalhouseofgeorgia.ge/p/eng/441/dynasty>

which indicates a significant inconsistency influencing the state-building process.

Besides inconsistencies in the state building process, Saakashvili took a series of remarkable moves. Especially during the first years of his rule, he strongly promoted civic nationalism stating that all the different ethnic and religious minorities in Georgia are equal stakeholders of the Georgian nation. In line with his determination to integrate with the West, Georgia became one of the signatory states in the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in 2005. According to this framework, Georgia agreed to promote the conditions of minorities, help develop their culture and identity, encourage tolerance within the country, protect the freedom of conscience, guarantee access to the media, recognize minority languages and names in minority languages, and provide minorities with education in their own languages. Georgia also promised to submit periodical reports to the Council of Europe about its legislative regulations regarding the obligations they had to comply with.²³ Following the adoption of this Framework, Georgia prepared a strategy document entitled the *National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration* as a guide covering the requirements of not only the 2005 Framework but also other international and regional treaties.²⁴ In addition, the Georgian parliament adopted a new Law on General Education in 2005. While this Law permitted the elective course of history of religions, it prohibited religious indoctrination at schools. Although the GOC was against this law and continued its existence and influence at schools with the legal base of the *Concordat*, this law ensured secular education in Georgia (Gurchiani, 2017).

²³“The Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” Accessed: June 2, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuideMinorities8en.pdf>

²⁴“National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration”, Accessed: June 5, 2019, http://smr.gov.ge/Uploads/National_C_a650ee97.pdf

Furthermore, religious minorities that had not been recognized as legal entities of public; they gained the right to register as non-governmental or no-profit organizations thanks to the amendment to the Civil Code in 2005. They also had the right to be registered with the status of ‘legal entities of public law’ following the amendment to the Civil Code in 2011. Although these two amendments to the Civil Code caused debates in practice²⁵, these regulations were perceived as a challenge to its special status by the GOC. All these frameworks and legislative regulations introduced by Saakashvili can be said to reflect his will to disseminate Western norms and values (Aydingün and Asker, 2012)

The Western oriented reforms introduced by Saakashvili, however, could not produce the expected results to solve the existing problems. The reforms on religious minorities aiming to improve their status in Georgia caused a discomfort in the GOC, which feared that it would diminish their influence on both state and society levels. Saakashvili managed to reduce corruption to a certain extent among the low and middle level state officials; however, corruption continued at the elite level (Steenland, 2016: 37-38). Furthermore, he failed to strengthen the economy and reduce unemployment. Saakashvili was also unsuccessful in consolidating a democratic regime in Georgia. He tried to suppress the voices against his political authority. Thus, he also increased pressure on civil society organizations and media channels that gave a place to dissidents’ political thoughts (Gürsoy, 2011: 55-60). In brief, while he took over as the president claiming democratic governance in Georgia, it seems that he ended up by being a relatively authoritarian leader. As a result, nearly 50,000 people joined the street protestors in Tbilisi in 2007 November and demanded for Saakashvili’s resignation.²⁶ Saakashvili did not resign, but

²⁵ For detailed information about debates, see (Keskin, 2017).

²⁶“Tear Gas Used on Georgia Protest”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7082317.stm>

he announced that the early presidential election would be held in the beginning of 2008. Even though he lost his popularity when compared to the 2004 presidential election, he was re-elected with 56.2% of the voters casting for him. This loss of support and legitimacy in a way pushed Saakashvili to approach the GOC.

When Saakashvili began to lose his political legitimacy starting with 2007, he needed the support of the GOC for preserving his authority. Nonetheless, his popularity drastically dropped following the 2008 August War with Russia. Saakashvili's close relations with the West, attempts to join NATO, and his anti-Russian attitude, which had already increased the tension with Russia, peaked during the 2008 war. Georgia's intervention in South Ossetia in 2008 led to the intervention of Russia, and Georgia lost control in South Ossetia. As a result of the 2008 August War, South Ossetia declared its independence, which was recognized by Russia. Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia as well. These developments not only damaged the political authority of Saakashvili but also interrupted the state building process of Georgia. Furthermore, while diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia broke down, Patriarch Illia II became a mediator aiming at decreasing the tension between the two countries.²⁷ As a result, the GOC further increased its power and influence in Georgia after the 2008 August War.

Following the August War in 2008, economic situation in Georgia began to deteriorate. Even though Saakashvili tried to improve economy, he largely failed.²⁸ In addition to it, Saakashvili's authoritarian tendencies were confronted with strong reactions from the Georgian society. In 2009, 2011, and

²⁷“Patriarch of Georgia: Our church and people never cut ties with Russia.”, Accessed: July 28, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/patriarch-georgia-russia-ties-438/>

²⁸ For detailed information about the situation of Georgia after the 2008 War, see (Mikhelidze, 2009).

2012, thousands of Georgians gathered to protest him.²⁹ Saakashvili and his party, United National Movement (UNM), significantly lost its political legitimacy in the eyes of Georgians. The 2013 Presidential election was the proof of this. As Saakashvili was constitutionally unable to participate in the election due to having performed two terms of presidency, his party candidate David Bakradze became the new candidate and was supported by the 21% of the voters. In this election, Giorgi Margvelashvili became the fourth president of Georgia having earned 62% of the votes.

Margvelashvili had relatively smaller constitutional power than the previous presidents due to the constitutional changes on October 15, 2010, which came into force in 2013. This constitutional reform curbed the power of the president and limited it to a mediator role between the executive and the legislative branches of government. Even though the president has the greatest representative role in foreign relations, s/he needed the permission of the parliament according to the new constitutional reforms. These changes in the constitution strengthened the authority of the prime minister in determining national and international policies, organizing the cabinet, and appointing the regional governors.³⁰ This distribution of power caused confrontation between

²⁹“Thousands Gather for Street Protests against Georgian President”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/09/georgia-protests-mikheil-saakashvili>

²⁹“Georgian Protest Crushed as President Blames Russia”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-protest-idUSTRE74P4BC20110526>

²⁹“80,000 at Opposition Rally as Georgia Nears Crossroads”, Accessed: July, 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/28/world/europe/tens-of-thousands-in-georgia-protest-president.html>

³⁰“Constitutional reform in Georgia: changing to stay the same?”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2010-10-20/constitutional-reform-georgia-changing-to-stay-same>

“Georgian Parliament Approves Controversial Constitutional Amendment”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgian_Parliament_Approves_Controversial_Constitutional_Amendment/2191769.html

the prime minister and the president³¹, which led to debates on constitutional changes in 2017. One change, for example, related to the election procedures of the president. The president would not be elected by direct voting anymore but by a 300-member Electoral College composed of members of the parliament and local government representatives. Following his moderate rule and Western oriented policies, Margvelashvili decided not to run for a second term. In the 2018 presidential election, Salome Zourabichvili was elected as the 5th president of Georgia when 59% of the voters cast ballots for him in second round.

Margvelashvili continued to be Western oriented in a way. At the same time, he emphasized the significance of the GOC for the Georgian nation and highlighted the close link between Orthodoxy and the Georgian nation.³² In the context of Western orientation, the State Agency for Religious Affairs was established in 2014 to promote the collaboration between religions, improve a legal framework, raise consciousness about freedom of religion and belief, and to evaluate Georgia's attitude towards religion.³³ Furthermore, the State Agency for Religious Affairs was responsible for distributing state funds to the four traditional religious groups in Georgia, namely to Muslims, Armenians, Catholics, and Jews to compensate their losses during the Soviet period.³⁴ However, the State Agency turned out to be detached from its mission, which was to secure equality among religions, and it did not produce effective solutions to the problems of religious minorities in Georgia. The institutions

³¹“Presidential Profile – Giorgi Margvelashvili, Georgia’s non-partisan President”, Accessed: July 27, 2019, <https://presidential-power.com/?p=6037>

³² “Georgian Church marks 100th anniversary of restoration of independence”, Accessed: July 28, 2019, <http://www.pravmir.com/georgian-church-marks-100th-anniversary-restoration-independence/>

³³ “Mission”, Accessed: July 28, 2019, <http://religion.geo.gov.ge/eng/mission>

³⁴“Georgia creates State Agency on Religious Affairs”, Accessed: July 28, 2019, <http://agenda.ge/news/8170/eng>.

were reported by many to be a mechanism of state control on religions, and the influence of the GOC on that institution was also mentioned in several publications. Contradicting with its objectives, the State Agency for Religious Issues augmented the already existing hierarchy among religions and then became almost totally ineffective (Keskin, 2017). The anti-discrimination law was another example to such ineffective practices conflicting with their original objectives. Adopted on May 2, 2014 as a requirement under the EU-Georgia Visa Liberalization Action Plan in Margvelashvili's period, it aimed at securing equality among people. This Law was meant to ensure the prohibition of any direct or indirect discrimination. However, this law which was related to the protection of the rights of LGBT was strongly criticized by the GOC, which mentioned that it was against the Georgian traditions. In addition, by the Second Opinion Report on June 17, 2015 adopted by the Advisory Committee on FCNM, the GOC increased its influence in Georgian society, and minority representatives felt offended because of the growing notion of the 'proper Orthodox Georgian'.³⁵ In other words, while positive steps were taken during Margveleashvili's period to consolidate civic nationalism in Georgia, the GOC became a barrier to the implementation of policies and promoted the ethno-religious nationalism in Georgia.

Briefly, the GOC managed to increase its influence on both state and societal level after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. While Gamsakhurdia developed ethno-religious discourse during his short rule, Shevardnadze secured the legal status for the GOC with the 1995 Constitution of Georgia, and he granted the GOC several privileges, especially with the *Concordat*. Although Saakashvili partially succeeded in introducing legislative frameworks and implementing them to ensure the rights of minorities in his early rule, he

³⁵“Second Opinion on Georgia adopted on 17 June 2015”, Accessed: July, 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=0900001680590fb5>

needed to rely on the support of the GOC following his loss of legitimacy after 2007. Thus, the GOC was entitled to intervene in the politics.

As regards the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks, the preparation of the legal framework for their return was finalized in 2007 as a result of the pressure of the Council of Europe. However, the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law was delayed because of the August War in 2008 and the consequent economic, social, and political instabilities. The field data showed that Saakashvili's personal initiatives helped some of Ahıska Turks who were already living in Georgia and were given Georgian identity receive Georgian citizenship.³⁶ However, it is obvious that the majority of the Ahıska Turks who applied for return in the context of 2007 Law experienced several difficulties throughout the application process and suffered from complex procedural regulations of the Law. The field data also showed that many Ahıska Turks who managed to apply despite difficulties and several uncertainties, especially regarding citizenship, believe that a major barrier to the repatriation process is the ethno-religious nationalism, which is dominant in Georgia. Based on interviews conducted both in Azerbaijan and Georgia, the next chapter presents challenges to the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks.

³⁶ Interview, Nasakirali (Georgia), October 27, 2015

CHAPTER 4

THE MAIN CHALLENGES TO THE REPATRIATION OF AHISKA TURKS

4.1. Introduction

As mentioned briefly in previous chapters, Ahıska Turks have largely failed to return to Georgia in both Soviet and post-Soviet periods. An analysis of the data gathered during the fieldwork in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and an examination of various international and national reports reveals three main reasons for the relative failure of the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. First, it was the actions of the Council of Europe that pushed Georgia to prepare the legal framework for the repatriation, and has also carried out assessments related to the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law. The Council of Europe, however, scaled back its monitoring towards the end of the process, and this has been detrimental to the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law. Secondly, it can be argued that the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the 2007 Repatriation Law and the uncertainties about granting of Georgian citizenship has discouraged many Ahıska Turks from migrating to Georgia. Thirdly, although Ahıska Turks are officially defined as ethnically Georgian, they are known as Turks by the Georgian society. Accordingly, there is a fear in society that their return to Georgia may result in ethnic tension with the Armenians who live in Samtskhe-Javakheti. In short, it can be claimed that the ethno-religious nature of the Georgian nationalism and Georgian national identity has posed a major challenge to the repatriation and integration of Ahıska Turks.

4.2. The Significance of the Council of Europe's Monitoring of the Repatriation Process

As mentioned before, the political elite in Georgia aimed at integrating to the West following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this regard, it was important for Georgia to become a part of international organizations. Georgian political authorities perceived Georgia's membership to international organizations as a crucial step to get recognition for country's Western orientation. Within this frame, politicians initiated many policies in order to fulfill the requirements of international organizations. One of the objectives for promulgating the Presidential Decrees in Georgia between 1993 and 1999 regarding the repatriation of Ahıska Turks was to meet legislative standards of the international organizations in the field of human rights. As pointed out previously, these decrees were poorly prepared, and Georgia was largely incapable of implementing, so no significant achievement was produced related the repatriation issue.

In fact, it can be argued that throughout the 1990s, Georgia held the USSR as responsible for the deportation of Ahıska Turks, and this constituted an excuse for not taking the steps required to solve the problem of repatriation. Nonetheless, Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1999 has been a milestone in the repatriation efforts of Ahıska Turks. Georgia applied to the membership of the Council of Europe in 1996. After that, the Council of Europe monitored Georgia's efforts in the repatriation issue, and so stipulated the repatriation of Ahıska Turks as one of the conditions for Georgia's membership. Georgia acknowledged this condition in 1998 December. Thereby, became member of the Council of Europe in April 1999 (Üren, 2015: 3012; Pentakainen and Trier, 2004: 33). As a condition of membership, as mentioned before, Georgia had to complete the preparation of a legal framework for the repatriation, rehabilitation and integration of Ahıska Turks,

and was to enact a law in two years (2001), initiate repatriation efforts in three years (2002) and finalize the repatriation process in 12 years (2011) (Tarkhan-Mouravi, 2007: 488). Following Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe, the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks has been monitored by the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Council of Europe and its different monitoring bodies such as the Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the National Minorities (FCNM). Before moving on to the role of Council of Europe in the repatriation issue, it is useful to explain how the monitoring bodies of the Council of Europe monitor Georgia for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is composed of the representatives of member states. Even if the Parliamentary Assembly is a place of different voices, its aim is to defend “common heritage” of people in Europe such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The Parliamentary Assembly organizes committee meetings, sessions and sittings in order to improve European laws, monitor whether member states fulfill obligations, discuss the political and social issues in Europe, and help to cease conflicts and provide the unification in the continent. As a result of meetings and reports of the Monitoring Committee, the Parliamentary Assembly can prepare the adopted texts, namely recommendations, resolutions or working documents.³⁷ Although the recommendations and resolutions taken by the Parliamentary Assembly are not binding, the Assembly considers itself the conscience of the Greater Europe. In this regard, member states are expected to answers questions related to them.³⁸ The Parliamentary Assembly mentioned

³⁷ “Documents”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, http://website-pace.net/en_GB/web/apce/documents

³⁸ “The democratic conscience of Greater Europe”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, http://website-pace.net/en_GB/web/apce/in-brief

the repatriation of Ahıska Turks in several adopted texts and writing documents from 1999 to nowadays.

The Commissioner for Human Rights organizes visits and makes interviews in member state to monitor human rights violations. The report is published following the official visit of the Commissioner.³⁹ The Commissioner for Human Rights mentioned the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks in Georgia in reports on Georgia prepared between 2003 and 2015. In addition, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) is another body of the Council of Europe which monitored Georgia related to the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. In country monitoring, ECRI visits key figures in member states in order to prepare report on the racism and intolerance. Following the report of the ECRI, the Government of the member state makes comment on the report. The ECRI also organizes round tables at national levels aimed at solving mentioned problems in the member state monitoring.⁴⁰ Since 2002, ECRI published four reports, two interim follow up documents regarding racism and intolerance in Georgia and it held two round tables in Georgia with stakeholders. Lastly, the National Minorities is monitoring Georgia with respect to the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM). In this monitoring, each cycle has five stages. At first, the member state prepares a report on the improvements or regulations on the obligations of the Framework, then Advisory Committee Delegation organizes visit to the country. Following this visit, including interviews of different parts of the shareholders, the Committee publishes an “Opinion” report. The member state prepares a document entitled “Government Comments” in response to the “Opinion” report of the Advisory Committee. Lastly, “Resolution” is adopted by the Committee of Ministers. In Georgia, the

³⁹ “The Commissioner conducts visits to help raise the standards of human rights protection in all Council of Europe member states, in accordance with his mandate”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/country-monitoring>

⁴⁰ “European Commission against Racism and Intolerance” Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/leaflet-ecri-2019/168094b101>

first and second monitoring cycles were completed, and “Opinion” reports in the first two cycles touched on the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. The third cycle is still continuing.

Following Georgia’s accession to the Council of Europe, these mentioned monitoring organizations began to monitor whether Georgia keep its commitment about the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. On April 20, 2001, the report prepared by Alvaro-Gil-Robles, Commissioner for Human Rights, stated that even if the Georgian authorities accepted the principle of the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, they obviously inclined to postpone Ahıska Turks’ repatriation due to problem of IDPs, conflict with Abkhazia, and poor economic condition. In parallel with this tendency, Georgian authorities demanded to start with collecting precise data on how many Ahıska Turks want to return to Georgia. Alvaro-Gil-Robles mentioned that it would take time, leading Georgia to postpone the preparing legal framework for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. In addition, this report also pointed out that Georgian authority voiced a potential ethnic tension if Ahıska Turks return to their region of origin in Georgia where mostly Armenians live. However, the report warned the Georgian authorities about possible consequences of dispersing Ahıska Turks population.⁴¹ Besides, although Georgia promised to stick to the schedule established for the implementation of the repatriation process, the law was not promulgated in two years, leading the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to adopt Resolution 1257 in 2001, demanding Georgia to accelerate the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks.⁴² Using the excuse of political instability, Georgia requested the Council of Europe to extend the

⁴¹“Annual report October 15th 1999 to April 1st 2001”, Accessed: July, 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=9263&lang=EN>

⁴²“Resolution 1257 (2001) - Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTMLen.asp?fileid=16941&lang=en>

deadline for the beginning of the repatriation process, which the Council of Europe duly accepted on the condition that Georgia completes the repatriation process in 2011. Another report prepared by the Monitoring Committee in 2001 again reminded Georgia to accelerate the preparation of the repatriation law.⁴³

Different rights violations, despite the warnings of the monitoring organizations, continued to be reported. On October 12, 2001, the Report presented by Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography, emphasized the difficulties experienced by Ahıska Turks who bought house in Akhalkhalaki applied to obtain residence registration. The Georgian officials refused their demands by asserting different excuses. This report explained this situation as a bureaucratic abuse.⁴⁴

The first report of the ECRI on Georgia in 2002 stressed that a part of Ahıska Turks who already live in Georgia was deprived of Georgian citizenship, so they are either citizens of another country or stateless. This report also emphasized the necessity of effective integration programs towards Ahıska Turks. Furthermore, the report criticized Georgia about challenges faced by Ahıska Turks in restoring their family name.⁴⁵ As a response, Georgia did not produce any comment due to the usage of the term ‘Meskhetian Turks’ in the

⁴³“Honouring of obligations and commitments by Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=9465&lang=EN>

⁴⁴“For debate in the Standing Committee see Rule 15 of the Rules of Procedure”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=9539&lang=EN>

⁴⁵“Report on Georgia, Adopted on 22 June 2001”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/first-report-on-georgia/16808b576c>

report. The Georgian authorities insisted on using the term ‘The deported population from the South Georgia in 1944.’⁴⁶

The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography in 2002 gave place to concerns about lacking tangible steps of Georgia related the preparation of the repatriation law for Ahıska Turks.⁴⁷ In June 2003, Alvaro-Gil-Robles, as the Commissioner of Human Rights, again stated the necessity of concrete steps toward addressing the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. What is more, he reminded the situation of the Ahıska Turks in Krasnodar and he highlighted that Georgia was responsible for providing legal framework for them to return to Georgia.⁴⁸ In December 2003, Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights also noted that Georgia did not propose satisfactory legal regulations on the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.⁴⁹

After the Rose Revolution of 2003, the Saakashvili government took only small steps on the way to prepare the legal framework for repatriation, leading the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to promulgate Resolutions 1415 and 1428 in 2005.⁵⁰ These two Resolutions aimed to remind

⁴⁶“The following appendix does not form part of ECRI's analysis and proposals concerning the situation in Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/government-comments-on-the-first-report-on-georgia/16808b5776>

⁴⁷“Situation of refugees and displaced persons in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=9761&lang=EN>

⁴⁸“3rd Annual Report January to December 2002” Accessed: July, 29, 2019, https://search.coe.int/commissioner/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016806da9fe

⁴⁹ “3rd Annual Report on the Activities of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights (1 January – 31 December 2002”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewHTML.asp?FileID=10385&lang=EN>

⁵⁰“Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/XrefXML2HTMLen.asp?fileid=17288&lang=en>

the Georgian government to speed up the repatriation without any delay. On January 5, 2006, the Monitoring Committee evaluated the implementation of 1415 Resolution. Although the Monitoring Committee, to some extent, considered the establishment of the Commission in Georgia in 2005 for the repatriation issue as a positive step, it criticized the decision of the Commission for collecting precise data about Ahıska Turk population as a time consuming task. Furthermore, the Parliamentary Assembly followed the Resolution 1415 and 1428 up in 2006 with Resolution 1477, again reminding Georgia of the deadline for the repatriation process and the need to complete the process on time.⁵¹

As a result of the constant pressure of the Council of Europe, Georgia adopted the “Law of Georgia on Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Resettled from Georgia by the Former Soviet Union in the 40s of the 20th Century”, which was approved on June 11, 2007, and was adopted on January 1 2008 (Keskin, et al., 2016: 298).⁵² One may easily argue that comprehensive reports of different monitoring parts of the Council of Europe led Georgia to establish legal framework for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. After the law of repatriation came into force, the Council continued its monitoring of the process.

It is clear that the Council of Europe and its monitoring bodies have maintained their role in the reporting of problems of Ahıska Turks. For example, as ECRI

“Resolution 1428 (2005) - Situation of the Deported Meskhetian Population”, Accessed: July, 29 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTMLen.asp?fileid=17312&lang=en>

⁵¹“Resolution 1477 (2006) - Implementation of Resolution 1415 (2005) on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTMLen.asp?fileid=17398&lang=en>

⁵² See the reports on Georgia, www.coe.int › Tbilisi › Reports on Georgia

suggested in its first report in 2002, it gave emphasize the establishing detailed integration program for Ahıska Turks. However, Georgia released the “Comment” document drawing attention to the term appellation ‘Meskhetian Turks’. According to the Georgian officials this naming causes misunderstanding about their ethnic group and it prohibits their integration into Georgian State.⁵³ Moreover, the report prepared by the Monitoring Committee in 2008 also stated significant problems of the Repatriation Law such as difficulties encountered by Ahıska Turks in implementation and challenges in granting Georgian citizenship.⁵⁴

The National Minorities’ first cycle of the monitoring on Georgia started in 2007 and ended in 2014. The National Minorities’ “Opinion” report of the first cycle in 2009 stated that Ahıska Turks were facing a number of obstacles in the repatriation process, including complications in the application process and in the implementation of law.⁵⁵ In response, Georgia released a “Comment” report in 2009 detailing the ongoing application process, and provided excuses for the interruptions to the repatriation process.⁵⁶ The second cycle of monitoring began on April 1 2012 and ended on January 11, 2018. During this cycle, the Council raised concerns over the difficulties being in obtaining

⁵³“Comments of the Committee of Human Rights and Civil Integration of the Parliament of Georgia on the ECRI’s draft second report on Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/government-comments-on-the-third-report-on-georgia/16808b5778>

⁵⁴“Honouring of obligations and commitments by Georgia”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://semanticpace.net/tools/pdf.aspx?doc=aHR0cDovL2Fzc2VtYmx5LmNvZS5pbnQvbnceveG1sL1hSZWYvWDJILURXLWV4dHIuYXNwP2ZpbGVpZD0xMTg0OSZsYW5nPUVO&xsI=aHR0cDovL3NlbWFudGljcGFjZS5uZXQvWHNsdC9QZGYvWFJlZi1XRC1BVCIYTUwyUERGLnhzbA==&xsltparams=ZmlsZWlkPTEExODQ5>

⁵⁵“Opinion on Georgia, Adopted on 19 March 2009”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf

⁵⁶ “Comments of the Government of Georgia on the First Opinion of the Advisory Committee on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Georgia”, Accessed: July, 29, 2019, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_Com_Georgia_en.pdf

Georgian citizenship by applicants from Azerbaijan and the problems of integration being faced by Meskhetian Turks in Georgia.⁵⁷ Georgia responded with another “Comment” report, released in 2016, stating:

... after being granted Georgian citizenship, that person is obliged to relinquish the citizenship of the other country within 2 years. Hence, issues related withdrawal from Azerbaijani Citizenship is beyond the competence of Georgia.⁵⁸

The third cycle of monitoring started on April 1 2017, and is continuing today. Georgia published “State Report” in 2017, but there is no mention the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. The ‘Opinion’ report will be published in the coming months. In addition, the last report of Commissioner for Human Right was published in 2015 regarding the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, and it urged the Georgian authorities to resolve remaining obstacles for the repatriation and integration of Ahıska Turks.

Considering the last five years of the monitoring process, mainly the Monitoring Committee and the ECRI to active in monitoring the repatriation process of Ahıska Turks. Due to the mentioned challenges in the application process, many Ahıska Turks failed to benefit from the 2007 Repatriation. Nonetheless, the Council seems to focus on the integration of Ahıska Turks who managed to apply and returned to Georgia, but interest in the challenges of application procedures. Paralell to this, ECRI stated in the 2016 report:

...the support for Meshketians was not part of a comprehensive repatriation and integration strategy for Meshketians...The strategy

⁵⁷ The Council of Europe “Opinion on Georgia, Adopted on 17 June 2015”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/georgia>

⁵⁸“Comments by Georgia on the Second Opinion on Georgia of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/georgia>

was only finalised in 2014 and the adoption of the corresponding action plan for its implementation is still pending.⁵⁹

In 2017, the Monitoring Community also stressed that repatriation is not only about promulgating the legislative framework, but also developing concrete strategies for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.⁶⁰

Considering the released reports, it can be argued that the monitoring of the Council of Europe pushed Georgia to promulgate the 2007 Repatriation Law. The Council had also important role in reporting the difficulties experienced by Ahıska Turks in the application process. This encouraged Georgia to make some changes in the 2007 Repatriation Law. In this regard, it is obvious that interactive relation between Georgia and the Council of Europe endowed with a substantial progress in the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. However in the recent years, except general warnings on the repatriation issue, the Council have waited the Georgia's strategy plan for repatriation to be enacted. Under the low level encouragement of the Council of Europe, Georgia also seems to be reluctant to focus on the repatriation issue in a comprehensive way.

Based on the results of an interview with a representative of a civil society organization in Tbilisi, it is possible to argue that there is a perception that Georgia has fulfilled its responsibilities and obligations in line with the terms of the Council of Europe, and that it met the schedule of the repatriation process.⁶¹ Furthermore, an interview conducted with a representative in the

⁵⁹ "ECRI REPORT ON GEORGIA (fifth monitoring cycle)", Accessed: July 29, 2019, <https://rm.coe.int/fourth-report-on-georgia/16808b5773>

⁶⁰ "The progress of the Assembly's monitoring procedure (September 2015-December 2016) and the periodic review of the honouring of obligations by Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France and Germany", Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/XRef-AMDetails-EN.asp?FileId=23246&amid=23443>

⁶¹ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 4, 2015.

Tbilisi office of the Council of Europe revealed that the repatriation of Ahıska Turks is no longer on the agenda of the office. One expert in the Tbilisi office stated, "... there is no longer a project on the repatriation process of Meskhetian Turks in our office".⁶² It can thus be assumed that recently, the Council of Europe has adopted a more passive view of the issue when compared to its earlier stance, in that it is approaching the issue as if Georgia has completed the repatriation process, thus fulfilling its obligation to the Council of Europe. It could be argued that although the Council played a significant role in encouraging Georgia to prepare the legal framework for the repatriation, it has failed to monitor the process, which can be understood from the low number of repatriates to date (Aydingün, 2016: 417). Thus, it can be also claimed that the relatively poor monitoring of the Council of Europe has opened door the Georgian ethno-religious nationalism to affect the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.

4.3. The 2007 Repatriation Law and Problems of Implementation: An Obstacle for Repatriation?

As Ahıska Turks began applying for repatriation in 2008, complaints started to be raised about complicated procedures required for the application. The Council of Europe claimed to have received a long list of complaints regarding the law, in particular, Articles 1, 3, 4, 9 and 10 of the 2007 Repatriation Law, which were discussed at length and criticized by NGOs and experts. Article 1 of the 2007 Repatriation Law states:

The purpose of this law is to create legal mechanisms for the return to Georgia of persons forcefully sent into exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia in the 40s of the 20th century by the former USSR, and their descendants. The repatriation system established by this law is based on the restoration of historical

⁶² Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia). December 2, 2015.

fairness and on worthy and voluntary return principles, and envisages step-by-step repatriation.⁶³

One of the executive members of the Ahıska Turks' organization, during an interview in Baku, stated that the law did not even refer to their community by name, and argued that the use of the term "persons forcefully sent into exile" was a way of avoiding the use of the term "Ahıska Turks". He also said that the term "step-by-step repatriation" was a source of concern among Ahıska Turks.⁶⁴

Article 2 defines the used terms in the 2007 Repatriation Law. This Article is important for the definition of two terms, *a person forcefully sent into exile* and *Repatriate*. According to the Law, "a person forcefully sent into exile refers to a person who was forcefully sent into exile from former Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia to other former Soviet Republics by Decree No. 6279 cc on 31 July, 1944 by the State Security Committee of the USSR." *Repatriate* means "a person who received the status of a repatriate according to the procedures established by this Law". In addition, the definition of *a shortcoming* was added in 2009. *A shortcoming* refers to improper documents and documents which lack a proper certification of translation.⁶⁵ According to the interviews in Azerbaijan, many interviewees said that there were lots of applications refused by Georgia. In this regard, it can be said that adding the

⁶³ Republic of Georgia "Law of Georgia 'On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century'". [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS. This document was provided by Giorgi Bobgiashvili.

⁶⁴ Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015.

⁶⁵ Republic of Georgia "Law of Georgia 'On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century'". [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

term *a shortcoming* regarding required documents enable the legal basis for Georgia to categorize its refusals under this term.⁶⁶

Article 3 defines the person who can apply for repatriate status. According to the first provision, a person who is sent forcefully into exile and his/her direct descendants may apply for and obtain the status of repatriate. In Article 3, Provision 2, it is stated that the spouses of persons and their underage children may apply, and will receive repatriate status as long as the persons stated in Article 1 submit the application.⁶⁷ Many Ahıska Turks in Saatlı complained about the complicated nature of the application process and the time needed to collect the required documents, claiming that many Ahıska Turks who fit the definition provided in Article 1 had been unable to complete the requirements and submit their applications. They also stressed that as a result of delays in the evaluation process, children that had been applied for by their families when underage were reaching the age of 18, and so then needed to make their own applications. An elderly Ahıska Turk in Saatlı (Azerbaijan) said that there had been no need for a separate application for their children at the beginning of the application process, but the complicated requirements of the law meant that he had been unable to finalize the process before his children reached the age of 18, and subsequently, the Georgian government demanded that their children make a new application.⁶⁸ During the interviews it was said that the difficulties encountered in the application process, as in the above-mentioned case, in some cases led to more than one application being made from the same family, and there was no guarantee that members of the same family would receive

⁶⁶ Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015.

⁶⁷ Republic of Georgia “Law of Georgia ‘On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40’s of the 20th Century’”. [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

⁶⁸ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

their repatriate status at the same time. The same interviewee said that this situation was destroying family unity among Ahıska Turks, and that those who are granted repatriate status are hesitant about migrating to Georgia.⁶⁹ An expert from the European Center for Minority Issues (ECMI) claimed during our interview in Tbilisi that when Georgia evaluates the applications of Ahıska Turks, defines the family as a nuclear family, and fails to understand that the Ahıska Turkish family is an extended family, which can be either horizontally or vertically extended. Accordingly, in most cases, Ahıska Turks, in fear of becoming further dispersed, decide against repatriation (Keskin, et al., 2016: 305).⁷⁰

The second provision of Article 4 sets out the documents necessary for the granting of repatriate status. These include the document of deportation, valid permanent residence or/and citizenship documents, birth certificate, certificate from the place of residence, official documents certifying marital status and/or family relations, application to receive the status of repatriate by his/her spouse and underage children, personal data, certificate of criminal records, knowledge of languages, citizenship, and information on financial assets and property. The requirement for a document detailing the health of the applicant was removed from the provisions in 2009 in an amendment.⁷¹ One interviewee in Baku highlighted that demanding of the document about the applicant's health condition insulted Ahıska Turks. Georgia behaved as if Ahıska Turks are diseased individual. The same interviewee also criticized Georgia's request

⁶⁹ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁷⁰ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 4, 2015.

⁷¹ Republic of Georgia "Law of Georgia 'On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century'". [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

of the document of criminal record. He argued that the State perceives Ahıska Turks as potential criminals.⁷²

Many Ahıska Turks interviewed stressed that despite the extension of the application deadline to July 1 2010, collecting all of the necessary documents on time is still difficult.⁷³ One interviewee in Tbilisi said that some of the documents that are required for the application are difficult to obtain. To illustrate, obtaining a document of deportation is a serious problem for a number of Ahıska Turks. An Ahıska Turk in Tbilisi said during the interview that the documents of 1944 Deportation are in the St. Petersburg and Georgia, and he pointed that access to the documents in St. Petersburg is too difficult. According to him, Georgia is also reluctant to share deportation document. He concluded that the aim of Georgia for demanding the deportation document is delaying the repatriation process.⁷⁴ The same interviewee claimed that although Georgia had initiated an archival research project to find documents related to the 1944 Deportation, there has been no progress.⁷⁵ Another document that is necessary but all but impossible to obtain by Ahıska Turks living in Krasnodar (Russian Federation) is the valid permanent residence permit (Rus. *propiska*), as Ahıska Turks living in Krasnodar were subjected to severe discrimination and were even deprived of residence permit (Aydingün, 2008: 8). Article 4 Provision 6 states that if it is not possible to obtain a particular document required for the application, the applicant should present reliable proof that this is not the fault of the applicant.⁷⁶ However, it was apparent from interviews in

⁷² Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015.

⁷³ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁷⁴ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 3, 2015.

⁷⁵ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 3, 2015.

⁷⁶ Republic of Georgia “Law of Georgia ‘On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40’s of the 20th

Saatlı that there is still uncertainty about how applicants can prove that they are unable to provide certain documents, and there are cases in which relatives have been unable to complete their application due to the lack of the 1944 deportation document or a residence permit.⁷⁷

Article 4 Provision 3 states that the required documents for the granting of repatriate status must be submitted either in either the Georgian or English languages. According to the Council of Europe:

... it should be born in mind that the majority of applicants for return do not speak these languages, and the fact that they are required to supply certificates that are expensive and/or difficult to obtain.⁷⁸

A member of a Meskhetian Turk Organization in Baku stated:

All documents must be submitted either in Georgian or in English. The cost of translation varies from 100 to 150 dollar per person. This is a heavy cost for Meskhetian Turks, considering their income.⁷⁹

In order to apply to the repatriate status, Ahıska Turks also have to fill another form. In this form, the information about their religion, ethnicity, their membership to the political party or civil society organization, their military duty, whether or not they belong to any intelligence agency and whether they are obliged to keep any state secrets, where they intend to settle in Georgia, and

Century””. [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

⁷⁷ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015

⁷⁸“Opinion on Georgia, Adopted on 19 March 2009” Accessed: July, 29, 2019, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/PDF_1st_OP_Georgia_en.pdf

⁷⁹ Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015.

what the reason is for the returning Georgia.⁸⁰ In this regard it can be said that the questioning of the applicant's religion, ethnic origin, whether he participated in a military operations, whether he was a member of an any organizations or having his/her contact with the intelligence agency is not based on the restoration of historical fairness as the 2007 Deportation Law promises, but repeated the historical mistake did in the Stalin period (Keskin et. al., 2016: 306).

Article 9 relates to the provision of Georgian citizenship after having obtained the status of repatriate. Provision 4 of the Article states that a person who obtains repatriate status must satisfy the requirements for Georgian citizenship one year after receipt of the status. Although this provision was abolished in a 2009 Amendment,⁸¹ there is still uncertainty over the deadline for giving up citizenship of one's former country. According to Article 1, Provision 1, the general procedure for the granting of citizenship follows Article 27 of the Organic Law of Georgia, entitled "on Citizenship of Georgia",⁸² which states that the person with repatriate status can obtain citizenship of Georgia in accordance with the decree of the Government of Georgia on "the Simplified Procedures of Granting Citizenship for Individuals with Repatriate Status". This abolishes the need for a repatriate to give up their citizenship of another

⁸⁰Council of Europe Organization for Migration, ve European Centre for Minority Issues-Tbilisi Office (2008). "Repatriation to Georgia? Guidelines on Procedures and Applications". p. 9-12.

⁸¹Republic of Georgia "Law of Georgia 'On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century'". [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

⁸²Republic of Georgia "Law of Georgia 'On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40's of the 20th Century'". [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

country, eliminating the risk of leaving them stateless.⁸³ Speaking on this issue, a government official involved in issues of migration and repatriation argued that citizenship of Georgia could be easily achieved in a short period of time for someone with repatriate status,⁸⁴ although during the interview an expert from ECMI claimed that understanding the process of getting citizenship of Georgia is complicated. There is a two-year time limit on giving up citizenship of one's former country and for obtaining Georgian citizenship, although the laws defining the conditions under which Georgian citizenship will be granted are still problematic in implementation.⁸⁵ Interviews conducted with Ahıska Turks in Saatlı revealed that the large majority of them are worried about becoming stateless while waiting for getting the Georgian citizenship. One Ahıska Turk who obtained repatriate status expressed his worries about obtaining Georgian citizenship with the following words:

There is something called conditional citizenship. They say that if you cancel your Azerbaijan citizenship, you will be accepted as a Georgian citizen. How can a man leave his Azerbaijani citizenship? What if you don't get Georgian citizenship? You cannot guarantee it.⁸⁶

Another worry, particularly among elderly Ahıska Turks is related to social rights such as their retirement pension. They do not know whether this will be transferred to Georgia if they give up their Azerbaijani citizenship. During the interviews conducted in Saatlı, many of the interviewees said that they were

⁸³ "Organic Law of Georgia on Citizenship of Georgia", (Unofficial Translation by UNHCR). Accessed: July 29, 2019, [http://eudo-citizenship.eu/NationalDB/docs/GEO%20Organic%20Law%20on%20Citizenship%20of%20Georgia%20of%2025%203%201993,%20as%20amended%2012%202011%20\(consolidated%20English%20translation\).pdf](http://eudo-citizenship.eu/NationalDB/docs/GEO%20Organic%20Law%20on%20Citizenship%20of%20Georgia%20of%2025%203%201993,%20as%20amended%2012%202011%20(consolidated%20English%20translation).pdf)

⁸⁴ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 3, 2015

⁸⁵ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 3, 2015.

⁸⁶ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

hesitant about migrating to Georgia due to uncertainties related to their future and the transfer of their social rights.⁸⁷ One state official in the State Minister on the Issues of Refugees and Resettlement said that Ahıska Turks who are retired from Azerbaijan hesitated to leave the citizenship of Azerbaijan because their pension from Azerbaijan is higher than that of Georgia.⁸⁸

Article 10 sets out the general conditions that will lead to the suspension or termination of repatriate status. Committing crime, providing false information during the application process, being declared missing or dead by the court, obtaining citizenship of a foreign country and violating the Simplified Procedures of Granting Citizenship to Individuals with repatriate status are all grounds for an annulment of the status of repatriate.⁸⁹ Some of the Ahıska Turks living in Saatlı claimed that their applications had not been accepted,⁹⁰ and there is a common belief among them that Georgia legitimizes the annulment of repatriate status without providing concrete reasons⁹¹ that are most probably legitimized by Article 10.

In the 2007 Repatriation Law, Georgia made some amendments aimed at resolving problems related to application process, but the law remained more complicated for Ahıska Turks.⁹² It is understood from the interviews conducted

⁸⁷ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁸⁸ Interview Tbilisi (Georgia) December 1, 2015.

⁸⁹ Republic of Georgia “Law of Georgia ‘On Repatriation of Persons Forcefully Sent into Exile from the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia by the Former USSR in the 40’s of the 20th Century’”. [Unofficial English Translation by European Center for Minority Issue – Caucasus/Tbilisi Regional Office], Tbilisi, July 11, 2007, N5261 RS.

⁹⁰ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁹¹ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁹² Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015

in Azerbaijan that Ahıska Turks were largely unable to make their application on their own due to the complicated procedure of the application process. Therefore, many of them needed to support of DATÜB (in Turkish Dünya Ahıska Türkleri Birliği). Although DATÜB managed to help many Ahıska Turks in this process, some of Ahıska Turks living in different parts of Azerbaijan could not get help in application process, so they failed to submit valid application to the Georgian authorities⁹³ Furthermore, it can be claimed that the Law provided a general framework on the repatriation status and receiving the Georgian citizenship. The Law also could not give concrete explanations as to where repatriates would settle in Georgia, and what kind of rights Ahıska Turks have after the achieving repatriate status. Although one of the experts from ECMI argued that Georgia prepared a simple and understandable website as a source of information to direct applicants⁹⁴, interviews conducted in Azerbaijan and Tbilisi shows that limited efforts of the Georgian authorities have also failed to end the discussions on the repatriation process. The difficulties experienced with the application process and the uncertainties regarding life in Georgia are key factors affecting the decisions of Ahıska Turks related to migration. In addition many Ahıska Turks who applied to return believe that Georgia deliberately makes repatriation process difficult due to their strong attachment to Turkishness. As a result, 5,841 Ahıska Turks managed to apply to return to Georgia despite all challenges. Among them, 1,254 Ahıska Turks were granted with repatriate status, and only 7 of them acquired Georgian citizenship.⁹⁵

⁹³ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

⁹⁴ Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 4, 2015.

⁹⁵“Internally Displaced Persons’ Issues”, Accessed: July 29, 2019, <http://www.mra.gov.ge/eng/static/1601>

4.4. Naming of the Ahıska Turks by the Georgian State and Different Views Related to the Repercussions of their Return to Georgia

As mentioned in the second chapter, the ethnic origin of Ahıska Turks is as long-contested issue. Beyond discussions of whether Ahıska Turks are ethnically Georgian or not, it is certain that almost the entire community define themselves as Turkish, and this has been a defining factor in their repatriation to Georgia. From the interviews conducted in Saatlı, Sabirabad, and Baku, it can be understood that many Ahıska Turks said that their attempts to return to Georgia in the Soviet period had failed due to their attachment to Turkishness.⁹⁶

During the Soviet period, Georgia developed an official discourse about the ethnic origin of Ahıska Turks, claiming that there were no Turks in the community that Georgia refers to as “Meskhetians”, seeing them rather as ethnic Georgians who had converted to Islam during the Ottoman period. In the 1950s, Georgia stated that Ahıska Turks could return to Georgia as long as they accepted their ethnically Georgian identity. The Vatan Society, an organization focused on securing the return of Ahıska Turks to their homeland, suggested to their members that they could define themselves as Georgian in a tactical attempt to migrate to Georgia. Although this was not accepted by the majority of Ahıska Turks, some took the advice and migrated to Georgia, and this has resulted in the emergence of a small pro-Georgian group among the Ahıska Turks (Aydingün, 2002: 55-56). In addition to this tactical attempt to migrate, the *Hsna* organization created by the Georgian state for promoting the Georgian orientation among Ahıska Turks organized Ahıska Turks’ migration to Georgia. From the interviews carried out in Nasakirali, Tsitelubani and Tbilisi, it can be understood that there are a number of Ahıska Turks who

⁹⁶ Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015.

accepted Georgian origin, who took Georgian surnames and who have been living in Georgia since the 1960s.⁹⁷

The hopes of Ahıska Turks that they would be able to return to Georgia increased following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Georgia's subsequent independence, although at the time, Georgia was struggling to maintain its territorial integrity against the secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As a result of these ethno-political conflicts that marked the early period of independence, the Georgian government, with President Gamsakhurdia at the helm, failed to establish a state that was strong enough to ensure internal security across the territory, and the rise of Georgian nationalism came to constitute a threat to minorities. Against the backdrop of this highly charged political atmosphere, roughly 2,000 Ahıska Turks who had been residing in Georgia were forced to flee the country, and any possible discussions of repatriation regarding Ahıska Turks was refused (Trier et al., 2011). During the Gamsakhurdia period they were defined as "Turks" by the state, and so were not wanted in the country. A common slogan of the time in Georgia was "Georgia for Georgians". After the Gamsakhurdia period, the "Turkishness" of Ahıska Turks was again denied by the state, and the issue of repatriation again came to agenda. The idea that Ahıska Turks are ethnic Georgians began to promote by Georgian state and this community could not been considered as one of the national minorities within Georgia.

As mentioned previously, three Presidential Decrees were promulgated in 1993, 1996 and 1999 related to the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks, although little real progress was made. Aydıngün (2002) argues that all of the Decrees made by the Georgian authorities were aimed at supporting the rehabilitation of the pro-Georgian oriented Ahıska Turks who defined themselves as ethnically

⁹⁷ Interview, Tsitelubani (Georgia), April 4, 2016; Interview, Nasakirali (Georgia), October 27, 2015; Interview, Tbilisi, December 1, 2015.

Georgian. Although a number of pro-Georgian Ahıska Turks settled in Georgia as a result of this policy, they faced severe difficulties in obtaining Georgian citizenship, proving that the official position of Georgia during the Soviet period had been carried over into the post-Soviet period, and a similar debate related to the ethnic origins of Ahıska Turks was raised following the adoption of the 2007 Repatriation Law.⁹⁸ Some of the Ahıska Turks in Saatlı, Baku and Tbilisi claimed that the official application documents included a space for applicants to write religion and ethnic origin, and many believed that their Turkishness would be an obstacle to repatriation.⁹⁹

At the time, fears were growing that the possible return of Ahıska Turks to Samtskhe-Javakheti would be likely to spark conflict. The Georgian government was concerned that if Ahıska Turks returned to their homeland, where significant numbers of Armenians now reside, new ethnic conflicts may break out, considering the historical enmity between Armenians and Turks. This problem was made worse by the Georgian media, which regularly stirred up prejudices towards Turks (Biletska and Tuncel, 2016: 321). The Parliamentary Assembly report in 2008 highlighted that although Saakashvili and the lawmakers of Georgia regarded the repatriation of Ahıska Turks as Georgia's "moral obligation", the Georgian government led the negative public opinion about the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. This report also stated that there are political parties voicing provocative statements towards the repatriation of Ahıska Turks in the Georgian Parliament. Even the relatively softest ones among them suggested that the repatriation of Ahıska Turks could pose a challenge to Georgia's both political stability and territorial unity. It is obvious that the Georgian public view related to the repatriation issue is

⁹⁸ Interview, Tsitelubani (Georgia), April 4, 2016

⁹⁹ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015; Interview, Baku (Azerbaijan), September 7, 2015; Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 4, 2015.

affected by the Georgian political elites. The public survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2006, 53% of the population in Georgia was against the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. According to the report in 2008, the percentage on the opponents of the repatriation of Ahıska Turks increased up to 67%. Considering the Javakheti region, where 95% of the population is composed of Armenians, and the percentage of those who opposes the repatriation of Ahıska Turks may be higher. Furthermore, statements from some members of Vatan Society related to cultural autonomy in Samtskhe-Javakheti have been negatively perceived in Georgia, raising fears that Ahıska Turks may begin another secessionist movement in Georgia, and this is a source of concern for the Armenians in the region. This issue has been elaborated upon in a number of studies (Biletska and Tuncel, 2016: 321; Modebadze, 2009: 120-121).

A report released by ECRI in 2010 stressed the need to initiate an awareness-raising campaign in the Armenian-populated regions regarding the repatriation of Ahıska Turks.¹⁰⁰ In the 2013 report of ECRI, it was mentioned that Georgia had been partially successful in launching the awareness-raising campaign¹⁰¹, but according to a research conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in 2011, the negative perception of Meskhetian Turks in the collective memory of Georgian is continuing (Tarkhan-Mouravi and Khutsishvili, 2012: 12), and is a serious obstacle in the way of repatriation. Based on their field research study in Javakheti in 2015, Biletska and Tuncel (2016: 340-341) stated that Armenians are potentially against the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, and although this may well reflect a dimension of the social reality, some people think that the potential for ethnic tension is being exaggerated by

¹⁰⁰“ECRI Report on Georgia”, Accessed: June 11, 2019, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Georgia/Georgia_CBC_en.asp

¹⁰¹ “ECRI Conclusions on The Implementation of the Recommendations in Respect of Georgia Subject to Interim Follow-Up”, Accessed: June 20, 2019, http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/ecri/Country-by-country/Georgia/Georgia_CBC_en.asp

Georgia to legitimize its reluctance to allow Ahıska Turks to return to the region. What is more, the perception of Armenians in the Samstkke-Javakheti region that Georgia uses the repatriation of Ahıska Turks as a tool for the breaking Armenians' domination in the region (Biletska and Tuncel, 2016: 330). Overall, the fieldwork reveals that the Armenian population in the Samstkhe-Javakheti region still represents a problem when the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks comes to the agenda.¹⁰²

It can be said that when the return of Ahıska Turks to their original villages comes to the agenda of Georgia, their attachment to the Turkishness is used by the state as a trump towards Armenians in the region. Moreover, speaking to Ahıska Turks in Georgia, it can be understood that even those who accepted their Georgian ethnicity during the Soviet period still feel excluded by the Georgian state and society. As known Georgia is predominantly Orthodox Christian¹⁰³, and thus, the strong attachment Ahıska Turks to their religion (Islam) prevented them from being perceived as full Georgians by the majority of the society and the state. Furthermore, as a response of the international reports regarding minority rights in Georgia, the Georgian official discourse considered Ahıska Turks as ethnic Georgians, leading the problems of Ahıska Turks to remain unsolved. Also, the ethno-religious nature of Georgian nationalism and national identity prevented the integration of Ahıska Turks even when they accept that they are ethnic Georgians because being Georgian requires also being an Orthodox Christian.

¹⁰² Interview, Tbilisi (Georgia), December 2, 2015.

¹⁰³ Interview, Nasakirali (Georgia), October 27, 2015.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The Ahıska Turks have been subjected to various pressures since the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from Ahıska region and the Soviet control over this region. According to the Soviet Nationalities Policy, Ahıska Turks were not recognized as one of the nationalities within the Soviet Union. Therefore, they were deprived of the right to self-determination and to an autonomous administrative unit as well. In addition, Ahıska Turks were perceived as a threat by the Soviet regime due to their strong attachment to Turkishness and their strong ties with Turkey. Thus, in 1944, towards the end of the Second World War, nearly 100,000 Ahıska Turks were deported from their homeland to the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Along with many other deported nationalities, they were subjected to a ‘Special Settlement Regime’ that lasted from 1944 until its abolition in 1956. While the 1994 Deportation and severe discriminations under the ‘Special Settlement Regime’ caused a collective trauma among Ahıska Turks, this trauma resulted in the strengthening of their national consciousness. During the interviews conducted in Azerbaijan, Ahıska Turks often referred to their Turkishness as a primary reason of the 1944 deportation.¹⁰⁴

As mentioned in the Chapter 2, the removal of the ‘Special Settlement Regime’ in 1956 did not mean permission to return Georgia. The Soviet authorities prohibited Ahıska Turks to settle in Georgia. Although a few Ahıska Turks managed to return to Georgia, they were expelled from the country. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR enacted a decree in 1957 stating

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

that the “Azerbaijanis” (referring to Ahıska Turks) who had been deported from the Georgian SSR to Central Asia in the 1940s were at liberty to settle in the Azerbaijani SSR (Trier and Khanzhin (Ed.), 2007: 651). Consequently, nearly 25.000 Ahıska Turks moved to Azerbaijan between 1958 and the end of the 1960s, wanting to be closer to their historical homeland, and hoping that one day they will be able to return to Samtskhe-Javakheti (Keskin and Anaç: 2016: 287; Yunusov, 2007: 175). However, most of them never had the possibility to return to their homeland due to pressure from the Soviet Union, which consistently refused the Ahıska Turks demands of return.

Moreover, an ethnic conflict arose between Ahıska Turks and Uzbeks particularly in Ferghana Valley in 1989. This conflict escalated rapidly a pogrom towards the Ahıska Turks. Thus, Ahıska Turks had to leave Uzbekistan, and move to other Soviet Socialist Republics. This pogrom induced to another collective trauma among Ahıska Turks, and migration from Uzbekistan to other Soviet states increased the fragmentation of the Ahıska Turk population within Soviet border. It can be asserted that the repatriation of Ahıska Turks became more difficult after the Ferghana Events because the Georgian authorities highlighted their Turkish identity as a cause for the Ferghana Events, and the Georgian political elites promoted the idea that Ahıska Turks could be source of ethnic conflict in Samtskhe-Javakheti region with Armenians too. Although several reasons may be considered for the Ferghana events, interviews conducted with Ahıska Turks in Azerbaijan demonstrated that their Turkish identity is the number one reason for the Ferghana Events.¹⁰⁵

During the Soviet period, the repatriation demands of Ahıska Turks were ignored by both Soviet and Georgian authorities. Ahıska Turk organizations which expressed their demands of return were oppressed. In addition, Ahıska

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

Turks who settled in Georgia by their own means were forced to leave Georgia. The Soviet regime repudiated Ahıska Turks' right of return and delayed the legislative framework until the last days of the Soviet Union. Based on the interviews in Azerbaijan, it can be said that majority of Ahıska Turks believe that their attachment to Turkishness is to reason for not returning to Georgia during the Soviet era.¹⁰⁶

The Soviet Georgia also tried to weaken Ahıska Turks' attachment to Turkishness by putting forward the acceptance of Georgian identity as a condition for their settlement in Georgia. In this regard, Georgian state-sponsored *Hsna* association which promotes the Georgian orientation for the repatriation of Ahıska Turks caused a division among the Ahıska Turks during the repatriation struggle process. It would not be wrong to say that the main barrier to the repatriation of Ahıska Turks during Soviet regime was directly or indirectly related to their Turkish identity. In fact, this is predictable when the political structure of the Soviet Union is considered. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the Soviet political structure based on ethnic stratification and arbitrary criteria for ethnicity selected by the regime. Being a non-recognized nationality, Ahıska Turks were lacking of the autonomous administrative unit, and they were at the bottom of the Soviet ethnic stratification. In this regard, it can be argued that this has been the legal basis of discriminations faced by Ahıska Turks. In addition, it is also possible to conclude that the general indifference of the Soviet authorities towards the repatriation of Ahıska Turks is related to the desire of keeping this legal basis.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the GOC has strived for Georgian identity and culture against "others" since the middle ages. While the GOC became a uniting and symbolic institution for the Georgian nation as an opponent to Islam during Muslim Empire's dominations in Georgia, this role of the Church

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Saatlı (Azerbaijan), September 9, 2015.

continued during the domination of the Russian Empire. In other words, the GOC resisted to the Russification policies of the Russian Empire starting with 1801, the beginning of Russian domination in the region. Later, although the GOC seriously suffered from the Soviet policies promoting scientific atheism during Soviet period, as found out during the interviews and related publications, it succeeded in increase its influence on both state and societal level starting with early years of 1980s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgian Orthodoxy was promoted by all Presidents of Georgia in order to keep the Georgian together, achieve public support for their political authority. During the Gamsakhurdia period, Georgian ethno-religious nationalism enabled the GOC to get a place in the political and social structure of the country. During the Shevardnadze period, the 1995 Constitution of Georgia acknowledged the special role of the GOC in the Georgian history. The *Concordat* also brought significant privileges to the GOC. Research results demonstrated that The Shevardnadze's period can be defined as a period during which the legal status of the GOC is fully defined. Although the GOC was relatively passive in the early days of Saakashvili, the Church served as a source of legitimacy for Saakashvili since 2007. During Margvelashvili's period, importance of the GOC continued and the GOC kept its significance in the Georgian state politics. Although there were a few minor downs in the GOC's influence on the nation-state building process, the failure of Presidents in resolving problems of the country gave room to the GOC to strengthen its power both at the state and societal levels. In this regard, there is no doubt that the GOC became an inseparable part of the Georgian national identity (Keskin, 2017). This has caused to the promotion of ethno-religious nationalism rather than a civic nationalism. As a result, minorities in Georgia, even when they have the citizenship of Georgia, are often not viewed as part of the Georgian nation and furthermore they are perceived as a threat to the Georgian national security.

The view that a “proper Georgian” should be an ethnic Georgians who is Orthodox Christian poses a challenge to the principle of equal treatment of religious minorities in Georgia. As often stated in the international reports and found out during this research, the religious and ethnic minorities complain about the growing discriminations based on the definition of a “proper Georgian”, which renders their integration to the society almost impossible. Considering the interviews conducted by Ahıska Turks in Georgia, one can conclude that even those who accepted Georgian ethnic identity in order to settle in Georgia during the Soviet regime, are not perceived as “proper Georgian”. Therefore, their integration process to the Georgia could not be realized. During the interviews conducted with Ahıska Turks living in an old building of a poor neighborhood of Tbilisi, it became clear that they still feel discriminated against and also insecure, despite their Georgian citizenship.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, those who live in Nasakirali who also define themselves as Georgian lack the feeling of security, and face significant problems such as unemployment.¹⁰⁸

As elaborated by many scholars, Georgianness is defined based on three important markers: ethnicity, language and religion. The research findings have demonstrated that ethnicity and religion are currently the two important markers, with the latter being relatively more important, and this has a direct impact on the case of Ahıska Turks.¹⁰⁹ As mentioned before, although the large majority of Ahıska Turks in Georgia define and/or present themselves as ethnic Georgians, they have maintained their religious identity. One such respondent in Tsitelubani said: “I am Georgian, but I am Muslim. I follow my religion.”^{110,}

¹⁰⁷ Interview, Tbilisi, April 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Nasakirali (Georgia), October 27, 2015.

¹⁰⁹ Interview, Tbilisi, April 3, 2016

¹¹⁰ Interview, Tsitelubani (Georgia), April 4, 2016

The research findings reveal that acceptance of a Georgian ethnicity by the Ahıska Turks was not enough for them to be recognized as “proper Georgians”, as they were not Orthodox Christians. Ahıska Turks, even if they accepted to be ethnic Georgians, are perceived as ‘incomplete’. Most Georgians believe that to be a true Georgian, the person must be Orthodox Christian, meaning that Muslims are treated with disdain by much of society. A Muslim Ahıska Turk who defines himself as ethnically Georgian said:

We have Christian neighbors, and they know that we do not drink alcohol. A couple weeks ago, a neighbor who was drunk knocked on my door. He said: “Why have you come here? What are you doing here? You are Muslim.” I know he was drunk, but this shows his true feelings about us.¹¹¹

Although there is not a policy of encouragement towards Ahıska Turks for conversion, in a number of research Tarkhan-Mouravi and Khutsishvili, (2012: 31) it is claimed that the children of Ahıska Turks who converted to Orthodox Christianity are more easily integrated into society, and such studies, which are very much in line with the official Georgian discourse, can be said to lay the foundations of discrimination based on the idea that Ahıska Turks are not only ethnic Georgians, but also “originally” Orthodox Christian. Although this view about ethnic and religious origin was completely rejected by those interviewed in Azerbaijan, the Ahıska Turks in Georgia accept to be ethnic Georgian, but are strongly attached to Islam. None of them denied their Muslim identity.

To conclude, it can be said that the repatriation of Ahıska Turks is an unfulfilled promise of post-Soviet Georgia. The research data demonstrates the unwillingness of Georgia for repatriating the Ahıska Turks. It is important to underline the fact that the indifference of the Council of the Europe especially

¹¹¹ Interview, Tsitelubani (Georgia), April 4, 2016

in recent years provided the Georgian governments the opportunity to slow down the repatriation process. The complicated nature of the legal framework prepared by Georgia caused important difficulties during the repatriation process. All these demonstrated that Georgia has little motivation to complete the repatriation of Ahıska Turks. Moreover, according to the fieldwork data, Ahıska Turks hesitate to take the decision to migrate to Georgia due to uncertainties surrounding their future lives in the country.

This research has also demonstrated that the ethno-religious nature of Georgian nationalism has been a major barrier to the repatriation of Ahıska Turks, who are referred to as “Turks” by the general public, although treated officially as “Georgians”, and this unspoken “Turkishness” has spurred debates on the possibility of conflict in the event of them returning to Samtskhe-Javakheti. The interviews revealed that even when Ahıska Turks accept their Georgian ethnicity, they are not perceived as fully Georgian due to their religion. In short, it would be fair to say that the Ahıska Turk community still faces very important problems when attempting to start a new life in their historical homeland. This explains why the number of those who have returned as a result of the 2007 law is very limited and why they hesitate to settle in Georgia even after completing the necessary procedures. It is important to remind that of 5,841 applications, 1,254 Ahıska Turks were granted with repatriate status, and only 7 of them acquired Georgian citizenship.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY/TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Bu tezin amacı, Ahıska Türklerinin, Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından itibaren ana vatanlarına geri dönüş sürecini incelemek ve çok az sayıda Ahıska Türkü'nün ana vatanlarına dönmesinin ardındaki nedenleri analiz etmektir. Ahıska Türkleri, günümüzde Gürcistan sınırları içinde yer alan Samtshe-Cavahetya bölgesinde yaşamış, Türk dilli Müslüman bir topluluktur. Yaşadıkları bu bölge, Sovyetler Birliği ve Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Hükümeti ile 1921 yılında imzalanan Moskova ve Kars anlaşmalarıyla Sovyetler Birliği yönetimi altına girmiştir. Bu tarihten itibaren, Sovyetler Birliği'nde diğer halklara tanınan birçok haktan mahrum bırakılan Ahıska Türkleri, 14 Kasım 1944'te, Sovyetler Birliği tarafından ana vatanları Ahıska bölgesinden Kırgızistan, Kazakistan ve Özbekistan Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyetleri'ne sürgün edilmişlerdir. Sürgüne tabi tutulan diğer halklardan farklı olarak, Ahıska Türkleri Almanya ile iş birliği yapmakla suçlanmamış, Türkiye sınırında, Sovyetler Birliği'nin güvenliğini tehdit ettikleri gerekçesiyle sürülmüşlerdir. Ahıska Türkleri 1944'ten 1956'ya kadar 'Özel Yerleşim Rejimi' ne tabi tutulmuşlardır. Sovyetler Birliği'nin lideri Stalin'in ölümünden sonra yönetime gelen Hruşçev, 1956 yılında, 'Özel Yerleşim Rejimi' ne son vermiş ve bu rejime tabi tutulan sürgün halklar üzerindeki kısıtlamaları kaldırmıştır. Ancak sürgün edildikleri tarihte Sovyetler Birliği'nde özerk idari bir birime sahip olmayan ve 'Sovyet Milliyetler Politikasına göre resmî bir milliyet olarak tanınmayan Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına dönmeleri mümkün olmamıştır. Sovyet yönetimi, Ahıska Türklerini Gürcistan'daki ana vatanları yerine, Azerbaycan Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyeti'ne yerleşmelerine izin vermiştir. Bu durumu ana vatanlarına yakın olmak için fırsat

bilen yaklaşık 25 bin Ahıska Türkü Azerbaycan'a göç etmiştir. Ahıska Türkleri, 'Özel Yerleşim Rejimi'nin kaldırılmasından itibaren ana vatanlarına geri dönüş mücadelesine başlamışlardır. Ancak Gürcistan Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyeti'nin isteksiz tavırları, ana vatanlarına geri dönebilmek için Gürcü kimliğini kabul etme şartı, Ahıska Türklerinin olası geri dönüşlerinin bölgeye yerleştirilen Ermenilerle etnik bir çatışmaya neden olabileceği düşüncesinin dillendirilmesi, Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına dönüşüne engel olmuştur. Bu nedenle, Sovyet yönetimi boyunca ana vatana geri dönüş münferit girişimlerle sınırlı kalmıştır. Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dönüş mücadelesi devam ederken, 1989 yılında Özbekistan'ın Fergana vilayetinde Özbekler ve Ahıska Türkleri arasındaki tartışma, Ahıska Türkerini hedef alan etnik çatışmalara dönüşmüştür. Bu olaylar neticesinde 17 bin Ahıska Türkü, Sovyet yönetimi tarafından Rusya Federasyonu'na götürülmüş, Özbekistan'ın çeşitli bölgelerinde yaşayan yaklaşık 70 bin Ahıska Türkü de çatışmalarının yayılabileceği kaygısıyla kendi imkânlarıyla Özbekistan'ı terk etmek zorunda kalmışlardır. Göç edenlerin büyük çoğunluğu Azerbaycan'a yerleşmiştir.

1991 yılında Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından bağımsızlığını elde eden Gürcistan, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüş taleplerinin muhatabı olmuştur. Ancak Gürcistan, ekonomi ve politika alanlarındaki istikrarsızlık, ülke içindeki etnik çatışmalar ve bağımsızlık sonrası gün geçtikçe etkisini arttıran Gürcü milliyetçiliği gibi sebepler nedeniyle, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünü mümkün kılacak yasal düzenlemeleri hayata geçirmede isteksiz davranmıştır. Gürcistan'ın isteksiz tavrına rağmen, ülkenin 1999 yılında Avrupa Konseyi'ne şartlı üyeliği, Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dönüş mücadelesinde önemli bir kırılma noktası olmuştur. Gürcistan'ın Avrupa Konseyi'ne üyelik şartlarından biri, Ahıska Türklerinin Gürcistan'a geri dönüş sürecinde yasal sorumluluğunun üstlenilmesi ve geri dönüşü mümkün kılacak hukuki düzenlemelerinin Gürcistan tarafından yapılmasıdır. Avrupa Konseyi'ne üyeliğin yükümlülükleri gereğince, Gürcistan, şartlı üyeliğinden itibaren

iki yıl içinde (2001) geri dönüşü organize edecek yasayı Avrupa Konseyi'ne danışarak hazırlamayı, üç yıl içinde yasanın uygulamaya geçmesini (2002) ve 12 yıl içinde (2011) de Gürcistan vatandaşlığının verilmesini kapsayan entegrasyon sürecini tamamlamayı taahhüt etmiştir. Yasal sorumluluklarına rağmen, Gürcistan öngörülen takvime bağlı kalamamış, ülke içinde yerinden edilen mültecilerin sorunlarını, 2003 Gül Devrimi'ni ve bölgedeki Ermenilerin Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne karşı olumsuz tavırlarını öne sürerek, geri dönüşü mümkün kılacak yasanın hazırlanması için ek süre talep etmiştir. Gürcistan'ın söz verdiği takvime uymaması ve Rusya Federasyonu'nun özellikle Krasnodar bölgesinde yaşayan Ahıska Türklerine uygulanan etnik ayrımcılığın uluslararası örgütlerin çabalarına rağmen son bulmaması neticesinde, 2004 yılından başlamak üzere yaklaşık 15 bin Ahıska Türkü, özel mülteci programı kapsamında Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ne (ABD) yerleştirilmişlerdir.

Avrupa Konseyi'nin baskıları sonucunda, Gürcistan, 1 Ocak 2008 yılında yürürlüğe girmek üzere, '20'inci Yüzyılın 40'lı Yıllarında Eski SSCB Tarafından Gürcistan Sovyet Sosyalist Cumhuriyeti'nden Zorla Sürgüne Gönderilen Kişilerin Geri Dönüşü' başlıklı yasayı kabul etmiştir. Ancak yasanın uygulanması hususunda ciddi problemler yaşanmış, sürecin verimli olarak sürdürülmesi pek de mümkün olmamıştır. Bu durumdan, özellikle geri dönüş başvurularının büyük bir kısmını oluşturan Azerbaycan'da yaşayan Ahıska Türkleri önemli ölçüde etkilenmişlerdir.

Türkiye, Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasının ardından birçok Ahıska Türkü için önemli bir göç merkezi olmuştur. Binlerce Ahıska Türkü serbest ve iskânlı göçle Türkiye'ye gelmiştir. Türkiye'ye kendi imkânlarıyla gelen Ahıska Türklerinin birçoğu Bursa, Antalya ve İstanbul'a yerleşmişlerdir. Ahıska Türklerinin ilk iskânlı göçü ise 1992 yılında gerçekleşmiştir. Bu göç kapsamında Iğdır'a 150 Ahıska Türkü aile yerleştirilmiştir. İkinci iskânlı göç ise 2015 yılı sonlarında başlamıştır. İlk aşamada 2,252 Ahıska Türkü Erzincan'ın Üzümlü ilçesi ve Bitlis'in Ahlat ilçesine

yerleştirilmiştir. Resmî rakamlara göre şu an ikinci iskânlı göç kapsamında yaklaşık 3 bin Ahıska Türkü Türkiye'ye yerleştirilmiştir. Bugün yaklaşık 600 bin Ahıska Türkü; Azerbaycan, Kazakistan, Kırgızistan, Gürcistan, Rusya, Türkiye, Ukrayna, Özbekistan, Kuzey Kıbrıs Türk Cumhuriyeti ve ABD olmak üzere on farklı ülkede yaşamlarına devam etmektedir.

Bu tez, 2015 ve 2016 yıllarında Azerbaycan'da (Bakü, Saatlı ve Sabirabad) ve Gürcistan'da (Nasakirali, Tiflis ve Tsitelubani) yapılan saha çalışmaları ve derinlemesine mülakatların verilerine dayanarak, Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dönüşünün kısmen başarısız olmasında üç ana nedene dikkat çekmektedir. İlk neden, Avrupa Konseyi'nin 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'nın uygulanmasının takibinde görece yetersiz kaldığıdır. Avrupa Konseyi, Gürcistan'ın 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'nı hazırlamasında önemli bir rol oynamasına rağmen sürecin takibinde yetersiz kalmıştır. Özellikle, yasadaki tüm aksaklıklara rağmen, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüş sürecinin başarılı bir şekilde yürütüldüğü izlenimi, yapılan saha araştırmalarında çeşitli sivil toplum örgütü temsilcileri tarafından vurgulanmıştır. İkinci olarak, 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'na başvuru sürecinde ve yasanın uygulanmasında karşılaşılan zorluklar, Gürcistan vatandaşlığının verilmesiyle ilgili belirsizlikler, birçok Ahıska Türkünün Gürcistan'a göç etme hususunda tereddüt etmelerine neden olmuştur. Azerbaycan ve Gürcistan'daki saha araştırmaları sırasında birçok görüşmeci, 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'nın Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına dönüşünü neredeyse imkânsız hale getirdiğini ve bunun devlet düzeyinde artan Gürcü milliyetçiliğinin bir sonucu olduğunu belirtmiştir. Yapılan saha araştırmalarının verilerine göre, Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına dönüşünün önündeki bir diğer bir engel ise onların etnik kimlikleridir. Ahıska Türkleri, resmî olarak etnik Gürcü olarak tanımlanmış olsalar da Gürcü toplumu tarafından Türk olarak bilinmektedirler. Bu bağlamda, Gürcistan devlet görevlileri ve Ahıska Türkleri ile gerçekleştirilen görüşmelerin bir kısmında, Ahıska Türklerinin geri

dönüşünün Samtshe-Cavahetya bölgesinde yaşayan Ermenilerle etnik bir çatışmaya yol açabileceği korkusundan bahsedilmiştir. Genel olarak ise bu tez, Gürcü milliyetçiliğinin ve bu milliyetçiliğin Ortodoksluğa dayalı doğasının, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünü ve entegrasyonunu zorlaştırdığını savunmaktadır. Ayrıca, Avrupa Konseyi'nin geri dönüş sürecinin ilerleyen evrelerinde, sürecin takibinde görece pasif kalmasının dine dayalı Gürcü milliyetçiliğın bahsi geçen sürece ağırlığını koymasına neden olduğunu da savunmaktadır.

2014 nüfus sayımı verilerine göre günümüz Gürcistan Cumhuriyeti'nde birçok farklı dinî ve etnik topluluk yaşamaktadır. Ancak nüfusunun büyük çoğunluğunu Ortodoks Hristiyan olduğu Gürcistan'da, Ortodoksluk tarihsel bir önem arz etmekte, bu nedenle de Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi toplumsal ve siyasi alanlarda olduğu gibi Gürcü ulusal kimliğinin de oluşumunda önemli bir yer teşkil etmektedir. Gürcistan'da Hristiyanlık 1. yy' dan itibaren yayılmaya başlamış ve 4. yy' da devlet dini olarak kabul edilmiştir. 11. yy ve 13. yy arasında, Altın Çağ olarak adlandırılan zaman dilimi dışında, Gürcü prenslikleri merkezî otoriteden yoksun ve parçalı bir yapıya sahipken, Gürcü Ortodoksluğu Gürcü dilini ve kültürünü koruyan önemli bir unsur olmuştur. Osmanlı ve İran gibi Müslüman imparatorlukların bölgenin kontrolünü ele geçirme mücadelesinde ve özellikle Osmanlı kontrolünde geçen sürede Gürcü Ortodoksluğu, Gürcü kimliği ve dilinin korunmasında önemli rol oynamıştır. 1801'de Rus İmparatorluğu'nun Gürcistan' da hâkimiyet kurmasıyla beraber Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi, Rus İmparatorluğu'nun Ruslaştırma politikaları karşısında ciddi bir engel olarak görülmüş, bu nedenle önce 1811'de Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin özerk yapısı kaldırılmış ve Rus Ortodoksluğuna bağlanmıştır. Daha sonra ise Rus İmparatorluğu Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin ekonomik, siyasi ve toplumsal gücünü kırmak için birçok yaptırım uygulamıştır. Tüm bunlara rağmen Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi Ruslaştırma politikaları karşısında varlığını sürdürmüş ve Gürcülüğün muhafazasındaki rolünü devam ettirmiştir. Rus İmparatorluğu'nun 1917'de Bolşevik

Devrimi'yle sona ermesinin ardından, bağımsız Gürcistan Devleti'nden önce, Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi bağımsızlığını ilan etmiştir. Ancak 1921'de Bolşeviklerin Gürcistan'ı işgal etmesiyle Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi bağımsızlığını kaybetmiş, kurulan Sovyet rejimi boyunca da diğer tüm dinî kurumlar gibi Sovyet yönetiminin din karşıtı politikalarından etkilenmiş ve Gürcü toplumundan uzaklaştırılmıştır. Özellikle 1980'li yılların ikinci yarısından itibaren Gorbaçov'un reformlarıyla kendine alan yaratabilen Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi, Sovyet rejimi boyunca kaybettiği haklarının bir kısmını kazanabilmiştir. Sovyetler Birliği'nin yıkılışına doğru da Gürcü toplumunun Sovyetleşme karşıtlığının yegâne sembolü olarak, Gürcü ulusal kimliğinin önemli bir parçası olmuştur.

Sovyetler Birliği'nin dağılmasından sonra, bağımsız Gürcistan devleti siyasi ve ekonomi alanlarında istikrarlı bir yönetim kurmakta güçlük çekmiş, ayrıca Abhazya ve Güney Osetya'da yaşanan etnik çatışmalar nedeniyle de devlet inşa süreci sekteye uğramıştır. Bir taraftan Batı yanlısı demokratik reformların hayata geçirilmesi hedeflenirken, Gürcistan'ın siyasi elitleri, sosyalist rejimin geride bıraktığı ideolojik boşluğu Gürcü Ortodoksluğunu ve Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'ni kullanarak doldurmaya çalışmıştır. Özellikle kırılğan olan siyasi otoritelerine Gürcü toplumundan destek alabilmek için Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin Gürcü ulusal kimliğindeki önemini vurgulamışlardır. Başka bir ifadeyle, Gürcü politikacılar, Kilise'yi siyasi otoriteleri için meşruiyet kaynağı olarak görmüşlerdir. Bu bağlamda, Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi Gürcistan'da siyasi alana rahatça girebilmiş ve Gürcistan'da dine dayalı Gürcü milliyetçiliğinin toplumdaki etkisini arttırmıştır. Özellikle 'Tam Gürcü' olmanın etnik Gürcü ve Ortodoks olmanın üzerine kurulmuş olması, Gürcistan'da yaşayan ancak etnik Gürcü veya Ortodoks olmayan azınlık topluluklarının dışlanmasına sebep olmuştur. Bu durum, Türk ve Müslüman kimlikleriyle bilinen Ahıska Türklerinin Gürcistan'da var olabilme mücadeleleri açısından önemli bir nokta olarak dikkati çekmektedir.

Bağımsız Gürcistan devletinin ilk cumhurbaşkanı Gamsahurdiya, ülke içindeki ayrılıkçı hareketlere karşı Gürcü milliyetçiliğini sıkı bir şekilde savunmuş ve Gürcü Ortodoksluğunun Gürcü ulusal kimliği için önemini vurgulamıştır. Gamsahurdiya'nın döneminde, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne dair herhangi bir gelişme olmamakla birlikte, yükselen Gürcü milliyetçiliği nedeniyle daha önce Gürcistan'a kendi imkânlarıyla yerleşebilen birçok Ahıska Türkü ülkeyi terk etmek zorunda kalmıştır. Gamsahurdiya'dan sonra Şevardnadze 1993 yılında Gürcistan'ın ikinci cumhurbaşkanı olmuştur. Şevardnadze döneminde, 1995 yılında çıkarılan Gürcistan Anayasası'nda Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin tarihsel önemi vurgulanmış, 2002 yılında imzalanan *Concordat* ile de Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi Gürcistan'da diğer dinlerin sahip olmadığı önemli imtiyazlar elde etmiştir. Diğer bir taraftan, Şevardnadze'nin Batı ile bütünleşme ve uluslararası örgütlere katılma isteği, Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dönüş sorununun ele alınmasını sağlamıştır. 1993-1999 yılları arasında Cumhurbaşkanlığı tarafından üç kararname çıkarılmış ve Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşü için birçok program hazırlanmıştır. Ancak Gürcistan bunları uygulamaya koyma konusunda başarılı olamamıştır. Bu dönemde Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne dair en önemli gelişme ise daha önce bahsedilen, Gürcistan'ın 1999 yılında Avrupa Konseyi'ne şartlı üye olarak kabul edilmesi ve şartlardan birinin Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünün sağlanması oluşudur. Ancak Şevardnadze döneminde bu şartla ilgili herhangi bir olumlu gelişme sağlanamamıştır. Gürcistan'ın içinde bulunduğu siyasi istikrarsızlık, maddi zorluklar, hâlihazırda var olan ülke içinde yerinden edilmiş kişilerin durumlarının belirsizliği, Cavaheya bölgesinde yaşayan Ermenilerle Ahıska Türkleri arasında muhtemel etnik gerilim korkusu ve bunun Bakü-Tiflis-Ceyhan Petrol Boru Hattının güvenliği üzerindeki olası tehdidi, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşünün önündeki engeller olarak değerlendirilebilir. Şevardnadze, 2003 yılında Gül Devrimi ile birlikte yerini Saakaşvili'ye bırakmıştır. Halkın büyük çoğunluğunun desteğini alarak cumhurbaşkanı olan Saakaşvili, iktidarının ilk yıllarında Batı yanlısı reformların

uygulanmasında, ülke içindeki dinî ve etnik azınlıkların haklarının iyileştirilmesinde önemli başarılar elde etmiştir. Ancak Saakaşvili de iktidarının ilk yıllarında devlet arması ve bayrağı gibi önemli sembollerde Gürcü Ortodoksluğuna yer vermiştir. Saakaşvili'nin, iktidarının sarsılmaya başladığı 2007 yılından itibaren, özellikle de 2008 yılında Rusya ile yapılan Ağustos Savaşı'ndan sonra siyasi otoritesini güçlendirmek amacıyla Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'ne siyasi alanda yer açmaya başladığını söylemek yanlış olmayacaktır. Aynı şekilde, Saakaşvili'den sonra 2013 yılında cumhurbaşkanı olan Margvelaşvili de Gürcü Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin tarihsel önemini vurgulamış ve Kilise'nin Gürcü ulusal kimliğinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olduğu anlayışını sürdürmüştür. Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatana geri dönüş sürecine dair özellikle Saakaşvili döneminde önemli atımlar atılmış, 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası yürürlüğe girmiştir. Ancak yasaya başvuruda çeşitli sorunlar yaşanmıştır. Bahsi geçen yasaya 5,841 başvuru yapılmış, bunlardan 1,254'ü *repatriant* statüsü alabilmiştir. *Repatriant* statüsü alan Ahıska Türkleri'nden ise ancak 7'si Gürcistan vatandaşı olabilmiştir.

Gürcistan'da ve Azerbaycan'da gerçekleştirilen saha araştırmaları neticesinde, neden çok az sayıda Ahıska Türkünün Gürcistan'a geri dönebildiğine ilişkin üç ana başlık ortaya çıkmıştır. Bunlardan ilki, Avrupa Konseyi'nin geri dönüş sürecini takip etmede görece pasif kalmasıdır. Avrupa Konseyi, 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'nın hazırlanmasında Gürcistan için itici bir güç olmuş, aynı zamanda yasanın uygulanmasındaki sorunlara dikkat çekme hususunda öncülük etmiştir. Ancak Tiflis'te çeşitli sivil toplum örgütleriyle gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda, Avrupa Konseyi yetkililerinde, Gürcistan'ın geri dönüşüne ilişkin sorumluluklarını ve yükümlülüklerini yerine getirdiği algısının var olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Nitekim Avrupa Konseyi Tiflis Ofisinde bir temsilci ile yapılan görüşmede, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne ilişkin konularla birebir ilgilenen bir projelerinin olmadığı aktarılmıştır. Bu nedenle, Avrupa Konseyi'nin, Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüş

sürecinin takibinde önceki yıllara nazaran daha pasif kaldığı, başvuru sırasında yaşanan tüm sorunlara rağmen sürecin Gürcistan tarafından büyük oranda başarıyla tamamlanmış gibi gördüğünü söylemek mümkündür.

İkinci olarak, Azerbaycan'da gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda, Ahıska Türklerinin 2007 Geri Dönüş Yasası'na başvuru sürecinde karşılaştığı zorlukların, onların geri dönme düşüncelerinde ciddi tereddütlere neden olduğu saptanmıştır. Yasada Ahıska Türkü adlandırılmasının kullanılmaması, özellikle Gürcistan'dan zorla sürgün edilen kişi tanımının kullanılması, Ahıska Türklerini huzursuz etmiştir. Ayrıca, yasada geçen kademeli dönüşün sağlanması ibaresi de dönüşün gerçekleşeceği zaman aralığına dair ciddi şüpheler uyandırmıştır. Buna ek olarak, daha önce anne veya babalarının başvuruları nedeniyle ayrı bir başvuruya sahip olmayan 18 yaş altı çocukların, başvuru sürecindeki uzamalar neticesinde, 18 yaşını geçtikleri ve ayrı bir başvuru yapmak zorunda oldukları, Azerbaycan'da gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda Ahıska Türkleri tarafından aktarılmıştır. Bu durum, aynı ailede birden fazla başvuru sürecinin yaşanmasına neden olmuştur. Tüm bunlara ek olarak, özellikle Ahıska Türklerinin geniş aileye sahip olmaları ve aile içinde *repatriant* statüsü alamayan bireyin olması durumunda aile birliğinin parçalanacağı korkusu, aile içinde *repatriant* statüsü almış Ahıska Türklerinin Gürcistan'a geri dönme hususunda endişe duymalarına, dolayısıyla geri dönmeye dair tereddüt etmelerine sebep olmuştur. Başvuru sürecinde istenen belgelerin fazla oluşu, bu belgelerin İngilizce veya Gürcüce'ye tercümesinin mali anlamda büyük bir yük olduğu, sürgün ve ikametgâh (*propiska*) gibi belgelerin temininin çok zor oluşu, Azerbaycan'da gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda vurgulanmış ve bu durumun Gürcistan'ın geri dönüş sürecini zorlaştırmak istediğini düşüncesi ile bağdaştırılmıştır. Azerbaycan'da gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda, başvuru sürecinde özellikle Ahıska Türklerinin mensup oldukları dinin ve kendilerini ait hissettikleri etnisitenin sorulması da ana vatanlarına dönmek isteyen Ahıska Türklerinde, tarihte olduğu gibi ayrımcılığa

maruz kalacakları korkusunu akıllara getirmiştir. Gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda, Ahıska Türklerinin Azerbaycan vatandaşlığını bırakmadan Gürcistan vatandaşlığı alamayacakları belirtilmiş, Gürcistan vatandaşlığının ne kadar sürede alınacağı hususundaki belirsizliklerin de Azerbaycan'da başvurusu kabul edilen birçok Ahıska Türkünün devletsiz kalma korkusuyla Gürcistan'a yerleşmede tereddüt ettiklerini göstermiştir. Gürcistan vatandaşlığı alınsa bile Azerbaycan'da kazandıkları sosyal haklarının Gürcistan vatandaşlığına nasıl transfer edileceği, özellikle yaşlı Ahıska Türklerinin emekli aylıklarının ne olacağı konusu belirsizliğini sürdürmektedir. Yasaya başvuruda yaşanan sorunlar ve Gürcistan'daki yaşama dair birçok belirsizlik, ana vatanlarına göç etme kararı alan Ahıska Türklerinin bu kararı uygulamada isteksiz olmalarına neden olmuştur.

Azerbaycan'da ve Gürcistan'da gerçekleştirilen saha araştırmaları verilerine göre Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına dönmelerinin önündeki bir diğer engel ise Gürcistan devleti tarafından etnik Gürcü olarak tanımlansalar da Türklüğe olan aidiyetlerinin bilinmesi ve bu durumun sürgün edildikleri Ahıska'ya yerleştirildiklerinde bölgedeki Ermenilerle etnik çatışmaya sebep olacağı düşüncesinin devlet ve toplum düzeyinde dile getirilmesidir. Ahıska Türkleri ana vatana geri dönüş mücadelesinde Türk kimliklerinden ödün vermezken, Gürcistan devleti onların etnik Gürcü olduğu ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu döneminde Müslümanlaştırıldıkları düşüncesini savunmuştur. Öyle ki Sovyet rejimi boyunca, Gürcü olduğunu kabul eden Ahıska Türklerinin geri dönüşüne kısmen de olsa izin verilmiştir. Ahıska Türklerinin bir kısmı ana vatana geri dönebilmek için Gürcü etnik kimliğini stratejik olarak kabul etse de bu düşünce Ahıska Türkleri arasında büyük destek görmemiş ancak geri dönüş sürecinde örgütsel mücadelenin parçalanmasına sebep olmuştur. Gürcistan'da gerçekleştirilen mülakatlarda, özellikle 1960'lardan itibaren Gürcü soy ismi alarak Gürcistan'a yerleşen Ahıska Türklerinin var olduğu

anlaşılmış ancak devlet tarafından Türk oldukları bilinen Ahıska Türklerinin hâlen çeşitli entegrasyon problemleri yaşadığı gözlemlenmiştir.

Ahıska Türklerinin kendi köylerine dönmeleri Gürcistan'ın gündemine geldiğinde, Gürcistan devleti, Ahıska Türklerinin Türklüğe bağlılıklarının bölgedeki Ermenilerle etnik çatışmaya neden olabileceği ve bu durumun hâlihazırda bölgede siyasi ve toplumsal düzeyde hâkim olan Ermenilerin, Gürcistan merkezi otoritesinden ayrılabilmesi düşüncesini dile getirmektedir. Yapılan saha araştırmasında, bu durumun bölgede toplumsal düzeyde kısmen karşılığı olsa da Ahıska Türklerinin olası geri dönüşünün, Gürcistan devleti tarafından bölgedeki Ermenilere karşı koz olarak kullanıldığı söylenebilir. Gerçekleştirilen saha araştırmalarında, Türklüğe aidiyetlerini vurgulayan Ahıska Türklerinin arasında bahsi geçen durumun endişelere sebep olduğu ve ana vatana geri dönüş hususunda tereddüt etmelerine sebep olduğu tespit edilmiştir.

'Tam Gürcü' olmanın etnik olarak Gürcü ve aynı zamanda Ortodoksluk inancına sahip olma üzerinden tanımlandığı Gürcistan'da, Ahıska Türklerinin Gürcistan devleti tarafından 'Tam Gürcü' olarak görülmediğini söylemek yanlış olmayacaktır. Daha önce bahsedildiği gibi, Gürcü etnik kimliğini kabul eden Ahıska Türklerinin de Gürcistan'da Gürcistan vatandaşlığı edinmede, iş bulmada, topluma entegre olmada birçok zorluk yaşadığı, Gürcistan'da yapılan saha araştırmasında gözlemlenmiştir. Öte yandan, Ortodoksluğun toplum ve devlet düzeyde geniş bir etki alanına sahip olduğu Gürcistan'da, etnik olarak Gürcü olduğunu kabul eden Ahıska Türklerinin Müslüman olmaları nedeniyle de entegrasyon problemleri yaşadığı gözlemlenmiştir. Kısaca, Gürcistan ulusal kimliğinin ayrılmaz bir parçası olan Ortodoksluğun da Ahıska Türklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dönmelerinde ve dönebilenlerin topluma entegrasyonlarında ciddi bir sorun teşkil ettiğini söylemek mümkündür.

Sonu olarak, Ahıska Trklerinin ana vatanlarına geri dnşnn, Sovyet sonrası Grcistan'ın yerine getirmediėi bir vaadi olduėu sylenebilir. Yapılan saha arařtırmalarının verileri, Grcistan'ın Ahıska Trklerinin geri dnşi hususunda isteksizliėini gstermiř ve Avrupa Konseyi'nin geri dnř srecini takip etmede bařarısızlıėının da zellikle son yıllarda Grcistan'a geri dnř srecini yavařlatma fırsatı verdiėini ortaya ıkarmıřtır. te yandan, Grcistan tarafından hazırlanan 2007 Geri Dnř Yasası'na bařvuran Ahıska Trklerinin karřılařtıkları zorluklar, Grcistan'da olası yeni bir yařama dair belirsizlikler, bařvuruda bulunan Ahıska Trklerinin ana vatana dnme hususunda tereddt etmelerine neden olmuřtur. Ahıska Trklerinin srgn edildikleri blgede yařayan Ermenilerin geri dnře potansiyel olarak karřı ıkmaları ve Grcistan Devleti'nin de bunu geri dnře engel bir unsur olarak dile getirmesi, Ahıska Trklerinin ana vatanlarına dnme hususunda nemli bir engel teřkil etmektedir. zetle, resm olarak Grc tanımlansalar bile, Trk ve Mslman kimliklerinin bilindiėi Ahıska Trklerinin, ulusal kimliėin Grc ve Ortodoks olma zerinden kurulan Grcistan'da yeni bir hayata bařlamanın olası zorlukları, neden ok az sayıda Ahıska Trknn ana vatanlarına dnebildiėini/dndėn aıklamaktadır.

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