THE GREEKS OF GEORGIA: MIGRATION AND SOCIOECONOMIC PROBLEMS

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Greeks first came to western Georgia in the 8th-7th centuries B.C., yet the ancestors of most of the Greeks now living in the country came in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, the once large diaspora (which comprised a significant part of Georgia's population) has shrunk to several thousand people.

The first wave of Greeks from Asia Minor (the Anatolian Greeks) was generated by Czar Irakly II's economic projects implemented in the 1770s and the policies of the regional countries. Under the Kuchuk-Kaynardji Peace Treaty of 1774 between Russia and Turkey, the Russian Empire acquired a protectorate over the Greeks; this was followed by Greek migration to Russia. It was at the same time that Irakly II invited Greek artisans from the Erzurum and Kars regions to work at the newly-opened silver and copper plants in Akhtal and Alaverdi. (About 800 Greeks with families moved to Georgia from the industrial centers of Asia Minor.)

In fact, Russia deliberately created a Christian area in Georgia (where Armenians lived side-by-side with Georgians) which bordered on the Islamic world; this was further promoted by the resettlement of Greek refugees who came in great numbers, especially in the 19th century. Under the Adrianople Peace Treaty which put an end to the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-1829 Russia was expected to remove its troops from the Erzurum vilayet, a move which would have left the local Greeks who had been on the Russian side during the war unprotected. At General Paskevich's request, Nicholas I allowed the Greeks to settle in Georgia. They came mainly to the Borchala uezd, which had been completely ruined by Turkish and Daghestani inroads. By 1830, about 18 Greek settlements had appeared in the Tsalka District. Simultaneously, Greeks from the northwestern vilayets of Turkey started moving to the Dmanisi District; they replaced the local Georgian geographic names with the names of the villages they left behind in Turkey. This part of the country still abounds in Turkish geographical names, even though over time some of the villages restored their old Georgian names. In the 1830s, Greeks moved to Samtskhe: 200 Greek families settled in the villages of Tsikhisdjvari (Borzhomi District) and Mikeltsminda (Akhaltsikhe District) depopulated by the Muslim incursions. The favorable living conditions made it much easier to strike root there than in the Tsalka District.

Greeks appeared in Abkhazia and Ajaria after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878; the Russian government believed it expedient to move Greeks, politically reliable Orthodox Christians,

to the lands depopulated by mutiny in Abkhazia. Greeks started pouring into these lands in great numbers in 1881; they settled in Batumi and the Dagva village. By the early 20th century, their numbers increased considerably. It should be said that the local Greeks were fairly well-educated and cultured people.[1] Mass Greek migration ended in the 1930s.

It is worth noting that even earlier, in the 1920s, the Greeks started emigrating from Georgia: Sovietization, the dire economic situation,[2] and the processes unfolding in Turkey[3] forced the Greeks to seek a better life in their historical homeland. The next emigration wave arose in the 1940s when the Soviet authorities moved the Pontic Greeks living along the Black Sea coast in Georgia, Abkhazia, and Ajaria to Central Asia and Kazakhstan, areas with bad climates and adverse geographic conditions. Few of them came back after rehabilitation.

[1] See: I. Garakanidze, "History of Greek Resettlement to Georgia (18th-19th Centuries)," in: *The Greeks of Georgia,* 2000, pp. 28-70 (in Georgian).

[2] See: "Ot'ezd grekov," *Batumi* (newspaper published by the Greeks of Ajaria), No. 1-2, January-February 2001.

[3] See: "Den pamiati genotsida Pontiyskogo ellinizma," *Eliniki diaspora* (publication of the Union of the Greek Communities of Georgia), Nos. 5-6 (V-VI), 2003.

The Settlement Pattern

Until the 1990s, the Greek population of Georgia grew steadily first due to migration (in the 19th century) and later thanks to natural population growth: in 1926, there were 54,000 Greeks, or 2.0% of the total population, living in Georgia; in 1937, 85,000 (2.4 %); in 1959, 73,000 (1.8%); in 1970, 89,000 (1.9%); and in 1979, 95,000 (1.9%).

Greek settlements are mainly found in the southern and southwestern regions of Georgia—in the Tsalka, Tetritskaroy, Dmanisi, Marneuli, Akhaltsikhe, and Borzhomi districts—and in the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria.[4]

In 1989, there were about 100,000 Greeks (or 1.9% of the total population) living in Georgia; they were in the majority in the Tsalka District (27,000, or 61.0%) where they lived side-by-side with Armenians (28.5% of the district's total population) and Azeris (5.1%). Driven away by natural calamities in the mountains of Svanetia and in Ajaria, Georgians returned to the region in the late 1980s after several centuries of absence. They were resettled there for political reasons as well: Tbilisi wanted to tip the demographic balance in this mainly non-Georgian district by moving Georgian ecological migrants there. By helping the newcomers to adapt to the alien conditions, public organizations supported the official structures. Since that time, the number of Georgians has been growing slowly but steadily.

According to the national population census of 2002, the number of Greeks in Georgia dropped to 15,000, or 0.3% of the total population. About 3,800 of them live in Tbilisi; 2,200, in Ajaria; and 7,500 in Kvemo Kartli, including 4,600 Greeks in the Tsalka District. Today, Armenians are in the majority there.[5]

[4] See: M. Pkhakadze, "The Current Settlement Patterns of the Greeks in Georgia," in: *The Greeks of Georgia,* pp. 71-83.

[5] See: *The State Department of Georgia for Statistics. Results of the First National Population Census of 2002,* Vol. 1, 2003, pp. 110-116 (in Georgian). It should be said here that the local Greeks are convinced there are fewer of them still living in Georgia: because of mistakes, some of those who had emigrated were entered on the lists as still living in Georgia.

Greeks were involved in the migration processes which began in the 1990s to a much greater extent than other ethnic groups, mainly because Greece helped all Greeks from former Soviet republics to resettle in their historical homeland. Nearly all of the 14,700 Greeks who lived in Abkhazia in 1989 left the country for Greece after the war of 1992-1993.[6]

The nationalism raging in the country during Zviad Gamsakhurdia's presidency spurred on emigration: nationalists of all hues and their organizations persecuted ethnic minorities without impunity; they were especially active in the places where ethnic minorities lived in compact groups. There were no cases of deliberate persecution of the Greeks, yet nationalist hysterics caused apprehension and urged people to emigrate. With the removal of Gamsakhurdia, the wave of nationalism subsided, while Greeks continued to emigrate for socioeconomic reasons.

The absolute majority emigrated to Greece; fewer people went to Cyprus, other European states, and Russia. The larger part of the émigrés expected to get residence permits to be able to stay in the country, mainly because back home the strained socioeconomic conditions were killing hopes of getting adequate employment. This has already deprived the Tsalka District of young people, while those of the Greeks who preferred to stay behind (mainly the elderly) live on the money their relatives send them from other countries. In fact, members of the older generation have also decided to emigrate with the help of the same relatives. Crime is another reason behind this: Greeks are attacked, their houses and farm buildings are burned down, and there were several murders.[7]

The Georgian authorities so far have done nothing to stem the outflow. They have limited themselves to statements,[8] while two presidential acts (of 1996 and 2002) on the sociopolitical development of the Tsalka District remained on paper. The outflow is going on.

One Ethnos— Two Languages

In the past, all the Greeks who settled in Georgia belonged to one of the two language groups—the Greek-speaking Ellinophones (they called themselves "Romeos" or, rarely, "Grekos" and "Elinos"), who on the whole preferred Abkhazia and Ajaria (and, to a lesser extent, south Georgian villages), and Turkic-speaking Greeks who called themselves the "Urums." They preferred the Tsalka and Dmanisi districts.[9] The Greek-speakers use the Pontic dialect. In Greek "ponto" means a sea coast or a coastal country. In antiquity this word referred to the territory along the southern and southeastern Black Sea coasts where, in the 6th century B.C., the Greeks founded their first colonies and where, some 300 years later, the Pontic Kingdom was located. Later, Ponto (the Pontic area) and the Pontic

[6] See: R. Gachechiladze, *Population Migration in Georgia and Its Socioeconomic Results,* Tbilisi, 1997, p. 37 (in Georgian). To move the Greeks away from Abkhazia, the Greek government carried out a special operation in the course of which Greeks were evacuated by sea: *Athens News Agency Bulletin*, 19 August, 1993. About the Greeks living in Abkhazia see the website of Post Factum Radio: [http://www.postfactumk.org/index.php?tim=2-5-2003&ID=103].

[7] See: P. Kotanov, "Kogda zhe nastupit spokoystvie?" *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 1-2 (I- II), 2005.

[8] See: "Migratsia grekov iz Tsalkskogo rayona dolzhna byt priostanovlena," *Mnogonatsional'naia Gruzia,* No. 4, August 2002.

[9] Two different languages used by the same ethnic community have created an identity problem for the local Greeks as one ethnic group. This is not obvious, yet there is alienation between the Greeks of the Black Sea coast and Eastern Georgia.

population remained closely connected with the territory and its people. In the course of history, the Pontic population lived under different rulers in different historic conditions, yet they kept their collective name—the Pontic people. Today, they live in Ukraine, Russia (mainly in the Northern Caucasus), in Armenia, and Georgia.

The local Greek speakers use the term "Romeyka" to describe their Pontic dialect, which is fairly common in Georgia, and apply the word "Romey" to themselves. They also call their language the Pontiaka. Another term, Elinika, is also applied, although much more rarely, to describe the same language together with the Pontiaka; people in Greece mainly use it to describe the Greek language. For several reasons, the Pontic dialect in Georgia has moved farther from the contemporary spoken and written Greek than all other Greek dialects. The language of the Greek-speaking community in Georgia was influenced by neighboring tongues—Russian, Georgian, Turkish, and Armenian.[10]

The Turkic-speaking population of the Tsalka District mainly uses the eastern Anatolian dialects of the Turkish language[11] and call the local Greeks "Urums." The term that appeared after the collapse of the Eastern Roman Empire, when the Turks conquered Byzantium stems, from the Latin root "Roma" which means "Rome" or rather the "Roman" (a subject of the Eastern Roman Empire living in one of its provinces, irrespective of his/her ethnic affiliation, captured by the Turks).

The Urums of Georgia use a Turkish dialect divided into local dialects very close to the Turkish dialect. It developed under the strong influence of three languages: the Azerbaijani, Georgian, and Russian. Most of the Tsalka population are Christians—Georgians and Greeks who are Orthodox Christians and Armenians who are Gregorians, as well as Azeris who are Sunni Muslims.[12]

The Problem of the State Language

Under Soviet power most Greek children attended Russian schools since knowledge of Russian was needed to enter colleges and universities and be employable across the country. With the Soviet Union out of the picture, the Georgian tongue became the main language of the country's sociopolitical life, while the Greeks living in compact groups, as well as the Azeri and Armenian majority of Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti do not know Georgian at all.

In the Tsalka District there are several factors behind this. The district is populated mainly by Greeks, Armenians, and Azeris who use Russian or Turkic for communication; in Soviet times and today, the Georgian taught in local schools was inadequate, to say the least. There were practical reasons to learn Russian too—the knowledge of Russian alone was more than enough. The Greeks living in Tbilisi have a more or less adequate command of Georgian, yet Russian is still their main spoken language.

[10] See: A. Mikaberidze, M. Shakhpazidi, "On the Dialect of the Greeks of Georgia," in: *The Greeks of Georgia,* pp. 129-177.

[11] See: N. Djanashia, "General Description of the Tsalka Urums' Turkic Dialect," in: *The Greeks of Georgia,* pp. 178-192.

[12] See: L. Pashaeva, *Sem'ia i semeyny byt grekov Tsalkskogo rayona,* Tbilisi, 1992, pp. 18-19.

This has inevitably created problems in independent Georgia: the Greeks became virtually unemployable; they found themselves in an information vacuum and were excluded from the country's sociopolitical life. The only Greek deputy who served two terms in the Georgian parliament (of the 1995 and 1999 convocations) was practically excluded from law-making because of the language barrier. Those Greeks who can potentially find good jobs cannot do this because of the language exams required in certain spheres of activity. For them emigration is the only option. In the present socioeconomic and political context, the younger generation sees no prospects for themselves and, therefore, sees no reason to study Georgian. The state, on the other hand, cannot organize the teaching of Georgian in the areas where national minorities live in compact groups. After the Rose Revolution, the state started stepping up its activity in this sphere, yet the modest results achieved so far give no hope of a breakthrough.

Socioeconomic Conditions

Even though only 94 km away from Tbilisi, the Tsalka District (with its adverse climate and bad roads, which means that it takes people 4 to 5 hours to reach the capital) is in a more deplorable socioeconomic situation than many other areas. In winter, things become even worse.[13] Nearly all the local enterprises are idling, many of them have been plundered, and the power supply is erratic. The local Greeks, mostly jobless, are living on money transfers from relatives who emigrated to Greece; agriculture is no longer as profitable as it used to be.

The Greek government and public organizations are doing much to help the local Greeks within the international humanitarian programs.[14] The programs themselves are not limited to the Greek population alone: the three clinics opened under the aegis of the World Congress of Greeks Abroad in Tbilisi, Tsalka, and Tsikhisdjvari extend medical assistance to all ethnic groups living in Georgia.[15] The Greeks do hope that thanks to the international efforts and joint initiatives of the Georgian and Greek governments, the emigration wave will gradually subside.[16] So far this has not happened—young people are still resolved to leave the country.

Compensation Problem

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline could have potentially created jobs for the local Tsalka Greeks, yet they were never employed. Moreover, there were problems with getting compensation for the land taken up for laying the pipeline. From the very beginning, BP, which funded the project, bought

[13] Only a small stretch of road was repaired under the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project on BP money. It is expected that in the near future the highway that used to connect Armenian-populated Javakheti with Tbilisi will be restored. The road will cross the Tsalka District and will improve its communication with the capital. This project is realized by the Georgian government on American money under the Millennium Challenge program.

[14] See: V. Nekresidi, "Spasibo za pomoshch," *Eliniki diapora,* No. 6-7, 1998; V. Kekchidi, "Blagotvoritel'nost," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 4 (IV), 2003.

[15] See: A. Umudumova, "Vsemirny sovet grekov zarubezh'ia prodolzhit svoi prorammy v Gruzii," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 5-6 (V-VI), 2003; A. Papanidi, "Ambulatorii prinimaiut patsientov," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 1-2 (I-II), 2004.

[16] See: K. Diamantopulo, "Grecheskaia programma podderzhki ekonomicheskogo i sotsial'nogo razvitia Gruzii beret start," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 4 (IV), 2003; idem, "Iannis Makriotis privez iz Gretsii programmu ekonomicheskoy i sotsial'noy podderzhki naselenia Gruzii," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 5-6 (V-VI), 2003.

44m-wide land stretches and paid compensation not only to the people living in the direct proximity of the route, but also to those who were living within the 2km-wide area around the pipeline. The money, however, was intended for the so-called legal residents, while the Georgian ecological migrants mentioned above, who recently moved to the area and who occupied houses abandoned by their Greek owners without their permission, were not counted as legal residents. It is next to impossible to locate the houses' legal owners since all of them have emigrated.[17]

The newcomers were even suspected of moving to the area in the hope of receiving the compensation money.[18] The local people (Armenians and Greeks) find it hard to accept the ecological migrants (Georgians). This causes conflicts, while the fact that the compensation was intended only for the Greeks adds tension.

Other Problems of Private Property Protection

The Greeks are confronted with the problem of how to protect their property. This is especially true of those who emigrated and left houses behind; some of them are occupied by relatives, some of them were sold. It is hard to sell a house in the Tsalka District, because people from the capital or other places do not want to move there, while the local people have no money to buy property. The abandoned houses are either plundered or squatters move in; some of the ecological migrants, however, moved into houses with the permission of the Greek owners. The authorities should buy these houses from emigrants, but they do not have sufficient funds to do this.[19] However, in 2004 the Ministry for Refugees and Resettlement bought about 100 houses for ecological migrants in the Tsalka District. The 2005 budget has allocated 4.5 million laris, or $2.5 million, to buy another 100 houses.[20] The house owners, however, are not happy with the state prices[21] and prefer to wait until better times.

The socioeconomic problems in the region notwithstanding, ecological migrants continue pouring into the Tsalka District mainly in the hope, as a representative of the Georgian Ombudsman Office pointed out, of getting well-paid jobs with the pipeline construction project.[22] Those who are critical about the way the government is dealing with the migrants' problems never tire of saying that housing construction is proceeding slowly while only a few of the vacated houses are being bought. Migrants squat in the abandoned houses and cultivate the abandoned lands—this is all happening mainly in the Greek villages. In the absence of a land-redistribution mechanism, the situation is growing even more complicated.[23]

Ethnic conflicts are fuelled by squatting and many other everyday problems plaguing the area.[24] The situation is further aggravated by the fact that some of the ecological migrants are Muslims from the mountainous regions of Ajaria: this adds religious overtones to their conflicts with the local Greeks

[17] See: J. Wheatley, "Obstacles Impending the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia," *ECMI Working Paper #23,* February 2005.

[18] See: Z. Kechakmadze, "The Situation in Tsalka is Aggravated by the Special Services," *Rezonansi,* No. 81, 15 October, 2002 (in Georgian).

[19] See: M. Narchemashvili, "Why were Internal Troops Moved into Tsalka?" *Rezonansi,* No. 200, 26 July, 2002; Interview with Chairman of the Tsalka District Administration Georgi Kvaliashvili," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 6-7 (46-47), 2003.

[20] See: *Interpress,* 14 December, 2004.

[21] See: P. Kotanov, "Stoimost domov znachitel'no vyshe," *Eliniki diaspora,* No. 7-10 (VII-X), 2004.

[22] See: I. Zurabishvili, "From Internal Migration to Ethnic Misunderstandings," *Mtavari gazeti,* No. 83, 9 April, 2004 (in Georgian).

[23] See: Z. Baazov, "Napriazhennost iz-za neprodumannosti planov po pereseleniiu," *Panorama,* No. 7, April 2005.

[24] See: M. Mosiashvili, "Armenians are Keeping Down Migrants from Ajaria," *24 saati,* 2 April, 2003 (in Georgian).

and Armenians who are Christians.[25] The media, which tend to look at all conflicts as either ethnic or religious, are doing nothing to defuse the situation: the local people blame the journalists who come to Tsalka for a couple of days to look around (which is obviously not enough to assess the situation) for the very superficial reports about the local developments.[26]

According to Kiriak Iordanidi, Chairman of the Union of Greek Communities of Georgia, the conflicts between the Georgians and the Greeks are rooted in the still unresolved social and economic problems, primarily regarding real estate.[27] Conflicts between ethnic groups periodically flare up; recently the number of crimes, robberies, and murders has increased. The local Greeks explain this by the erratic way the newcomers' problems are dealt with. K. Iordanidi has pointed out that hundreds of criminals came to the area along with workers, peasants, and intellectuals.[28] The Greek ambassador to Georgia responded to the increased number of crimes against the Greeks in Georgia with a statement addressed to the Georgian Ministry of the Interior.[29] On 16 March, 2005 a family of elderly Greeks was beaten up and robbed. The Greeks and Armenians laid the blame on the Georgian newcomers and demanded that they should be allowed to pass judgment on the detained suspect. Later they beat up Georgians and raided a Georgian school. The Georgians complained about continued violence by Greeks and Armenians. This brought the Minister of the Interior to the district; additional policing was organized.[30]

Conclusion

Greeks, especially the Tsalka Greeks, are bent on emigrating to a much greater extent than the other ethnic minorities of Georgia. In the 1990s, their numbers sharply declined; the process will continue unabated due to the social and economic difficulties; as a result Georgia might lose its Greek community.

The Greeks living in the Tsalka District are very much concerned with the safety of their private property; the conflicts between the local Greeks and Armenians, on the one hand, and the ecological migrants (Georgians), on the other, stemming from the property issue are of an everyday nature, yet the periodical flare-ups are gradually acquiring ethnic hues against the background of the social and economic hardships. The media, which tend to describe the local events as ethnic confrontations, are failing to defuse tension. This, and the present attitude of the authorities toward the socioeconomic problems, will increase the danger of a full-scale ethnic conflict there.

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[25] See: N. Molodini, "The Danger of Religious Confrontation in Tsalka," *Akhali versia,* 7-8 April, 2004 (in Georgian).
[26] See: Z. Baazov, "Tsalka—rayon neotlozhennykh confliktov," *Kavkazskiy aktsent,* No. 8, 16-31 May, 2005.
[27] See: I. Zurabishvili, "Aliens in Their Own Country," *Mtavari gazeti,* No. 88, 16 April, 2004.
[28] See: K. Iordanidi, "An Open Letter to the President of Georgia," *24 saati,* No. 136, 10 June, 2004.
[29] See: "Presech vylazki kriminaliteta," *Mnogonatsional'naia Gruzia,* No. 3, March 2005.
[30] See: Z. Anjaparidze, *Georgia's Greek and Armenian Communities Decry Resettlement Plans,* The Jamestown Foundation, 23 March, 2005.