

The Pivotal Significance of Sociocultural Demarcations in Shaping and Upholding the Ethnic Identity of the Deported Meskhetians (Exemplified in the Context of South Georgia)

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ABSTRACT

The article delves into an intricate exploration of the function, significance, and intrinsic characteristics defining social, cultural, and ethnic demarcations, pivotal in shaping the self-perception of the deported Meskhetians. Despite the prevailing consensus emphasizing the pivotal role of historical memory, territorial associations, interconnected emotions, and collective trauma in shaping the identity of the deported Meskhetians, empirical studies underscore the substantial role played by social and cultural boundaries. These boundaries stand as equally significant mechanisms, fostering the preservation of the identity of this community vis-à-vis other ethnic or social groups. A consensus prevails regarding the manifestation of these boundaries, often characterized by unique markers, symbolic representations, specific attributes, or momentous events. The existence of such resemblant boundaries exerts a profound influence on the attitudes, interrelations, and mutual understandings between individuals and discrete groups, thereby exerting a substantial impact on self-perception. The empirical foundation supporting precise assertions and deductions emanates from comprehensive field studies carried out among the deported Meskhetians domiciled in South Georgia. The inquiry into the identity quandary of repatriates is approached from diverse angles, employing a spectrum of methodologies such as the micro-history approach, biographical-narrative interviews, in-depth interviews, and life history analysis. A comparative method was instrumental in juxtaposing and analyzing data sourced from distinct target groups, enabling the correlation of discerned disparities with varying experiences and historical recollections. Specifically, 44 participants spanning various ages and diverse life experiences underwent interviews. The amassed information was meticulously sifted through, considering parameters such as the respondent's age, ethnic background, gender, direct or tangential association with memories linked to the deportation episode. The primary trends influencing the trajectory of identity establishment or preservation, as delineated within the empirical data, were methodically extracted and isolated. The

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scrutiny of the acquired data revealed striking disparities in how interviewees perceive their own ethnic identity. Equally apparent were discrepancies in the local community's attitudes towards them and their interpretation of the interviewees' ethnicity. Notably, confirmation emerged regarding the existence of specific social and cultural boundaries within the internal dynamics of the deported Meskhetian community. Yet, as expected, conspicuous cultural and social distinctions surfaced between the deported Meskhetians and the local population, emphasizing unequivocal separations. The contention is posited that the distinctiveness of these boundaries is shaped by several factors. Specifically, the respondent's stance concerning ethnic heritage within their internal group, the diverse traditions prevalent within the Georgian ethnic group, anticipation of potential risks inherent in the Armenian ethnic group, and the accrued experiences from intergroup relations collectively contribute to this delineation. The overarching outcomes of the research are deliberated within the realm of prevailing theories pertaining to identity. The assertion is made that the pivotal determinants shaping the self-perception of the deported Meskhetians primarily align within the constructivist theory framework.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Underpinnings and Contextual Framework of the Research

The provided article constitutes a significant stride toward reconciling the voids within research, particularly regarding the fundamental role played by sociocultural demarcations in molding and preserving the ethnic identity of the deported Meskhetians, specifically exemplified within the context of South Georgia.

Virtually all studies conducted within the deported Meskhetian population unequivocally affirm the pivotal role of markers such as territoriality, evoking associated emotions, historical memory, and the like, in shaping the identity of the deported Meskhetians. Nevertheless, our extensive field research has unveiled a profound revelation. In addition to these markers, we have discerned the presence of social and cultural boundaries, which serve the dual purpose of fostering allegiance among group members to the core tenets of their collective identity, encompassing language, religion, and traditions, while simultaneously imposing significant burdens in the ongoing struggle to preserve that very identity. These boundaries, in essence, forge the structural scaffolding upon which individuals relate to or distinguish themselves from other societal groups.

The Meskhetians, constituting a distinctive ethnic collective, have evolved over time because of intricate sociocultural processes. Were it not for the enduring social dynamics that have unfolded within their milieu over the course of many years, and conceivably even centuries, the rich tapestry of their self-perception would not exhibit the remarkable diversity that it does today. In contemplating this phenomenon, one might wonder whether the collective entity known as the Deported Meskhetians/Ahiskel Turk would even exist. Ernest Gellner, in his seminal work "Nations and Nationalism," offers pertinent insights into these dynamics: "No doubt will, or consent constitutes an important factor in the formation of most groups, large and small. mankind has always been. organized in groups, of all kinds of shapes and sizes, sometimes sharply defined and sometimes loose, sometimes neatly nested and sometimes

overlapping or intertwined. The variety of these possibilities, and of the principles on which the groups were recruited and maintained, is endless. But two generic agents or catalysts of group formation and maintenance are obviously crucial: will, voluntary adherence and identification, loyalty, solidarity, on the one hand; and fear coercion compulsion, on the other. These two possibilities constitute extreme poles along a kind of spectrum“ (Gellner, 1983).

We think that it is in the format of the spectrum of the extreme poles of society formation proposed by Gellner that the foundations of the formation and maintenance of the deported Meskhetians as a society/group can be placed. On the one hand, the characteristics of the group unification of the deported Meskhetians (voluntary commitment, identification, loyalty) and on the other hand, the history of some of their ancestors who were Muslims centuries ago (fear, coercion). One important part of them was loyal to Islam, while the other part, in some cases out of fear and coercion, and in some cases for economic benefits, accepted Islam, which over time became a part of their culture and one of the important unifying factors. Ernest Gellner's work "Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals" states: "At the beginning of social transformation which brought about the new situation the world was full of political units of all sizes often overlapping and of cultural nuances and hence of men whose own culture did not converge with the one used by the rulers of the sovereign political unit they inhabited. Under the new social regime, this became increasingly uncomfortable. Men then have two options. If they were to diminish such discomfort: they could change their own culture or they could change nature of the political unit, either by changing its boundaries or by changing its cultural identification." (Gellner, 1994; Walicki, 2012).

2. Literature Review

Research dedicated explicitly to the pivotal significance of sociocultural demarcations in shaping and upholding the ethnic identity of deported Meskhetians is an evolving field, though it may not have an extensive volume of literature. However, there are academic papers, books, and scholarly articles that delve into aspects of their history, displacement, and identity struggles. Here are some sources that may contribute to understanding this subject:

The compilation of essays "The Meskhetian Turks: An Introduction to their History, Culture, and Resettlement Experiences" edited by Ayşegül Aydıngün, Çigdem Balım Harding, and Matthew Hoover covers various aspects of Meskhetian Turk history, culture, and resettlement experiences, which may include discussions on identity formation and sociocultural demarcations. As per the authors' assertions, the profoundly oppressive regime endured between 1944 and 1956, coupled with their vilification as "enemies of the people," served as catalysts prompting the Meskhetian Turks to unite for both physical endurance and cultural preservation. Consequently, the ordeal of deportation played a pivotal role in shaping the Meskhetian Turks' distinct identity as a discrete ethnic group. Furthermore, their steadfast adherence to endogamy, refraining from marrying outside their ethnic boundaries, significantly bolstered the cohesiveness of their identity. In various regions, particularly Central Asia, Meskhetian Turks predominantly settled in close-knit rural or suburban clusters comprising anywhere from a few dozen to approximately a hundred households. Typically, extended families maintained proximity and cohabited with those who hailed from the same Meskhetian villages, fostering a profound sense of communal solidarity (Aydıngün, Harding, Hoover, 2006).

In her article titled "Religious and National Identity of the Meskhetian Turks in the Conditions of Changing Statehood," Agata Novak posits the profound assertion that the forced deportation endured by the Ahıska Turks stands as the most poignant and tragic chapter in their historical narrative. This traumatic event has reverberated through their contemporary existence,

profoundly shaping their life, identity, cultural bearings, and religious convictions. Novak underscores the pivotal role played by the categorization of Ahiska Turks as "enemies of the nation," an exclusionary social designation that paradoxically acted as a unifying force, fostering tighter bonds and solidarity within their community. Simultaneously, this ostracization precipitated a confinement of the social and cultural milieu of the Ahiska Turks within the confines of their own group, leading to a insular existence. The cumulative weight of these harrowing experiences served as the crucible for the emergence of a distinct Meskhetian Turk identity, a separate and self-contained sense of self. Furthermore, their sustained adherence to traditional customs, notably the practice of endogamy—solely marrying within their community - has been instrumental in perpetuating and preserving this distinct identity, persisting even into the present day (Novak, 2021).

In the scholarly work titled "People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri)" authored by Malika Mirkanova, a comprehensive exploration is undertaken regarding the genesis of Meskhetian Turks, encompassing their diverse deportations, the adversities faced by them and their predecessors during Stalin's regime, including the Ferghana Pogrom of 1989. Furthermore, the narrative delves into their subsequent persecution in Krasnodar, Russia, and sheds light on their current circumstances in the United States. By immersing herself in extensive research on this subject and conducting interviews with a spectrum of Meskhetian Turks spanning varied professional and socio-economic strata, Mirkanova arrives at a resolute conclusion. She identifies the paramount characteristic defining this community as their recurrent, involuntary displacement coupled with enduring discrimination encountered within host populations across different geographical locales (Mirkhanova, 2006).

Hatice Nurhayat Bilge's doctoral thesis, titled "Meskhetian Turks: Exploring Identity Through Connections of Culture," delves into the intricate cultural identity of a displaced community known as the Meskhetian Turks, a group subjected to multiple forced relocations throughout their extensive history. Having been uprooted from their original homeland and dispersed across Central Asia and Eastern Europe for several decades, an approximate count of 15,000 Meskhetian Turks have recently been granted refugee status by the American government. The focal point of Bilge's study is a specific cluster of Meskhetian Turkish refugees situated in the expansive Phoenix metropolitan area. Employing a narrative approach, the research unfolds through a series of twelve comprehensive, open-ended, in-depth interviews, complemented by the researcher's astute observations within the community. This scholarly endeavor encompasses three primary objectives: firstly, to comprehensively grasp the intricate layers of Meskhetian Turkish cultural identity; secondly, to delve into the intricate connections maintained by Meskhetian Turks with Turkish culture; and lastly, to scrutinize and evaluate the process of adaptation of Meskhetian Turks to life in the United States (Bilge, 2012). Research findings indicate that Meskhetian Turks residing across diverse regions exhibit varying patterns in self-identification. For instance, Meskhetian Turks in Azerbaijan tend to express a stronger affinity toward their Turkish roots (Yunusov, 2007). Conversely, counterparts in Georgia vehemently disavow such connections, emphasizing their differences from the Turkish identity (Sumbadze, 2007). The author's conclusive findings unveil a significant correlation between the preservation of the Meskhetian Turkish identity and the pervasive threats that encroach upon both their cultural essence and existential presence. Integral facets defining the Meskhetian Turkish identity, namely the steadfast preservation of their cultural heritage and the profound sense of community, stand as poignant reflections of this reality. Moreover, this comprehensive study illuminates how the group's assimilation into the cultural milieu of the United States is markedly influenced by these overarching dynamics. Conflicting elements within their adaptation, exemplified by the emergence of a sense of

security following the dissipation of immediate threats and a concurrent apprehension concerning the potential erosion of their cultural heritage in the absence of a pressing threat, serve as compelling affirmations of this influential nexus.

The scholarly literature underpinning the presented article engages with a spectrum of scientific works, serving as the theoretical foundation. These scholarly works:

- Offer a comprehensive and nuanced historical narrative detailing the deportation of Meskhetian Turks under Stalin's regime. They meticulously illuminate the intricate historical backdrop surrounding the displacement of this community and its profound repercussions on their ethnic identity (Khazanov, 1992); (Jones, 1993); The discussion not only delves into the origin, historical trajectory, and potential catalysts behind the deportation of this group but also underscores a noteworthy aspect: the pervasive ambiguity surrounding their identity. Despite the predominant adherence to Islam and the Turkish language among the Meskhetian populace, a persistent state of uncertainty shrouds their sense of self. Dating back to the nineteenth century, a close interweaving of religious affiliation with national identity was evident, culminating in a prevailing sentiment among most Meskhetian Muslims who regarded themselves as more aligned with Turkish ethnicity despite bearing Georgian names. Presently, a substantial segment, born outside the confines of Meskheti, identifies themselves as "Meskhi Turks," constituting the majority. Concurrently, a notable minority, advocating for their return to Georgia, persistently upholds their identification as Georgian Muslims. This dichotomy has intricately fractured Meskhetian solidarity, fostering a recurring rift between factions espousing a pro-Turkish orientation and those steadfastly maintaining their "Georgianness";
- Delve into the intricate interplay between memory, cultural politics, and their roles in shaping and upholding the ethnic identity of Meskhetians in the aftermath of displacement (Perovic, 2018); Commencing its exploration from the nineteenth century, the text meticulously dissects the array of strategies employed by the state to assert its dominance over populations displaying a resilient resistance to external impositions. These communities, staunchly adhering to their established religious practices, traditions, and ways of life, frequently resorted to armed resistance against encroachments. Perovic's work stands as a pivotal addition to our understanding of the early Soviet era, a period often neglected in the tumultuous history of the region. The 1920s and 1930s marked the initial encounter between the predominantly Muslim populace of this region and a modernizing state, one that not only demanded unwavering allegiance but also active engagement in the agenda of 'socialist transformation'. By tapping into previously unrevealed documents from Russian archives, Perovic meticulously investigates the repercussions brought about by Russian policies. Furthermore, the book elucidates the reasons underlying the failure of these modernization endeavors from Moscow's perspective. Ultimately, this failure led the Stalinist leadership to forcibly exile the Chechens and other North Caucasians to Central Asia during the years 1943-4;
- Discuss the myriad challenges encountered by Meskhetian Turks in the preservation of their ethnic identity, delving into sociocultural delineations (Aydingün, 2002). The article authored by Aydingün centers on the genesis, conservation, and evolution of the ethnic identity "Ahiska Turk," which emerged in the aftermath of the pivotal 1944 deportation. The primary objective is to underscore that the crystallization of an ethnic group, transitioning from a mere ethnic category, or the evolution of ethnic identities, emerges as a consequence of intricate interplays among historical, economic, political, and interactive contextual dynamics. The article posits that ethnic identities are fluid

constructs, subject to transformation across temporal and geographical landscapes, engendered by the interplay of external factors such as state policies and internal determinants inherent within the group. It contends that comprehending ethnic identity necessitates an approach that comprehensively integrates external elements - such as state-driven policies - and internal facets, encompassing the inherent characteristics of the group. As such, the examination of the Ahiska Turks serves as a focal point to discern the pivotal influence exerted by state policies and the perceptions of host societies in delineating and shaping ethnic boundaries.

3. Body of Paper

As per the constructivist approach, the parameters defining group membership and the very concept of group membership are inclined to evolve over time, with individuals entering and exiting the group, fostering the emergence of novel traditions and lifestyles. Nevertheless, even amidst these dynamic shifts, the group itself persists as a fundamental framework for organizing public life (Halle, 2004).

It is widely posited that ethnic groups, functioning as bearers of culture, share a profound connection with their ecological surroundings. This connection implies their inherent capacity to adapt to the environment that members of the group must navigate. The same group of people, with unchanged values and ideas, would surely pursue different patterns of life and institutionalize different forms of behavior when faced with the different opportunities offered in different environments. Likewise, we must expect to find that one ethnic group, spread over a territory with varying ecological circumstances, will exhibit regional diversities of overt institutionalized behavior which do not reflect differences in cultural orientation. The cultural contents of ethnic dichotomies would seem analytically to be of two orders: (I) overt signals or signs - the diacritical features that people look for and exhibit to show identity, often such features as dress, language, house-form, or general style of life, and (II) basic value orientations: the standards of morality and excellence by which performance is judged. Since belonging to an ethnic category implies being a certain kind of person, having that basic identity, it also implies a claim to be judged, and to judge oneself, by those standards that are relevant to that identity” (Barth, 1998).

The primary research hypotheses were articulated as follows:

The sociocultural boundaries delineating the deported Meskhetians find their conceptual moorings within the constructivist paradigm, encompassing not only their interactions with the local populace but also within the confines of their own internal group dynamics.

The substantial significance of sociocultural boundaries is corroborated in the context of safeguarding the identity of the deported Meskhetians, working in concert with other identity markers.

The interpretation of borders and their perception, taking into consideration their various types and significance, can be categorized into four primary domains:

The Political Salience of Boundaries:

Ethnic borders may hold political relevance in certain instances, while in others, they may not.

The political significance of these borders is contingent upon situational variables, economic influences, or the visibility of ethnic markers.

Social Closure and Groupness:

In certain scenarios, there exist closed or exclusive ethnic groups that adamantly reject outsiders, though conversely, there are situations where the interaction between two ethnic groups is more fluid. At times, ethnic boundaries are closely associated with heightened levels of discrimination.

3.1. Cultural Boundaries

When cultural and ethnic distinctions overlap, the boundaries between these two groups tend to become more pronounced. It is plausible that ethnic borders may not necessarily divide the population along cultural lines; they might instead serve as unifying factors. Alternatively, these borders may gradually erode over time, facilitating the assimilation of specific groups.

3.2. Stability/ Steadfastness

Certain groups exhibit a marked degree of boundary rigidity and persistence, denoting their capacity to uphold these demarcations across protracted epochs, spanning multiple generations. It is noteworthy, however, that within a singular group, the dynamics of these boundaries can undergo profound transformations within the confines of a single generation. In turn, "It seems that the degree of stability is linked to various modes of transmitting ethnic membership. The most stable boundaries are found among people who identify individuals through multigenerational, unilineal descent lines. More unstable boundaries, one could argue, are those defined by behavioral, rather than genealogical, membership criteria" (Wimmer, 2008).

4. Methodology

This research predominantly employs qualitative methods, with the underlying methodological approach rooted in constructivist theory. As a primary step, markers, and factors pertinent to the research inquiry, duly substantiated during the research process, were meticulously identified. These markers/factors encompassed the nexus between social and/or cultural boundaries and identity, elucidating their role in delineating distinctions among various groups and in fostering allegiance within a particular group. Subsequently, these identified markers and factors were subjected to thorough examination and analysis within the context of pertinent theories.

For the collection and analysis of data, a triangulation approach was adopted, enriching the scientific rigor of the research. This approach involves a multifaceted exploration of the issue, employing a variety of methods to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences related to the deportation act, particularly focusing on the older generation living in the Samtskhe Javakheti region.

Utilizing the micro-history method, let's delve into the details of the deportation act, aiming to capture the firsthand accounts, memories, and interpretations of this historical event by the elderly.

Conducting biographical-narrative interviews with second-generation participants allowed us to document and analyze their experiences as displaced persons, shedding light on the challenges they faced, including discrimination and the complexities of living without a homeland.

To understand the broader social dynamics and interactions between deported Meskhetians and local inhabitants, we used embedded interviews in an immersive environment to explore the community's lived experiences.

In addition, a life history analysis was conducted to trace the life trajectory of the deported Meskhetians over time, representing their experiences and intra-group personal challenges.

The research design incorporated a comparative analysis of data obtained from different target groups, leveraging the comparative method. This facilitated the correlation of discerned differences with diverse experiences and historical memories, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the impact of the deportation act on various generations and communities.

Frederick Barth's perspective is fundamental to our exploration, serving as the foundational framework for identifying and elucidating social and/or cultural boundaries within the context of this research. „It is important to recognize that although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant (Barth, 1998). Henceforth, the primary focus of this research was delineated to revolve around narratives pertaining to the deported Meskhetians, along with their self-narratives.

5. Research Findings and Conclusions

In the pursuit of elucidating the presence and underpinnings of social and/or cultural boundaries among the deported Meskhetians and the local population residing in the South Georgia resettlement areas, extensive field research was conducted. Interviews were conducted with both the deported Meskhetians and the local inhabitants of Akhaltsikhe, Abastumani, Mugareti, Klde, Ude, and Arli. We conducted interviews with repatriated Meskhetians who resettled in Georgia from the 1990s up to the current period, along with members of the local community residing in these villages. Each village site yielded an average of 6-7 interviews, accumulating a total of 44 respondents across all sites. Among the pool of 44 respondents engaged in interviews, 14 comprised repatriated Meskhetians, while the remaining 30 represented members of the local community.

A total of 44 interviews were categorized as follows:

- Indigenous Local Population (18).
- Deported Meskhetians (14)
- Portion of the Local Population who settled in these areas during the 1950s (9).
- Local Ethnic Minorities - Armenians (3).

The respondents were stratified into three distinct age cohorts:

- Youth cohort (ages 13-30): n=14, comprising 50% female participants.
- Middle-aged adults (ages 31-60): n=20, with an equal representation of 50% female respondents.
- Elderly cohort (ages 61 and above): n=10, maintaining a balanced distribution of 50% female participants.

The selection of villages and respondents was methodically aligned with the resettlement zones of the deported Meskhetians. Our primary focus centered on investigating individuals residing in the villages housing repatriated Meskhetians. However, to comprehensively gauge the perspectives of the local populace, we conducted interviews in villages not hosting deported Meskhetians, such as Ude and Aral. This approach enabled us to juxtapose and analyze the empirical data gleaned from diverse village settings, facilitating comparative analysis.

All recorded interviews varied in duration, spanning from half an hour to an extensive three hours. The length of each interview was contingent upon the level of openness and trust

exhibited by individual respondents, allowing for an organic exploration of their experiences and perspectives.

Subsequently, we undertook content and thematic analyses as the final phase of our research methodology.

The research has unveiled that awareness of an individual respondent's ethnic lineage lays the foundation for social boundaries at the intragroup level. Nevertheless, the shared experience of tragedy and trauma fosters a heightened sense of solidarity. Consequently, within these groups, group membership takes precedence over ethnic affiliation. Thus, at the intra-group level, narratives regarding the ethnic origins of specific families do not carry substantial weight in contrast to more potent unifying factors such as shared historical memory and collective trauma. These ethnic narratives only serve to create a fragile and conditional boundary within the group.

The disposition of the local population toward the deported Meskhetians exhibits a spectrum of diversity. This variance is contingent upon several key factors, including the recollections held by the locals, the narratives circulating within the populace, geographic proximity (how near or distant they reside from the deported Meskhetians), and the potential for personal interaction. Accordingly, guided by these criteria, three principal categories within the local population have been identified, each characterized by distinct attitudes towards the deportees.

The local population in this region exhibits diverse attitudes towards the deported Meskhetians, often influenced by generational, ethnic, and settlement factors:

Older Generation vs. Younger Generation: The older segment of the local population, who have lived in the area for an extended period, possess vivid memories of the events that transpired in the mid-20th century. In contrast, the younger generation, while aware of these historical events, tends to harbor more negative perceptions of the deported Meskhi.

Ethnic Georgians with Deportation Ancestry: Another segment of the local population comprises ethnic Georgians who settled in the area due to deportations, such as the Imeretians and Ratchians. They generally exhibit a relatively positive attitude towards the deported Meskhetians.

Ethnic Minorities in Samtskhe-Javakheti: The third category consists of ethnic minorities belonging to various religious denominations residing in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, including respondents from the ethnically Armenian group. These individuals typically harbor few concerns regarding the religious and ethnic backgrounds of the Meskhetians. Their primary basis for maintaining social boundaries stems from apprehensions about potential future developments.

Field research has elucidated that practically all local residents have individually defined criteria that must be met by a particular individual to be accepted into their village or, at the very least, to diminish the social boundaries between their family and the deported Meskhetians.

The field data also underscores the significance of religion in terms of either mitigating or upholding social boundaries, primarily among the Georgian population settled in this area during the 20th century. However, a prevalent factor in this demographic's mindset pertains to apprehensions regarding the future intentions of the deported Meskhetians. Interestingly, these concerns differ from those held by representatives of other ethnic groups, particularly the Armenians, whose fears emanate from distinctive circumstances.

The ethnically Georgian population, who have settled in the region, is primarily anxious about the possibility of the deported Meskhetians returning and laying claim to their lands and

residences. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of this population remains open to accommodating the deportees in their villages, provided that their property rights remain intact. This nuanced perspective can be attributed to the polyethnic and multi-religious nature of the Meskhethi region, which has fostered a tradition of harmonious coexistence among diverse populations.

Conversely, among the ethnic Armenians, two prominent stances have emerged. A portion of this population maintains an indifferent attitude, emphasizing that they have never encountered issues with anyone in the past and expect no such problems in the future. They express a willingness to support whatever decision the government makes. On the other hand, another segment harbors a more negative disposition, perceiving the deportees as pawns in broader, potentially alarming schemes aimed at establishing a sizable Muslim (Turkish) state.

As per the findings of the field research, the perspective of the local ethnically Georgian population regarding cultural boundaries, in tandem with religion and language, is significantly influenced by their perception of the quintessential Georgian character. This population places great emphasis on traditions such as communal dining, wine consumption, and the practice of toasting as integral components of Georgian culture and identity. The absence of these traditions among the deported Meskhetians contributes to the delineation of a distinct cultural boundary.

Table gatherings, wine consumption, and toasting are recognized by foreign scholars specializing in Georgian traditional culture as pivotal elements of Georgian identity. For instance, Florian Muhlfried, in his article "Celebrating Identities in Post-Soviet Georgia," underscores the significance of these cultural practices as manifestations of Georgian identity (Muhlfried, 2007). Likewise, Matias Pelkmans, in his publication "Defending the Border/Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia," highlights the special reverence Georgians hold for wine and considers the tradition of wine consumption as an emblematic symbol of Georgians (Pelkmans, 2006).

The outcomes of the conducted field research have unveiled a multifaceted landscape of attitudes within the local population of Samtskhe-Javakheti villages towards the deported Meskhetians. These attitudes can be broadly categorized into three primary groups, with various factors intertwining to delineate social and cultural boundaries:

Indigenous Local Population with Historical Memory: This segment, bearing historical recollections, tends to harbor a negative disposition towards the deported Meskhetians. For them, historical memory and religious affiliation serve as key social boundaries.

Population Settled from Various Parts of Georgia: Those who relocated to the area during the latter half of the 20th century, devoid of historical memory regarding the deportees, erect social boundaries based on religion and geographic location. The separated lifestyle of the deported Meskhetians contributes to their relative isolation, creating an element of fear regarding potential future deportation and property confiscation.

Ethnic Minorities (Armenians): Ethnic minorities, particularly Armenians, generally hold heightened concerns about the deported Meskhetians' far-reaching repatriation plans. In this context, religion plays a central role in demarcating boundaries.

Additionally, the absence of certain traditions such as communal dining, wine consumption, and toasting, considered pivotal components of the Georgian character and culture, fosters a unique cultural boundary between the ethnically Georgian local population and the deported Meskhetians.

Among the deported Meskhetians themselves, at the intra-group level, familial positions concerning ethnic origin assume a subtle yet distinct role as boundaries. However, shared historical memory, trauma, religious beliefs, and language constitute more potent unifying factors within their group. Consequently, group membership holds greater importance than individual ethnicity for them.

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