

Cool Welcome for Meskhetians

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Muslims exiled by Stalin are to be legally entitled to go back at last, but convincing many Georgians this is a good idea is likely to be a difficult task.

After almost six years of wrangling with the Council of Europe, Georgia is finally taking steps to allow the Muslim Meskhetians to return home after a 60-year exile.

However, convincing Georgians to welcome back the community – deported by Stalin towards the end of the Second World War – will prove difficult. Many local people are suspicious of what they regard as an alien group who will not be easily assimilated. There is also the more pragmatic consideration of absorbing extra immigrants for a state already beset by numerous economic and social problems.

Making provision for the Meskhetians is a condition of Georgia's membership of the Council of Europe, CoE, since it joined in 1999. In March 2005, the CoE issued a statement urging the government to comply with the request.

But although the government is clearly keen to keep its promises to the CoE, many Georgians think it has gone too far in bending to the pressure on the Meskhetian issue.

In line with the CoE's minorities programme, by the end of this year, Georgia will complete preparations to enable tens of thousands of descendants of Meskhetians to return to their motherland, if they want.

ONE OF STALIN'S "PUNISHED PEOPLES"

The deported Muslim group used to live in the Meskheta area of southern Georgia, now the Samtskhe-Javakheti administrative region. They are also known as Meskhetian Turks, as there is some dispute about whether the majority are basically Turkish or Georgian in origin.

Stalin took against them, as he did with many ethnic groups across the Soviet Union. In this instance it was probably because the tide of the Second World War had turned in his favour, allowing him to consider aggressive action towards Turkey, and suggesting a need to clear away possible Turkish sympathisers.

Most of the deportations took place on the night of November 14, 1944. Almost the entire population of Meskhetian Muslims was rounded up and packed on to freight trains by security forces. By dawn, more than 92,000 people had gone, bound for a harsh life of exile in Central Asia.

Historian Marat Baratashvili, who runs a group called the Union of Meskhetian Repatriates, recalls, "My father Latipsha Baratishvili, a village teacher, helped his fellow villagers on the night of the deportation, because he thought he was carrying out [Communist] party orders. But then he was put into one of the railcars himself along with his Christian wife."

The Meskhetians are thought to be the last of the peoples deported wholesale by Stalin to be given the right to return to their motherland. The Chechens, Ingush, Karachay and Balkar of the North Caucasus and

the Kalmyks of southern Russia were allowed back after the dictator's death in 1953; the Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans were permitted to leave Central Asia only in the latter years of the Soviet Union - the former going home to Ukraine and many of the latter emigrating to Germany.

IMPLEMENTING THE REPATRIATION PLAN

As a condition of its membership of the CoE, which it joined in 1999, Georgia is required to facilitate the return of the Meskhetians by 2011.

Teimuraz Lomsadze, an adviser to the Ministry of Conflict Regulation who is working closely with the CoE minorities committee for protecting ethnic minorities, told IWPR that the repatriation will start next year.

Last month, a government commission headed by the minister of conflict regulation, Georgi Khaindrava, travelled to the Central Asian republics to assess the possible scale of repatriation.

Accommodating tens of thousands of new settlers - no one really knows how many will opt to come - will be extremely hard for a country whose economy is weak, and which has already received tens of thousands of refugees as a result of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"It is a complicated process," admitted Lomsadze. "But the biggest problem is money. We are hoping for aid from the governments of various countries, from international organisations, and from the state budget."

The repatriation will be made possible by a law which is currently being drafted and which according to Khaindrava will come into force in 2006. In its statement earlier this year, the CoE's Parliamentary Assembly noted that the law was supposed to have been adopted two years after Georgia joined the international body in 1999.

The first task for the authorities is to establish how many people are likely to come. Khaindrava's Central Asian trip in mid-October was intended to inform a more accurate assessment of the numbers involved.

According to a 2004 report from the European Centre for Minorities, ECMI, most of the diaspora live in Kazakstan - up to 100,000 people - and Azerbaijan, which may have as many as 110,000. In addition, there are up to 30,000 in Kyrgyzstan, and perhaps 15,000 in Uzbekistan, and 5,000-10,000 in Ukraine.

Most of the once large community in Uzbekistan left after ethnic violence there in 1989, and moved to Russia, Azerbaijan or other countries.

A further group, estimated at more than 25,000, now lives in Turkey, which they are unlikely to want to leave.

Khaindrava's team talked to Meskhetians in Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and examined files on deported individuals, which are held in the state archives of these countries.

“In the Bishkek archive alone there are up to 75,000 personal files relating to various deported nations,” said Lomsadze. “And then we will have to compare all the information there with what we find in the Georgian archives. We have to prevent a situation where people unrelated to the Meskhetian Muslims decide to come to our country.”

After the trip, Khaindrava concluded, “Our overall impression is that the descendants of the deported Meskhetians know almost nothing about Georgia. But most of them want the right to live in their motherland.”

At home, the government is now planning the practical steps that will make repatriation possible. Two centres will be opened in west and east Georgia where the families of returning Meskhetians will stay for at least three months, learning about the country’s culture and history and studying the language. The foreign ministry is already talking to the European Union about funds for this part of the programme.

Then the authorities will need to identify the areas where the returnees are to be settled, allocate land to them and provide jobs or pensions. They may also open bilingual schools where teaching will be conducted in Georgian and Turkish.

Another area that the government plans to address is encouraging public opinion to be more receptive, and that is likely to prove an uphill task.

Apart from natural concerns about providing for the incomers, the Meskhetian issue is highly emotive.

“Mass repatriation of the Muslim community is dangerous because the majority of them have no intention of identifying themselves as Georgians,” Nodar Natadze, leader of the nationalist Popular Front party, told a press conference in August. “They want to come here and live as Turks.”

The majority of people whom IWPR asked for their opinion of the repatriation programme expressed doubt and in some cases outright hostility to the issue.

“Settle the Meskhetian Turks in Georgia on a large scale? Tbilisi is already overflowing with refugees from Samachablo [South Ossetia] and Abkhazia,” said Tbilisi resident David Gachechiladze. “Let Georgians living abroad come back! Why bring in Muslims who differ from us in every way?”

At the same time, Gachechiladze said he feels “sincerely sorry for this unhappy people”.

In the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, some local people harked back to the ethnically-tinged conflicts in the southern Caucasus that followed the 1917 Russian Revolution. Local Georgians told stories of Muslim attacks on Christian villagers in 1918-19 to justify their present hostility.

By contrast, Baratashvili insists that “in days gone by, there were absolutely normal, good-neighbourly relations with the Meskhetian Muslims, so their return does not pose the slightest danger to anyone. In actual fact the danger comes from possible provocations and the political games played by bigger countries”.

IMMIGRATION A MIXED SUCCESS TO DATE

Baratashvili is one of the small number of Meskhetians who quietly settled in Georgia before there was any talk of repatriation. His Union of Meskhetian Repatriates collects information on the approximately 600 returnees now living in various parts of Georgia.

Such groups as have returned have settled in Samtskhe-Javakheti and other areas. Baratashvili ended up in the capital Tbilisi after finding life untenable in Akhaltsikhe, the main town of Samtskhe-Javakheti, in the Eighties. Others have clustered together in newly-built hamlets in various parts of the country. IWPR reported the difficulties facing one such community in 2003 in a report entitled *Meskhetians Make a New Life in Georgia*.

Many of these people talk of the discrimination they faced when they tried to settle in Georgia. Gular Khutsishvili, who brought his family to live in Akhaltsikhe a few years ago, told IWPR, "At first they really persecuted us. They threw stones at our windows and shouted, 'Get out of here, Tatars!'"

"We had small children and they were really scared. But gradually everything calmed down and now everything's alright."

Gular's relative Mamuka Khutsishvili, who moved to Akhaltsikhe in 1997, considers himself a Georgian and sends his children to a Georgian school, but his neighbours still call him a Turk.

"I am a Georgian, but other people find this hard to accept," he said. "When they call us Meskhetian Turks, they don't understand that it's very offensive."

Some Georgians cite a difficult relationship with the existing settlers as an argument for preventing more from coming.

Lali Kopaliani lives next to the Meskhetian-inhabited village of Akhali Ianeti in the west Georgian province of Imereti, and regards her neighbours as too different to be assimilated easily. "The only thing they have is Georgian surnames," she said. "We live by different rules and we have a different religion. I don't want the number of mixed families to grow. What will the Georgian people turn into?"

LOCATION A KEY FACTOR

Right now it is unclear where the government plans to put the repatriated Meskhetians - either in Samtskhe-Javakheti region alone, or spread across Georgia.

The government appears to have opted for the second of these options.

"The question we heard most often during our visit to Central Asia was whether they would be resettled in

Meskheta itself,” said Khaindrava. “These people have experienced many misfortunes and humiliations, they were forced to resettle outside Georgia, and it is our duty to return them to their historical homeland.

“However, for those to whom Georgia is dear, as it is to all Georgians, the motherland is the whole country, not just one part of it. So the repatriates will be put wherever it is possible.”

Baratashvili counters this proposal by quoting the Georgian constitution, which says every citizen has the right to live where he or she wants.

HOW MANY WILL ACTUALLY COME?

In reality, it is unlikely that anything like the entire diaspora will want to return. The estimated 18,000 Meskhetians living in Russia’s southern Krasnodar region might be keen to move as they have been given a hard time by unwelcoming local authorities. But around 2,000 have already been allowed to settle in the United States, and there is talk of granting US residence to virtually the whole group in the next year.

A second group - the 100,000 or so in Azerbaijan - have found it easy to assimilate into the local population as they are close in language, culture and religion. Ibrahim Burkhanov, the local leader of Vatan, a Meskhetian association, said on November 15 that repatriation was now a realistic prospect given the positions of the Georgian government and CoE. But it is unclear how many of the Azerbaijani community will opt to exercise this right.

After his Central Asian trip, Khaindrava said that “in Kazakhstan, for example, they have a good life - they live peacefully and have their own smallholdings. Judging from our meetings with them, probably not more than 20 or 25 per cent will want to come to Georgia”.

Members of the investigating commission would not be drawn on precise figures, but they believe that many of those who decide to come back will be the poor, and the elderly people who still remember the country.

Although Khaindrava suggested that about 30 per cent of the Meskhetians abroad might return, it was unclear what figure he was using as a total.

“It will all become clear once we have looked at individual cases in the archives in Central Asia,” said Lomsadze. “We need several months just to do that.”

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