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Turkish Georgians: The Forgotten Diaspora, Religion and Social Ties

By Andrea Weiss, Berlin

Abstract

Turkey is home to a Georgian diaspora of historical origins and of the Laz, a Kartvelian speaking population. This article outlines the historical origins of these transboundary diasporic populations and their importance for contemporary Georgian–Turkish relations in three spheres of societal ties: cultural, religious and business.

Introduction

Georgia and Turkey have excellent economic and interstate relations. Apart from the two states being “strategic partners” according to their foreign policy conceptions, in the years following Georgia’s rose revolution, Turkey has become Georgia’s most important trading partner. While the economic ties between the two countries are well documented, the individuals who play a role in them have received considerably less attention. Although diasporic and transboundary populations usually play a recognizable role as intermediators and avant-garde entrepreneurs in conducting business between countries, the Georgian diaspora in Turkey has remained unaddressed both in this respect and in terms of its role in social/societal ties between the two countries. This is also true in comparison to other diasporas that have been subject of research in Turkey, (e.g., the Circassian or the Abkhaz).

Who is the Georgian diaspora; does it exist at all? Erdemli¹ asks whether one can in fact speak of a Georgian diaspora in Turkey, applying various definitional criteria for what constitutes a “real diaspora,” and arrives at the conclusion that the Georgian diaspora is not a diaspora in a narrow sense due to its degree of assimilation and lack of internal cohesion. Rather than asking what types of populations could be considered a “diaspora,” it may be more fruitful to regard them as transboundary or diasporic populations.² Some considerations are in order when exploring the Georgian-speaking population, its internal diversity and the reasons that it resides outside the territory of Georgia.

Historical Migration Waves

Labor migrants from Georgia, who moved to Turkey after the collapse of the Soviet Union, or circular labor migrants, who (especially since the visa regime between the two countries was lifted in 2011) often go to work

in Turkey in shifts twice each year for three months, are also referred to as a ‘diaspora’ by the Georgian Ministry for Diaspora Relations. However, there is also a historical diaspora, mostly the descendants of 19th and early 20th century migrants, who are the focus of this article. Magnarella³, who studied the assimilation of Georgians in Turkey in the 1960s, refers to the Turkish census of 1965, which did not record ethnic background but instead the mother tongues and second languages of the population. According to the data from the 1965 census, 34,330 inhabitants of Turkey declared that Georgian was their mother tongue, while 48,974 people indicated that they spoke Georgian as their second language, with members of both groups being highly likely of Georgian descent. While the number of people of Georgian descent is doubtlessly much higher and likely numbers in the millions, Magnarella has also argued that the settlement patterns have fostered assimilation into the Turkish majority population, particularly in villages in which the population was mixed.

The migration of Georgians into the territory of what is now Turkey was mostly a result of the Russian and later Soviet conquest of the Caucasus and can roughly be categorized into three waves: The first wave of emigration from Georgia came after the Russo–Turkish war of 1828/1829. As a result of the war, what is now the Georgian province of Samtskhe-Javakheti became part of the Russian Empire. Together with Adjara, it was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, and the majority of the populations of both places had converted to Islam during Ottoman rule. The biggest influx of Georgians into the Ottoman Empire occurred during the second wave in the 1860s and 1870s until the end of the Russo–Turkish war of 1877/1878, during and after which approximately half a million were granted permission to leave for the Ottoman Empire. Their resettlement proved difficult, as the Ottoman Empire had to cope with a tremendous number of immigrants, the so-called *muhajirs*, from the Caucasus. Georgians did not receive preferential treatment and were settled in different regions spread across vast areas of the country but

1 Erdemli, Veysel. 2012. “Identifying the Georgians Living in Turkey as a Diasporic Community (Türkiye’de Yaşayan Gürcülerin Diaspora Olarak Tanımlanması).” *Avrasya İncelemeleri Dergisi (AVİD)*, 1/2: 343–361.

2 Although, for reasons of brevity, I continue to refer to them as the Georgian diaspora here, I consider them to be diasporic/transboundary populations.

3 Magnarella, P. J. (1976). „The Assimilation of Georgians in Turkey: A Case Study.“ *The Muslim World*, 66(1), 35–43.

predominantly in the provinces of Bursa, Adapazari and Ordu. The third wave occurred after the Soviet conquest of Georgia in the early 1920s; a significant part of this group then migrated further to other countries. While the first two waves of migration were largely composed of Muslims, the members of the third wave were far more diverse in terms of religious affiliation.

Georgians in Turkey

At present, interaction between the labor migrants and the descendants of the historical diaspora is rather weak—as a result of few shared spaces (and experiences). Georgians who settled in the territory of what is now Turkey are spread across the country, with some concentration on the central Black Sea coast and in the provinces east of Istanbul. The existence of a Georgian population that resides in the borderland with Georgia, mostly in the Artvin and Ardahan provinces, is the result of a mixed population in the border region and the drawing of the border, not migration. Many Georgians originally from these provinces have migrated to urban centers in other parts of Turkey. In terms of language, Georgians have assimilated into Turkish society to a greater extent than other Caucasian diasporic populations. The Georgian language has survived in rural areas of compact and sometimes-remote settlements, on the central Black Sea coast and, especially, in the Eastern border area.

Georgians are not the only speakers of a Kartvelian language—the Caucasian language group of which Georgian is the main language; but so are the Laz. Estimates of their population size range from 45 000 to 500 000. They reside primarily in Turkey on the very eastern part of the Black Sea coast bordering Georgia, only some 2000 in the village of Sarpi in Georgia.⁴ Despite that Georgians from Georgia readily embrace the Laz as *chveneburi*, meaning “ours” and denoting the Georgian diaspora, the Laz of Turkey do not consider themselves to be Georgians (despite that intermarriages seem to have occurred frequently). The most widespread terminology and self-designation for Georgians in Turkey is either *gürcü* or *chveneburi* (the equivalent of ‘ours’, in the sense of ‘our people’). The term *kartveli* is not widespread—one of the reasons is that it has more of a Christian connotation. The Georgian diasporic populations, embracing both the Georgian diaspora and Laz, are predominantly Muslim. Although the Laz are nominally Muslim, they generally practice Islam “only loosely”. Among Georgians in Turkey—as among most

diaspora groups—a secular perspective is widespread; however, there are also Muslim practitioners among them. In general, even the more secular diaspora is set apart by the fact that the diaspora is predominantly Muslim, while Georgia is a predominantly Christian country with a stark emphasis on its Christian identity. Therefore, the diaspora typically has more intense ties with the province of Adjara, not only because it is the adjacent border region but also due to its large Muslim population, which is roughly one-third of Adjara’s population.

Between 1937 and 1988, Sarpi, the main border crossing between the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and Turkey, was closed and the Laz village of Sarpi divided. Despite a few delegations between the two countries and individuals from Turkey visiting since the late 1970s, 1988 marked a landslide. The ‘opening of the gates’ in 1988 is, rather than the mere physical opening of a border gate, a powerful metaphor—in both the Turkish and Georgian languages—that designates the mutual discovery of a lost world behind both sides of the iron curtain and, above all, the finding of (lost) relatives. Despite the experience of cultural differences that these processes of encountering with relatives entailed, the people forged new networks that lie at the heart of inter-societal contacts between the two countries. Current inter-societal relations between the diaspora and Georgia can be roughly placed into three categories: cultural, business and religious—most members of the diaspora are active in one sphere rather than in several, reflected by a rather scattered landscape of Georgian diaspora associations in Turkey. The lack of formalized cross-boundary associations, however, does not entail a lack of ties in general.

Relations Between Georgia and the Georgian Diaspora

Relations between intellectuals from the diaspora and scholars in Georgia have focused primarily on history and language; these relations are somewhat limited in scope because few people in the diaspora are primarily interested in these ties and simultaneously have a sufficiently strong comprehension of Georgian. These ties are not formalized in associations but are rather interpersonal ties or literary and academic networks. In Georgia, these ties are oriented primarily towards Tbilisi. In contrast, the religious ties of the Georgian diaspora to Georgia are oriented towards Adjara and its Muslim population. Not only the Christian population of Adjara but also some Turkish actors, above all the state (institutions), perceive the question of faith in Adjara as a potential vehicle for Turkish influence in Adjara, which the latter regards as part of its natural sphere of influence for historical reasons. In this climate of suspi-

⁴ Silvia Kutscher 2008. The language of the Laz in Turkey: Contact-induced change or gradual language loss? *Turkic Languages* 12, 82–102.

cion, local Muslims are wary of any interference or aid from Turkish actors, particularly of its public display. The Georgian Friendship Association (*Gürcüstan Dostluk Derneği*) seems to be the only formalized organization in which the diaspora has an active stake at the religious inter-societal level. However, inter-societal ties are also forged through the sponsorship of *iftars* (fast-breaking religious ceremonies) and the renovation of mosques by individuals from the Georgian diaspora. In recent years, a new generation of Muslim youths, who are active in religious education, have received religious education in Turkey and returned to Adjara. Many of these individuals received support from the diaspora in Turkey during their studies either through individual encounters or the Georgian Friendship Association.

Adjara is not only the major hub for religious activity by diaspora members but also for their business activities—as it is a hub for economic activities by Turkish actors in general. Although the public perception does not always regard such actors as members of the diaspora, but as Turks and Turkish citizens, people in Adjara are aware of at least a few cases in point in their own wider networks. The contribution of these members of the Georgian diaspora—either as investors and/or as managers and facilitators—is considerable, and business ties can be considered major inter-societal ties. Batumi airport, which was modeled after the Geneva airport, is simultaneously an international airport for Georgia and a domestic Turkish airport and is run by the Turkish company TAV Urban Georgia. According to the diaspora journal *Chveneburi* the well-known Turkish businessman Ergün Atabay, an active member of the Georgian diaspora, is one of the airport investors. In the educational sector in Adjara which—due to the

investments made—can partly be considered in the business category, although such efforts are not necessarily profit-oriented, Shahin school, which provides internationally oriented primary and secondary education and belongs to the Gülen (a religious movement) orbit, was founded by a diaspora member in 1994. A branch of BAU (Bahçeşehir University) recently opened a medical faculty in Batumi at the initiative and under the direction of a cardiologist from the Georgian diaspora. Other examples can be found across a wide spectrum of business areas: in the textile industry, in slot clubs and casinos, in construction and in tourism (hotels and restaurants). While *chveneburi* are either larger investors or intermediaries and facilitators, many of them from the bordering Artvin province, Laz—with the exception of Nurol—instead occupy a medium stratum of entrepreneurs owning and running restaurants and smaller businesses. This seems to be in line with their self-perception as entrepreneurial and flexible. Nurol Holding, owned by the Çarmıklı family from Arhavi, is probably the largest investor among the diasporic population businesses and encompasses many sectors, above all, tourism such as the Sheraton Batumi, and the construction sector.

Conclusion

Although the concept of a solidified Georgian diaspora in Turkey might be misleading, diasporic transboundary populations play a significant role in Georgian–Turkish societal relations, particularly in the region of Adjara. Despite their low visibility, when considering all three spheres outlined above—cultural, religious and business ties—their impact is significant, given their sheer number.

About the Author

Andrea Weiss is a social anthropologist and currently works as a researcher at SWP (German Institute for International and Security Affairs) in Berlin within the framework of the EU-funded ISSICEU project.

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