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Creating, recreating and redefining ethnic identity: Ahıska/Meskhetian Turks¹ in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts

AYŞEGÜL AYDINGÜN

This article studies the case of the Ahıska Turks, an ethnically heterogeneous and stateless minority deported by Stalin from Meskheta-Javakheti (southern Georgia) to the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1944.² Until very recently, only a few people were aware of their existence and very limited research had been conducted on them. The lack of academic research on the Ahıska Turks is basically due to the fact that this group did not constitute a nation with its own territory and political organization. They lived in the USSR, as an officially unrecognized nationality and thus remained unknown until the events of Fergana in Uzbekistan, when they were massacred by some nationalist Uzbek groups in 1989.³ As a stateless minority, the Ahıska Turks were subjected to various types of discrimination both before and after the Soviet regime. In addition, unlike many deported nationalities, they have not been rehabilitated and are still not officially welcome in their home country. This article focuses on the construction, preservation and change of the ethnic identity ‘Ahıska Turk’, which was born in the context of the 1944 deportation. It aims to demonstrate that the formation of an ethnic group (i.e. the transformation from an ethnic category into an ethnic group) or ethnic identity change, are the products of specific interactional, historical, economic and political circumstances.⁴ It argues that ethnic identities change across time and place depending on the interaction between external and internal forces and that ethnic identity construction is a never-ending process. Hence, understanding ethnic identity is possible only with an approach that takes into consideration both the external (i.e. state policies) and the internal (i.e. group characteristics) factors shaping ethnic boundaries. Although external and internal factors shaping ethnicity are in continuous interaction, external factors are of greater significance. Therefore the case of the Ahıska Turks will be examined tracing the significance of the role played by the state policies and the attitudes of the host societies.

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Theoretical background

To be able to explain the existing social changes and reality, theories of ethnicity have gone through a process of revision, and the constructionist position that has emerged recently emphasizes the role played by the interaction of internal and external factors in shaping ethnic identity. The role of the state in determining ethnic identity for the creation or shift and the contextuality of ethnic identification is emphasized. In other words, following the failure of the modernist and Marxist models and also the weaknesses of the early approaches to ethnicity (namely primordialism and instrumentalism), constructionism offers a strong model paving the way to a better understanding of ethnic identity through considering both the state and the group itself as dynamic actors in the creation of new identities and in redefining the existing ones, and it also emphasizes the interplay between the state and ethnic identity.

This article argues that subjective consciousness is the key element in understanding ethnicity following the constructionist model and Weber. The shift toward subjective elements in the study of ethnicity has its roots in Weber's work. Weber, who emphasizes common descent as the central characteristic of ethnicity, defines ethnic groups as human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent.⁵ Thus, he aims to combine subjective and objective aspects of ethnicity and balance its cultural and political bases. Charles Keyes emphasizes the situational part of ethnicity. He highlights both the power of primordial ties and that of constructedness and contextual dynamics like Anthony Smith who, recently, emerged as a leading scholar of ethnicity. Like Smith, Keyes argues that although culture is the primary defining characteristic of an ethnic group, both primordial characteristics and the situational or structural factors should be considered in any attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of ethnicity.⁶ Furthermore, Smith's differentiation between 'ethnic category' and 'ethnic group' constitutes an important tool for understanding the significance of situationality, interaction and external factors. Although there can be no clear-cut distinction between ethnic categories and communities, the former is basically characterized by a lack of ethnic consciousness whereas the latter is characterized by a self-aware population conscious of its differences from other groups. In other words, in an ethnic category, a myth of common origins, shared historical memories, a sense of ethnic solidarity or an association with a designated homeland, which are among the main attributes of an ethnic community, are largely absent. Smith argues that the transformation of an ethnic category into an ethnic group is the product of quite specific circumstances.⁷

Ethnic groups do not emerge because people are of the same race or share the same language or culture. It is possible that 'objective' cultural groups remain for some time unaware of their common identity, which causes their ethnic consciousness to remain latent. As Weber argues, shared ethnicity by itself cannot lead to group formation. It can only facilitate group formation since it is the political community, which brings ethnicity into action.⁸ Adopting a similar position, Fredrik Barth supports the argument that the situational context is

important, since he argues that it is not the common culture of a group that leads them to think of themselves as ethnically related, but rather the other way around.⁹ Barth's approach signalled a radical change in ethnicity theories through criticizing the positions, which equate cultural groups with ethnic groups. Similar to Smith, his approach represented a shift of focus from cultural attributes of society towards the situational factors such as migration and conquest, emphasizing the importance of interaction between groups. He argued that the intensity with which a group profiles itself as an ethnic group—and with which individuals stress their ethnicity—increases when there is intense spatial, geographical and social contact between groups.¹⁰ In other words, the process of migration into a strange and unfamiliar environment is marked by ethnic heterogeneity, by cultural diversity and by new ranges of choice. Thus, under these conditions, individuals and groups are forced into fresh confrontations with the self, leading either to the buttressing of established forms of inclusiveness or to the emergence of new expressions of exclusiveness and separateness.¹¹ Thus, with Barth the idea that ethnic identity is situational gained further importance, and the dominant theoretical approach, according to which identities were fixed and unique, was challenged.

Constructionism makes a synthesis of instrumentalism and primordialism by sticking to their key insights on the one hand, and emphasizing activism on the other. What is meant by activism is the interaction between external and internal factors, a concept that has been used by the scholars to emphasize the active processes by which a group constitutes itself. In other words, constructionism differs from instrumentalism at the level of activism accorded in the internal dynamics of the group. This means that, although an ethnic group may be influenced by external circumstantial factors, its members can also use their history, cultural practices, and other internal group characteristics in shaping their identities.¹²

External factors creating Ahıska Turk ethnic identity

The state is the dominant institution in societies, and its policies shape ethnic boundaries and influence patterns of ethnic identification. Political policies and institutions may strengthen ethnic boundaries through discrimination and repression. Within that perspective, it will not be wrong to equate external factors with state policies, which play the most significant role in the strengthening of ethnic identities. Especially in the Soviet case, the role of the state (i.e. Soviet nationality policy) in creating ethnic identities has been of exceptional importance.

Although the most important historical event that entailed the emergence of a separate Ahıska Turk ethnic identity was the deportation of 1944, an attention must be paid to the impact of the 'transition period' which covers the Turkish–Russian War (1853–1854), the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) and the two World Wars (1914–1918/1939–1945). This period can be named as the 'transition period' since throughout this period the status of Meskheta region remained

complex because it was claimed by both the Turkish and the Russian sides. It is during this period that the Ahıska Turk ethnic consciousness began to take shape. Before the region became a part of the Georgian SSR and especially before their deportation, the Turks, the Kurds and the Karapapakhs, known as Ahıska Turks or Meskhetian Turks had little consciousness of having a separate ethnic identity. At the time, ethnic peculiarities were of minor importance and very often, religious differentiation was more fundamental than ethnic or national differences. Most of the time, local identities of kin, village, class and religion were very important.

The wars that involved or affected the Ahıska Turks played an important role as the mobilizer of ethnic sentiments and national consciousness, a centralizing force in the life of the community and a provider of myths and memories for future generations.¹³ As a result of these specific historical events, the Ahıska Turk ethnic identity began to be created although this appellation was not used at the time. The Ahıska Turks were on the side of the Ottomans during the Russian–Turkish War; and they followed the same attitude in the First World War and demanded to be allowed into the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War (in the Batoum Conference in 1918). However, the region was finally given to Georgia in 1921 and the Soviet government treated the Ahıska Turks as potential ‘enemies’ of the regime and as a security risk near the Turkish border. This attitude played a significant role in the development of the ethnic sentiment among the Ahıska Turks and helped to strengthen their feeling of Turkishness. This population was identified with espionage and was believed to have close relations with Turkish Intelligence, which later constituted the basic reasons for its deportation.

During this ‘transition period’, an important number of the Ahıska Turks migrated or escaped clandestinely to Turkey but the rest of the population was subject to a completely different fate. Within time, and parallel to the developments occurring in the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman identity was replaced by Turkish identity. This identification became stronger at the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, during which the Ahıska Turks were subject to unequal treatment, which reached its apogee with the 1944 deportation.

Turks, Kurds and Karapapakhs were selectively deported by Stalin according to the decision of the Soviet Committee of State under the pretext of ‘frontier security’.¹⁴ The deportation was followed by a structural discrimination period of Special Settlement until 1956, during which period they were deprived from their basic citizenship rights.

Thus, the ‘Ahıska Turk’ ethnic identity was born in the context of the 1944 deportation as a result of this state decision and the interaction of the Turks, Kurds and Karapapakhs with other groups in Central Asia, and strengthened within time due to the discriminatory policies of the Soviet state. Consequently, three different ethnic groups were unified under the name ‘Ahıska Turk’. These three groups experienced the same tragedy, they were treated similarly by the Soviet state and they were all considered as ‘Turks’ by the Soviet authorities as Turkish-speaking minorities. As argued by Horowitz,

Some small ethnic groups merge with or absorb others, or are absorbed by them, producing larger, composite groups. Larger groups, on the other hand, may divide into their component parts, or a portion of such a group may leave it to form a new, smaller group. Group boundaries thus grow wider or narrower by processes of assimilation or differentiation. New groups are born, though old groups do not always die when this occurs.¹⁵

The fact that the Ahıska Turks had no territory of their own constituted the major reason for their deportation to remain unknown. Until their massacre in Uzbekistan in 1989, their deportation, dispersal and discrimination were unknown not only at international level but also to a certain extent at national level. They were not mentioned in the Soviet statistics after late 1930s, and they were not allowed to register their nationality as 'Turkish'. It is impossible to know the exact population as a result of this assimilationist Soviet policy. The Soviet state has denied the existence of a Turkish population including during the period of rehabilitation of most of the deported nationalities after 1956. In fact, the early Soviet nationality policy or *korenizatsiia* aimed to assure the so-called freedom of nationalities and thus recognized the right to self-determination. The Turks were referred to as 'Turks' in the 1926 Soviet Census, and had access to education in Turkish until 1935–1936 when schools switched from Turkish to Azerbaijani language as medium of education. They benefited from the policy of *korenizatsiia* only a short time. In the late 1930s, as a result of increasing Russification policies and the elimination of the category 'Turk' from the list of recognized nationalities, they were stripped of the advantages of recognized ethnic groups, which possessed their own territory. Unlike the census of 1926, Turks were referred to as 'Azeris' in the census of 1939. They were labelled as Azerbaijanians on the assumption that they would assimilate.¹⁶ Despite the 1968 Decree of the Presidium of the USSR declaring that this community will enjoy the same rights as do all the citizens of the Soviet Union, the end of Special Settlement was not the end of discrimination against the Ahıska Turks. Beginning from 1957, Ahıska Turks made numerous applications to the Georgian and Russian authorities demanding to return to their home villages or to be allowed to migrate to Turkey. They obtained neither the right to migrate to Turkey, nor to settle in Georgia.¹⁷

One can argue that the official recognition or non-recognition of a particular ethnic group influences its ethnic identification and that it has been so in the case of the Ahıska Turks. As argued by Nagel,

The political recognition of a particular ethnic group can not only reshape the designated group's self-awareness and organization, but can also increase identification and mobilization among ethnic groups not officially recognized and thus promote new ethnic formation. This is especially likely when official designations are thought to advantage or disadvantage a group in some way.¹⁸

The former Soviet Union contained many different peoples both recognized and unrecognized. The fact of being recognized brought significant benefits such as territory, some degree of autonomy, use of and education in their own language, right to publish, right to maintain their religion (although in a restricted way).

The unrecognized nationalities were deprived of all these rights, and the Ahıska Turks were among these unrecognized nationalities. The fact of being an unrecognized nationality, and consequently being at the lower echelons of the ethnic hierarchy strengthened the ethnic solidarity among them in order to be able to surmount the inequalities and discriminations of the Soviet regime. Governmental classifications (in that case, the ethnic classification of the Soviet regime) are powerful in the construction of identities.¹⁹ As an unrecognized ethnic group, the large majority of the Ahıska Turks were excluded not only from the political elite but also from all of the important positions that involved decision-making. They lacked all the rights given to the recognized nationalities, such as preferences in employment, promotion, acceptance by universities and funds to encourage cultural development. This fact was the underlying reason for their low social status and occupational and residential concentration and segregation.

Discriminatory policies of the Soviet period took another character during the Gorbachev era and following its dissolution. This new political condition created new problems of identity caused by the rising titular nationalism challenging the Soviet ethnic hierarchy. Under this new condition, the situation of the minorities and especially of the stateless ones deteriorated. As the discrimination against the Ahıska Turks increased new population movements were created. Following the ethnic clashes that took place in Fergana in 1989, a large majority of the Ahıska Turks migrated or were evacuated to Azerbaijan and to the Russian Federation. With the 1989 migration and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ahıska Turks experienced further discrimination including problems of citizenship, lack of access to social institutions such as schools, social service organizations, financial credits. A part of the deportees of Fergana who were evacuated to Russia, were not given citizenship. Lack of access to social institutions was closely dependent on the lack of citizenship, and consequently, the problems of daily life were far from being resolved and this had also an effect on the strengthening of ethnic identity among the Ahıska Turks. In fact, the daily interactions or informal interactions with other people are also important for the reinforcement of the ethnic boundaries.²⁰

A part of the Ahıska Turks, especially those who were evacuated from Uzbekistan, began to migrate to Turkey following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In Turkey, Ahıska Turks faced important legal problems though they were informally welcomed by the state and the local population, as opposed to their experience during and after the Soviet period. However, their legal status in Turkey is quite complicated. Although formally they are illegal migrants, they have positive experiences of the informal practices of the government (e.g. they are not expatriated); of the labour market (e.g. they have jobs in the informal sector and sometimes they have insurance), of the social institutions (e.g. children are accepted in schools); and of daily life (e.g. they have good relations with their environment and they are welcomed especially because of their bitter experiences in the past caused by their Turkishness).

While analyzing the external factors shaping ethnic boundaries, besides the

state policies (including discriminatory policies) and formal and informal attitudes of the host societies, international factors are also important. Considering the new world order, external factors shaping ethnic boundaries are not limited only to the official policies of the countries involved with the Ahıska Turk issue. The political–strategic dimension of this issue entails the necessity of considering the growing role of international dynamics and institutions as external forces shaping ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, the role played by the countries, which have political and economic interests in the region, such as the USA, should also be considered. Thus there is a need for expanding the importance given to external factors and adopting a flexible and contextual understanding transcending the constructionist position in ethnic identity studies.

The number of countries and international organizations involved in the Ahıska Turk issue has increased with time depending on the changes in politics and the strategic importance of the Caucasus and consequently the Ahıska Turk community. The Ahıska Turk issue has gained a transnational character due to several factors such as the international pressure of the European Council on Georgia for the rehabilitation of the Ahıska Turks during its process of integration to Europe, and the Baku–Ceyhan oil pipeline project. The transportation of the Caspian oil is subject to intense political and strategic battles between a number of countries such as Turkey, Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In that context, the stability of the region seems to be a prerequisite for the transportation of oil via Javakheti in southern Georgia, where some of the former villages of the Ahıska Turks are situated. This region is currently inhabited by Armenians. The Georgian government is careful about the repatriation of the Ahıska Turks, considering that it can be either a source of conflict or peace in the region. The Association named ‘Hsna’, sponsored by the Georgian government, can be considered as a political attempt for the creation of a new ethnic identity, based on the argument that the Ahıska Turks (the Georgian government calls them Meskhetians) are ethnically Georgian. This is one of the attempts to reduce ethnic tensions and for Georgia to fulfill its international obligations. The creation of Hsna has resulted in the emergence of a pro-Georgian group within the Ahıska Turk community, which is significant in demonstrating the powerful role of the states in creating ethnic identities, and thus stands as a proof for the contextuality of ethnic identity formation.

Internal factors shaping the Ahıska Turk ethnic identity

Identity is a psychological reality and identification with an ethnic category or any other type of identity provides a psychological security, a feeling of belonging, to the individual. It is important to note that one’s ethnic identity may determine other series of identities in social, political, cultural and economic sectors.²¹ We can go further and say that in cases of ethnic discrimination, all the other identities of the individuals will be affected by their ethnic identity. This was a fact experienced by the Ahıska Turks during their years of exile in Central Asia.

The fieldwork carried out in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan has demonstrated that the Ahıska Turk identity was based on an emphasis on Turkishness, the idea of being the only Turks in the Soviet Union and the belief of belonging to the Ottoman Empire and later to Turkey. It also showed that their ethnic identity influenced all their other identities. Since the provinces where the Ahıska Turks used to live were for a long time parts of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks of the region considered themselves Ottomans and thus, as members of the dominant power. After their deportation in 1944, the Ahıska Turk identity based itself on a feeling of superiority in comparison to the local populations of Central Asia. Since the Ahıska Turks still defined themselves as members of a more 'civilized' and 'powerful' nation, they looked down on the indigenous populations. Ironically however, although they considered themselves superior to the local nationalities, they were not perceived and treated as such by the locals. To be Turks or Turkified and of a deported nationality was sufficient for them to be discriminated against in public life.

As the Soviet regime denied the symbolic resources of most of the ethnic groups in order to reach its socialist goals, ethnic groups such as the Ahıska Turks, who perceived their identity to be under threat, developed informal channels of resistance against official myths and pressures, and this fact kept their identities alive.²² The preservation of language, religion, certain rituals and celebrations, stories related to the past of the group or to their collective history were among these informal channels of resistance.

Ethnic solidarity can be interpreted as a reflexive response for an urgent need for the protection of culture and identity. Within the conditions of exile, under the unequal treatment of the Soviet regime, ethnic solidarity was the only way for survival for the Ahıska Turks. In other words, unequal treatment served to keep social structures alive.²³ Consequently, to preserve their culture, they had to refer more strongly to their ethnic roots, something they did not need to do in their original village settings where they lived in an ethnically more isolated and relatively more homogeneous environment. Ethnic solidarity was possible through living as a closed community and by reducing their relations with other ethnic groups to a minimum. Strong family ties, endogamy and the preservation of the native tongue have been the major tools for ethnic strengthening and cultural survival. Ahıska Turks had strong endogamous practices in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Mixed marriages, even with other Muslim communities were not accepted. They have also been loyal to their language. In fact, they judged their loyalty to the culture by their knowledge of the mother tongue, so much that sometimes language is treated as if language, ethnicity, ethnic pride and identity are one and the same thing. The case of the Ahıska Turks is a good illustration of Fishman's observation that when ethnicity turns into ethnic consciousness, then the language traditionally associated with the group, is interpreted as reflecting and conveying its culture more felicitously and succinctly than other languages.²⁴ On the one hand, they have been discriminated against and forced to differentiate themselves from other groups, on the other, they have been forced to assimilate. As a reaction, the Ahıska Turks have used

their language both to identify themselves and also as a tool against assimilation. It is also important to stress that religion is a significant dimension of the Ahıska Turk ethnic identity. Ahıska Turks argue that unlike the Kazakh and the Kyrgyz, they always practiced their religion despite many difficulties. According to the Ahıska Turks, during the Soviet period, the Kyrgyz and the Kazakh were mostly Russified and those who were observing Islam were observing it differently than they did. Thus, Ahıska Turks kept the public and private spheres clearly separate. Interaction with other nationalities was mostly limited to the public sphere, whereas, the private life was dominated by relations within their own ethnic community, in which the role of family was essential.

However, ethnic solidarity was most of the time limited to the large family structure. This can be seen in the weakness of the Ahıska Turk movement, which was first represented by the Vatan Society following the end of 'Special Settlement'. Later, during the Gorbachev period and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, other associations were founded. However, these associations were generally not representative of the Ahıska Turk population due to their organizational weakness and lack of interaction. This organizational weakness may be explained by a lack of intellectual stratum among the Ahıska Turk population. This weakness and the fragmented nature of the Ahıska Turk movement—since there are different associations having different objectives—are among the major obstacles to a more organized movement and the resolution of the Ahıska Turk issue.

Hence, the Ahıska Turks can solve only individual or community problems through co-operation. In that sense, although mostly limited to the large family, Ahıska Turks can be considered as a group that has high social capital, which means that the group is characterized by substantial or dense interpersonal relationships of trust or obligation. Furthermore, the exile that gave them an inferior status entailed the emergence of an achievement complex and competition with other ethnic groups, which pushed them to work hard in order to obtain a relatively wealthy life.²⁵ The characteristic of 'achievement complex', which is largely valid for all the migrant groups, is also valid in the case of the Ahıska Turks.

All groups contain differences among their members such as class, generation differences, besides a strong communal solidarity. Differences also exist among the Ahıska Turks, the main one being the three sub-ethnies that were unified. Although this differentiation is known by all the members of the Ahıska Turk community, it is not declared openly and most of the time does not constitute an obstacle for example for inter-marriage. One of the main reasons for this unification of the sub-ethnies of Kurds, Turks and Karapapakhs can be the size of their populations at the time of the deportation, since small size may constitute a disadvantage in dealing with states and institutions. Having experienced the same discrimination Kurds and Karapapakhs were unified with the Turks forming a unity under various names, such as 'Meskhetians', 'Meskhetian Turks', 'Soviet Turks' under the Soviet rule. An internal reason for unification and thus increasing the size of the group can be for marriage. If an ethnic group

is large enough this would make widespread out-marriage unnecessary,²⁶ and some researchers emphasize the significance of the group size arguing that the larger the group the more likely are the women to marry within it.²⁷ This argument seems to be relevant in the case of the Ahıska Turks too since while there are marriages between Kurds, Turks and Karapapakhs, out-group marriages, whether with Muslim or non-Muslim groups is very rare.

The Constructionist position in ethnic identity studies emphasizes the activism of the group itself. Thus, while discussing the group characteristics related to the preservation of culture and identity, it is necessary to mention examples of group activism to be able to prove that ethnic group boundaries are not entirely shaped by the external factors, reminding that the constructionist position is a synthesis of primordialism and instrumentalism. The rejection of policies, which renamed the Ahıska Turks, despite potential advantages, needs deeper analysis. For instance, the rejection of policies of the Soviet regime in the 1930s to name the Ahıska Turks as ‘Azerbaijanians’ or of the recent policies adopted by the Georgian government which aim to name the Ahıska Turks as ‘Meskhetians’ in order to define them as ethnic Georgians, constitute good examples proving the active nature of the group.

As a means of examining the role of interaction with other ethnic groups and its impact on ethnic identity formation, a comparison of the relations of the Ahıska Turks with other groups both in Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan and Turkey is necessary. The fieldwork data indicates that as a result of interaction between different ethnic groups following the 1944 deportation, the Ahıska Turks felt the need to differentiate themselves from the other newly encountered groups. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan they were discriminated against by the host society and the host state because of their Turkishness. However, in the case of their migration to Bursa, similar to the attitude of the Turkish government, the attitude of the society has been welcoming. They have good relations with their neighbors and people working with them and all the interviewees declared that they do not feel the necessity to differentiate themselves from the locals. But it is important to note that signs of differentiation from some other ethnic groups living in Bursa are observed. In other words, In Bursa, the Ahıska Turks have downplayed their ethnic identity to a certain extent, such that the significance of their ethnicity is generally preserved to be used only in the case of contact with other groups such as ethnically Georgian or Kurdish Turkish citizens, or ethnic Turks from Bulgaria.

Conclusion

The article has adopted a constructionist position, which is a useful model in understanding and analyzing the process of ethnic identity formation and shift among the Ahıska Turks. As pointed out by the constructionists, although the state has a significant effect on ethnic identity formation and shift (as we have seen in the case of the Ahıska Turks), a deeper understanding of ethnicity is possible only with an approach, which takes into consideration the external (i.e.

state policies) and internal (i.e. group characteristics) factors shaping ethnic boundaries. The case of the Ahıska Turks shows that internal and external factors are in continuous interaction. Nonetheless, this does not imply that the two are of equal importance. External factors have been of greater significance in shaping Ahıska Turk identity. Furthermore, this study also demonstrates the empowering role of intra-group relations including the attitude of the host society. However, it should be noted that it may not be always easy to separate the attitude of the host society from the official state policies, since they mostly nurture each other.

As state became the dominant institution in all societies, increasingly the political policies, which regulate ethnicity have begun to shape ethnic boundaries.²⁸ Ahıska Turks became one ethnic group (through the amalgamation of three different ethnies) because they were treated by the Soviet regime as the members of a distinct group. Turks, Kurds and Karapapakhs were unified and emerged as a group because they decided that they were the members of a distinct group and this decision was due to external factors. However, under different circumstances, as in the case of their migration to Turkey, they re-defined their ethnic identity. The situationality of the amalgamation of the three different ethnic groups became apparent with this migration. The fieldwork data gathered in Bursa, Turkey (the city where most of the new Ahıska Turk migrants live) gives the signs of selective migration. The Turks can be said to re-differentiate themselves from the Kurds and the Karapapakhs. According to the interviews carried out in Bursa, only ethnic Turks have the tendency to migrate to Turkey. Thus, the Ahıska Turk identity is re-defined under different conditions.

The case of the Ahıska Turks illustrates not only the growing role of the state in the formation of ethnic identities but also the growing role of international dynamics and institutions. As demonstrated by this study, there is a need for the theories of ethnicity to accord deeper attention to the role of international dynamics in analyzing ethnic identity formation, adopting a more flexible and contextual understanding.

The analysis of the Ahıska Turk ethnic identity formation and shift also demonstrates that informal practices of both the states and the host populations contribute to the strengthening of ethnic identification and may play a relatively more significant role compared to the formal practices of the states. In the case of the Ahıska Turks both before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the informal state policies and daily interactions played a very significant role in the construction and reinforcement of Ahıska Turk ethnic identity. They were mostly discriminated against by the Soviet regime and the local populations of the republics in which they lived, before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Following the independence of the former Soviet republics, these informal discriminations were aggravated due to rising titular nationalism. The informal discrimination they faced in the post-Soviet republics pushed those facing bad conditions to migrate to Turkey. The informal welcome of the Turkish state and the local populations facilitated their integration to the life in Turkey despite

important legal problems such as lack of Turkish citizenship. Unlike the Ahıska Turks interviewed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where they defined their situation as an exile situation, none of them use the term 'exile' to define their situation in Turkey. On the contrary, they all used the term 'homeland' for Turkey. Ironically, Ahıska Turks in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are citizens of these Republics, and economically they are better off than those living in Turkey who are poor illegal migrants.

Notes and references

1. The term 'Ahıska/Meskhetian Turk' is a controversial term. In this article the group in question will be referred as 'Ahıska Turk' (since it was the appellation used by the group members themselves during the fieldwork carried out by the author in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey at different periods between 1995 and 1999), and it includes three different ethnic groups namely the Turks, Kurds and Karapapakhs who were unified under the name of the 'Ahıska Turks' as a result of a similar experience of deportation and discrimination. However, in the Western literature this group is known as 'Meskhetian Turks' or as 'Meskhetians'.
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4. See Fredrik Barth, 'Enduring and emerging issues in the analysis of ethnicity', in Govers and Vermeulen (eds), *The Anthropology of Ethnicity* (The Netherlands: Het Spinhuis, 1994), p 12; Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp 68–69.
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