



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**INTERETHNIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE
CAUCASIAN DIASPORAS IN SAKARYA AND KOCAELI
PROVINCES OF TURKEY**

ALEKSANDRE KVAKHADZE

119

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Russia's conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century led to a large-scale exodus of Caucasian peoples to Turkey. The descendants of thousands of Georgians, North Caucasians, Abkhazians and other ethnic groups, who fled their homelands due to hostilities, reside in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire; namely, Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Kosovo. This article aims to overview the relationships between the Georgian, Circassian and Abkhazian diasporas in Turkey.

In July 2018, the author visited Georgian, Circassian, and Abkhazian villages in the provinces of Sakarya and Kocaeli in western Turkey. The following settlements were visited: a cluster of Georgian villages in the Golcuk sub-province (Nuzhetiye, Hasaneyn and Hamidiye), Circassian villages in the Karamursel province, a cluster of Caucasian villages in the Kocaeli (Masukiye), Sapanca (Yanık, Kurtköy, İstanbuldere and Kırkpınar), Sakarya (Maksudiye, Kayalarreşitbey, Alancuma, Boğazköy, Kışlaçayı, Balbalı, Adliye, Çaybaşı, İkizce and Mağara) and Hendek provinces (Çakallık, Uzuncaorman, Kargalıhanbaba, İkramiye and İkbaliye). During each visit, the author conducted qualitative interviews with a wide range of members of the local communities, including local authorities, activists, religious leaders, youth and elderly people. The respondents were asked about the history of their settlement, its economy, relationships with other ethnic groups, contacts with the historical homeland and the degree of engagement with their ethnic culture.

Georgians – The Georgian diaspora in Turkey can be sub-divided into two major categories. First, there is the indigenous population of the Artvin province. Historically, the Georgian population occupied the area upstream of the Chorokhi and Kura Rivers. However, as the result of migration and linguistic assimilation, the geography of the Georgian language has significantly shrunk in this region. Nowadays, Georgian settlements exist in the following sub-provinces (Turk. İlçe) of Artvin: Borçka, Şavşat, Artvin, Murğul, Imerhev and Yusufeli.¹ The second category of Georgians in Turkey comprises the descendants of migrants from the territory of the contemporary Ajara Autonomous Republic and the Artvin province. This migration was caused by the advance of the Russian army during the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman war.² Georgian settlements exist in Bursa, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Ordu, Samsun, Düzce and other provinces of Turkey. Aside from the old settlers, there are relatively new ethnic Georgian economic migrants from the Artvin province who migrated to the industrially developed regions of western Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s. All of the Georgian villages there

have unofficial Georgian names from their previous settlement in Artvin or in Ajara. For instance: Muradiye (Tokhveti), Kızanlık, Servetiye (Arkhva), Hamitli (Cinganpınar), Nuriye, İkramiye (Kvemo Khatila) and others.

Circassians – The Circassian diaspora in Turkey evolved as a result of the Russo-Caucasian war and the massive Circassian exodus from the north-west Caucasus. All Circassian sub-ethnic groups are represented in Turkey. Shapsugh and Abdzakh settlements prevail in western Turkey (Düzce, Bursa, Samsun, Sakarya and others) whereas Kabardians are more concentrated in the central regions of Turkey (Kayseri, Sivas and Eskişehir). The vast majority of Circassian villages are located in the forested mountains which resemble their previous settlements in the North Caucasus. According to Sufian Zhemukhov, 897 Circassian villages exist in Turkey.³

Similarly to Georgian settlements, Circassian villages also have parallel names. However, unlike Georgian villages, they are named after the founder of the village. For instance, Aydınpınar (Shaguch Hable), Maksudiye (Tetiço Hable) and Köprübaşıömerefendi (Hachemij Hable). The exact number of the Circassian population in Turkey is unknown. Zhemukhov believes that the number reaches five million.⁴ According to the 1965 census, 58,339 Turkish citizens mentioned Circassian as their mother tongue and 48,621 indicated it as their second best spoken language.⁵ Taking into the account the number of Circassian villages and the potential demographic growth, the estimated number of Circassians in Turkey should be between one and one-and-a-half million.

Abkhazians – In the 19th century, Abkhazians were deported to the Ottoman Empire in five waves: the 1840-41 expedition of General Muravyov, the 1853-56 Crimean war, the 1864 uprising in Abkhazia, the 1866 uprising in Likhni and the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman war. Abkhazians fled the territory of contemporary Abkhazia, Russia's Sochi region and North Caucasia (Ashuwa and Tapanta Abazins). Some Abkhazian sub-ethnic groups existing in Turkey, such as Pskhu (originated in the Pskhu valley), Sadz/Asadzua (from the contemporary Gagra and Sochi regions), Dal-Tsabal (from upper the Kodori valley), and Gum/Agumaa (from the contemporary Gulripsh and Sokhumi districts) are no longer represented in the Caucasus region. The vast majority of Abkhazian settlements are located in the Sakarya province. A substantial amount of Abkhazian villages is also located in the Düzce, Samsun and Bursa provinces. Similarly to Georgian villages, some Abkhazian settlements have been named after their previous settlements.

For instance, we have Guven (Mtsara) and Balbali (Kaldahuava). However, some villages were named after their founder. For example, we have Kayalarreşitbey (Maan Rkita) and others.

There is no consensus regarding the number of Abkhazians in Turkey. According to the 1965 census, the total number of Abkhazian language speakers was 12,119.⁶ The Abkhazians themselves believe that more than one million Abkhazians are living in Turkey. However, according to the data gathered by Abkhazian scholar, Viacheslav Chirikba, 228 Abkhaz villages exist in Turkey. He believes that the Abkhazian population in Turkey varies between 200 and 500 thousand.⁷

Common Problems

All Caucasian communities in Turkey are facing two main challenges. The first is the problem of assimilation. According to UNESCO, the Circassian, and Abkhazian languages in Turkey are considered as vulnerable or endangered languages whereas the Ubykh language is already extinct.⁸ The population younger than 40 years of age cannot communicate in their ancestral language. Even the older generation, among which the knowledge of the native language is high, prefers to communicate with each other in Turkish.

Another problem is urbanization. For example, in the village of Nuzhetiye, the primary and secondary schools are no longer functioning due to an absence of pupils. The migration of the younger generation to the big cities is high. In the Sakarya and Kocaeli provinces, a well-developed manufacturing industry combined with the proximity to Istanbul reinforces rapid urbanization. On the other hand, the industrial facilities in these provinces caused an economic migration from the Black Sea region; predominantly, from the Ordu, Rize, Samsun and Trabzon provinces. Turks from the Black Sea region, known as Karadenizli, have settled in many Circassian, Georgian or Abkhazian villages. For instance, the previously all-Abkhazian village of Değirmendere (Gagra) is nowadays populated by Karadenizli whereas Abkhazians have abandoned this village and moved to the cities or other villages. In addition, as the result of the expansion of large cities, some Caucasian villages have been included into their urban municipal boundaries. For instance, the Georgian village of Şirinsülhiye has merged with the city of Kartepe. Similarly, the territory of an abandoned Georgian village Istanbuldere in Sapanca subprovince has been purchased

by the developer companies, who have built there luxurious real estate and tourist facilities. Nevertheless, some Caucasian villages are trying to protect their identity. For instance, the residents of the Abkhazian village of Balbali are not selling their property to outsiders.

Georgian-Abkhaz Relationships – Historically, Georgians and Abkhazians in Turkey have had good-neighborly relationships. In many settlements, Abkhazians and Georgians reside side by side. According to the imam of the mosque in the village of Maşukie, Abkhazians and Georgians pray together during Friday prayers and live together in peace.⁹ Another Abkhazian respondent gave an explanation for the close relationships between Georgians and Abkhazians as follows:

Abkhazians, Georgians, Laz and other ethnic groups have excellent relationships here. Georgians here are not like in Georgia, they are Ajara Georgians. They are Muslims, as well as the Abkhazian migrants who are Muslims, too. Because of Islam, they have close relationships. Their customs and traditions are similar. There were no clashes between them. Mixed marriages also take place due to the similar traditions.¹⁰

Intermarriages between Georgians and Abkhazians are common. However, one Georgian respondent from Şirinsülhiye noted that ‘we [Georgians] are taking their [Abkhazian] women but our girls very rarely marry Abkhazian men because their traditions and etiquette is very complicated.’¹¹ Abkhazians and Georgians work together on farms and in factories. During a visit to the Abkhazian village of Çakallık, the author found several Georgians fluent in the Abkhazian language. Georgian respondents also mentioned the good neighborly relationships. However, several of residents of the Hendek sub-province talked about the complications during the first years of their arrival in Turkey. As one Georgian informant said:

Back in the days, they [Abkhazians] were involved in robbery. They were robbing our people on the road. But now, we do not have problems with them. We have good relationships.¹²

Unlike the residents of the villages, Abkhazian diaspora organizations have a hostile position towards Georgia. The largest Abkhazian organization, the Federation of Abkhazian Organizations (Tur. Abkhaz Dernekler Federasyonu), follows the narratives prevailing in breakaway Abkhazia. Furthermore, Abkhazian organizations are active in lobbying for the recognition of Abkhazia and the establishment of an economic relationship

between Turkey and the breakaway region. The organizations are not open for communication either with Georgian authorities or with civil society. They are unsatisfied with Georgia's policy of non-recognition, especially the withdrawal of non-recognized Abkhazian flags from various festivals and events in Turkey. In 1992-93, Abkhazian organizations were also active during the mobilization of volunteers from Turkey vis-à-vis the Abkhazian conflict.

Although Abkhazians in villages do not have hostile attitudes towards ethnic Georgians, they perceive Abkhazia as independent from the Georgian state. Nevertheless, they support the idea of reconciliation and people-to-people contacts. Some of our respondents or their relatives have visited Georgia (predominantly Batumi) for tourism and business purposes. One of the informants stressed the necessity for common Georgian-Abkhazian economic projects such as the Enguri hydro power plant.¹³ Their Georgian neighbors, on the other hand, are in most cases unaware about the dynamics of the conflict in Abkhazia. Georgians usually avoid any discussion of the conflict in Abkhazia with Abkhazians.

Georgian-Circassian Relationships – Similarly to Georgian-Abkhazian relationships, Georgians and Circassians in Turkey also have close ties. For instance, residents of the Circassian (Ubykh) villages of Yanık and Kırkpınar and the Georgian village of Kurtköy in the Sapanca province often meet together at one cafe. Residents of the Circassian villages have highly positive attitudes towards Georgians. One of our respondents from Maksudiye even mentioned the necessity for reconciliation between Georgians and Abkhazians.¹⁴

Circassian diaspora organizations do not hesitate to communicate with their Georgian colleagues. Since 2009, numerous leaders or activists of Circassian diaspora organizations have visited Georgia. In addition, during a visit to the Circassian ethnological museum in Maksudiye, the author found several items produced by the Tbilisi-based Circassian Cultural Center. Georgians in Turkey, however, have limited knowledge about the Circassians.¹⁵ Some of the respondents were even unaware about the difference between Circassians and Abkhazians.

Abkhazian-Circassian Relationships – The relationships between Abkhazians and Circassians is extremely close. It can be determined by two major factors. Firstly, they share the same deportation from the Caucasus. Secondly, some Abkhazians fled their homeland along with the

Circassians. It is known that Abkhazian tribes, such as the Sadz, Akhchipsy and Dal-Tsabal, were fighting against Tsarist Russian troops side by side with Circassians.

Until the 1990s, Abkhazians and other North Caucasians in Turkey were known as Circassians. However, following the demise of the Soviet Union, various ethnic group began to separate from the exonym Circassian, including Abkhazians and Circassians.

The identity of the Ubykh people is a matter of debate between Turkish Circassians and Abkhazians. Historically, the Ubykhs resided on the territory between Sochi and the Vordane River.¹⁶ All Ubykhs were deported to the Ottoman Empire. The Ubykhs have a very ambiguous self-identity. Most Ubykhs identify themselves as Circassian but not as Adyghe.¹⁷ Those Ubykhs who settled in close proximity to Abkhazians have been assimilated and identify themselves as Abkhazians (apsuwa). For instance, in the village of Yanik, representatives of the Ubykh Lak clan changed their authentic family names to Abkhazian names - Lakrba/Lakirba. Similarly, those Ubykhs who settled along with Circassians (predominantly Shapsugh), assimilated with Circassians and speak the Shapsugh dialect of the Circassian language.

Abazins, however, tends to be assimilated by Circassians (predominantly Kabardians). For instance, in the mixed Circassian-Abaza village of Kargalihanbaba, which was founded by Abaza Han-ipa, the Abazins speak the Circassian language and identify themselves as Adyghe.

Conclusions

The field trip to the Kocaeli and Sakarya provinces has shown that despite the turmoil in the Caucasus, people-to-people relationships between Caucasian peoples are thriving. However, the developments in the Caucasus have their impact. Caucasian communities in Turkey are interesting and, at the same time, an unexplored segment of Caucasian culture. The period of the Iron Curtain during the Soviet era did not allow researchers from Georgia or the Caucasus to visit these regions. Rapid assimilation and urbanization could lead to the extinction of many dialects, customs and social models. The Caucasian settlements in the Kocaeli and Sakarya provinces are small fragments of the whole Caucasian world in Turkey. This subject requires further scholarly investigation.

Appendix: Caucasian Settlements in the Kocaeli and Sakarya Provinces

1. Kocaeli Province

- 1.1. **Gölcük sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Ferhadiye, Hamidiye (Borçka), Hasaneyn, İcadiye (Beylik, Sabego), İrşadiye, Lütfiye, Mamuriye (Murkviyeti), Mesruriye, Nimetiye (Uznadzeebi), Nüzhetiye (Döşeme), Siretiye, Şevketiye (Saçmalı), Avazpınar
- 1.2. **Kartepe sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Balaban, Şirinsülhiye, Nusretiye; Abkhazian settlements: Büyükderbent, Hikmetiye
- 1.3. **Karamürsel sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Akpınar; Circassian settlements: Fevziye, Karadere, Mahmudiye (Karapınar), Örencik (Hamidiye), Selimiye (Ayvalıca), Tefikiye (Çavuşköy)
- 1.4. **İzmit sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Eşmeahmediye, Sultaniye; Ulupınar, Uzuntarla, Ketence (Hakurine Hable), Maşukiye
- 1.5. **Kandıra sub-province** - Circassian settlements: Karaağaç, Aktoprak

2. Sakarya Province

- 2.1. **Akyazı sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Beldibi, Reşadiye, Şerefiye, Kuzuluk; Circassian settlement: Çınardıbı (Şhabe Hable); Abkhazian settlements: Batakköy, Bedil Kadırbey, Bedil Kazana, Beynevit (Yenikonak), Bıçıkdere, Buğdaylı, Harmanlı, Hasanbey, Kazancı, Kızılıcıkormanı, Kuzuluk, Mesudiye (Tahirbey), Pazarköy, Salihli, Tektabanlı, Yeniormanköy (Osmanşevketiye), Yoganlık
- 2.2. **Geyve sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Şerefiye, İlimbey, Nuriosmaniye, Boğazköy (Şahanbey, Çıuwa Rkita), Kışlaçay
- 2.3. **Hendek sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Balıklı (İhsaniye, Kartla), Güldıbı (Gevli), Hicriye (Orji), Hüseyinşeyh, İkbaliye (Avana, Sıtmapınar), İlimbey, Karaçökek, Lütfiyeköşk, Muradiye (Tokhveti), Kızanlık, Servetiye (Arkhva), Hamitli (Cınganpınar), Nuriye, İkramiye (Kvemo Khatila), Gündoğan (Zemo Khatila), Tekelle (Süleymaniye), Kargalıyeniköy (Urtsmeli); Circassian settlements: Karhalıhanbaba (Han Hable); Abkhazian settlements: Aktefek, Beyköy, Beylice, Çakallık, Eskibiçki, Huseyinşeyh, Kalayık, Karaçökek, Soğuksu, Karadere, Ortaköy, Sariyer, Sivirtepe, Uzuncaorman, Yarıca, Melen
- 2.4. **Kocaalı sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Köyveri, Kozluk (Gürcü Fahriye), Demiraçma

- 2.5. **Karapürçek sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Mecidiye, Ahmediye, Kanlıçay, Hocaköy
- 2.6. **Sapanca sub-province** - Georgian settlements: Mahmudiye, Hacımercan, Akçay, Muradiye, İkramiye, İstanbuldere, Nailiye, İlimiye; Circassian settlements: Yanık, Kırkpınar (Şadiye), Sarılık
- 2.7. **Central sub-province** - Circassian settlements: Adliye, Aranca (İcadiye, Mişe Hable), Adliye, Alancuma (Bzhılı Hable), Çaybaşı (Fuadiye), İkizce, Kemaliye (Şırıkhu Hable), Kurudil (Penitkhuzh), Mağara, Maksudiye (Tetiyo Hable), Salihye (Dağe Hable)
- 2.8. **Karasu sub-province** - Abkhazian settlements; Sinanoğlu, Adatepe, Caferiye Melen, Karapınar, Acıelmak

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