

Meskhetians or Meskhetian Turks

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Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 3,257 Meskhetians or Meskhetian Turks in the Russian Federation, but this appears to vastly understate their true numbers. In the mid-1990s there were an estimated 72,000 Meskhetians living in the Russian Federation. Determination of their numbers today is difficult due to geographical dispersal and difficulties experienced by Meskhetians in formally registering residence and receiving identity documents. Most Meskhetians are ethnic Turks, whilst some are Turkified Georgians. They are Sunni Muslims.

Historical context

Until 1944 Meskhetians lived in Meskheta and Javakheti along the Georgian-Turkish border. For many years they were classified as Turks. In 1944, Stalin deported the Meskhetians to Central Asia, with thousands dying en route in cattle-trucks. Rehabilitated in 1968, they were not allowed to return to Georgia despite several attempts in the 1970s.

In June 1989 Meskhetians living in the Ferghana valley in Uzbekistan were attacked by Uzbeks and more than 100 were killed. Most Meskhetians fled to the Caucasus with more than 11,000 moving to the Krymski district in Krasnodar Krai. Georgia, through a combination of procrastination, local opposition and a lack of resources, has so far failed to provide mechanisms for a mass repatriation of the Meskhetians. Their original places of settlement in southern Georgia are not only amongst the country's most economically depressed, but are also now largely populated by Georgia's Armenian minority, which is strongly resistant to the return of the Meskhetians as representatives of the historical 'Turkish' enemy.

Meskhetians have also faced strong opposition to their presence in Russia, especially from Kuban Cossacks. Most have moved to Azerbaijan; some have settled in eastern Turkey. Two organizations were formed by Meskhetians in 1991, Vatan ('Homeland') and Salvation.

In February 2004 a programme implemented by the International Organization of Migration provided opportunities for Meskhetians to be allowed entry into the United States. By September 2005 some 21,000 Meskhetians had been resettled in the United States.

Current issues

A bill potentially formalizing procedures for repatriation of Meskhetians to Georgia was still in the process of review in the Georgian Parliament in 2006. Meskhetians nonetheless are concerned at

possible requirements to Georgianize their surnames and ethnicity in identity documents; those few Meskhetians who have already returned to Georgia have reportedly been forced to Georgianize in order to qualify for residence and welfare permits.

Meskhetians in Krasnodar krai, notorious in Russia as one of the most discriminatory regions with regard to minorities, are reportedly denied identity and travel documents, as well as birth certificates and marriage licenses. Russian human rights activists have highlighted how the refusal of local agencies of the Russian Ministry for Internal Affairs to give Meskhetians (and other minority groups) identity documents reduces them to 'non-persons' unable to move around the country. Some 16,000 Meskhetians are currently thought to reside in Krasnodar krai; reportedly, Meskhetians who settled in other regions of Russia have integrated much more successfully. Meskhetians in Krasnodar are also targets of violent racist attacks. According to reports Caucasian minorities in Krasnodar also face intimidation and violence from paramilitary groups of Cossacks funded by the local authorities, a form of officially sanctioned racism.

In March 2005 European Union officials raised the issue of discrimination against Meskhetians in consultations with Russia on human rights issues.