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SPECIAL ISSUE

URUM AND PONTIC GREEK: LANGUAGES AND COMMUNITIES

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Liana Melikishvili* and Natia Jalabadze*

The issue of ethnic identity and aspects of cross-cultural orientation of the Greeks in Georgia (the example of Ts'alk'a Greeks)

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Abstract: After the fall of the Soviet Union, the issue of ethnic identity has gained in importance among Georgia's multiethnic communities. Groups of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds faced the challenge of choosing a common language of communication, and they must address issues related to their ethno-cultural preferences. Using the example of Ts'alk'a Greeks – the largest Greek community in Georgia – this article discusses aspects of maintaining an ethnic identity in a multiethnic environment, and identifies visible trends of cross-cultural orientation. How do Greeks manage to preserve their ethnic identity, and what is their strategy based on? What determines the orientation of Greeks towards the different groups? The present study argues that culture (i. e. language, religion, traditions, customs, etc.) is crucial in this regard.

Keywords: Ts'alk'a Greeks, ethnic identity construction, cross-cultural orientation, migration, multi-ethnic society

1 Introduction

Ethnic identity, which is generally treated as the conceptualization of one's membership of an ethnic group, remains one of the most popular topics in the social sciences. Ethnic identity implies – at a minimum – the sameness of a band or nation of people who share common customs, traditions, historical experiences, and in some instances geographical residence (Trimble and Dickson 2014). Many researchers agree that it can be seen as embracing various aspects, including self-identification, feelings of belonging and commitment to a group – a sense of shared values and attitudes towards one's own ethnic group (Phinney et al. 2001). As argued by Soboleva:

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> Ethnic identity – is not only the adoption of certain group representations, readiness to a similar way of thinking and shared ethnic feelings. It also means building a system of relations and actions in a variety of inter-ethnic contacts. With its help a person defines their place in the multi-ethnic society and acquires modes of behavior within and outside their own community (Soboleva 2008: 1).

Most apologists of Russian (Soviet) "ethnicity theory" defend the idea of objectivity of the existence of ethnic communities whose members are united into a single "set" of common characteristics: Language, tradition, culture, religion, and sometimes territory, economics, statehood, etc. (Khabenskaya 2011). The language, native land, ethnonym, culture, anthropological similarity and religion are also recognized as key markers of ethnic identity by some Western scholars (Helms 2007; Phinney and Ong 2007).

The issue of ethnic identity was never a problem during Soviet times. The Communist regime sought to create a New Soviet Man (*Homo Sovieticus*) totally devoid of ethnic self-awareness and aimed to mould many ethnic groups into one – a Soviet nationality and a completely nationality-free society (Khodorovich 1998) that was successful enough in creating a favorable environment for the peaceful coexistence of people of different ethnic and cultural orientations. They had common interests and goals and a common language of communication, Russian. In the Soviet period, Russian was *lingua franca*, and this status was supported by the education system. The policy of advanced learning of the Russian language in secondary schools, and its use as a working language in state organizations and during cross-cultural communication, contributed to the rapprochement of different ethnic groups. Consequently, because of having a comparatively wide range of social relationships (involvement in social activities, active usage of information sources, having friends of different ethnic origin, etc.), the conditions for integration in Soviet times were comparatively favorable.

After the crash of the Soviet system, the intensification of identity preservation impulses of different ethnic groups was manifested in their struggle for independence. As argued in *Latent conflict in multiethnic society*:

> Before the USSR had collapsed, ethnic groups (national minorities) knew that they lived in a single and powerful country – the Soviet Union, but after it fell apart, their self-awareness lost its basis and they began to seek a new identity (Melikishvili 1999: 9).

Since the crash of the Soviet Union, the issue of ethnic identity has resurfaced in the former Soviet republics,[1] especially in those with multi-ethnic populations. In post-communist societies, the revival of a national spirit and the awakening

1 As a matter of fact, the USSR was a "voluntary" union of former independent nation-states, where titular nations covertly strove for national independence to a greater or lesser extent.

of national sentiments activated the mechanisms of ethnic identity maintenance and stimulated ethnic minorities living in the new independent states to strive for self-determination; it acquired an especially acute form and brought about conflicts, mostly ethnic in character. The formation of the new socio-psychological reality of the former Soviet Union, according to Lebedeva, "contributed to the transformation of the old and the search for new (ethnic, social, religious, etc.) identities" (Lebedeva 2002: 11).

In post-Soviet scientific circles, the study of ethnic identity on a particular material took place in the framework of the development of broader themes: ethno-political mobilization, ethnic boundaries, social and cultural distances, ethnic conflicts, tolerance, etc. (Khabenskaya 2011).

In the heterogeneous societies of the post-Soviet space, the issue of ethnic identity is seen as closely linked to the problem of cross-cultural communication. Groups of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds faced difficulties of choosing a common language of communication and cultural context. Similar processes occurred in Georgia and caused several problems, especially in the state's southern region – Kvemo Kartli – known for its ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity. Its five municipalities (Marneuli, Gardabani, Tetrits'q'aro, Dmanisi, Bolnisi and Ts'alk'a) are populated by Georgian and non-Georgian groups – Azeri, Armenian, Greek, Russian and a very small number of Ossetians, Ukrainians, Kurds and Romany.

This paper explores the mechanisms of maintaining ethnic identity and its relation to the cross-cultural orientation of Greeks in Georgia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and later the "repatriation" of Greeks.[2] We have tried to reveal the cultural markers on which the identity maintenance strategy of Greeks is based. The article examines how the markers of identity determine the orientation of Greeks towards the groups from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the heterogeneous society. As a target group for our research we have chosen the Greeks of the Ts'alk'a district.

Back in 2008–2010, the authors of this publication conducted fieldwork in the Ts'alk'a district within the framework of a project dedicated to the study of ethnic minority integration in the Kvemo Kartli region.[3] Among other non-Georgian groups, we studied the Greek population and the trends of their civil

2 In the early 1990s, because of social and economic hardship, ethnic Greeks left Georgia in search of a better life, mostly heading to Greece, where the government of Greece facilitated their repatriation.

3 The project – *Ethnic aspects of social security in polyethnic society (Ethnic minorities and civil society)* [2008–2010] was financed by the Rustaveli Foundation.

integration. The fieldwork was carried out in the Greek villages of Ts'alk'a. In 2013, we once again visited the Greek communities of Ts'alk'a, this time in connection with the project *The impact of current transformational processes on language and ethnic identity: Urum and Pontic Greeks in Georgia* financed by the Volkswagen Foundation. The aim of this second fieldwork trip was to verify our previous ethnographic data, reveal the current social transformations, and via the method of direct observation and interviewing, collect additional new material regarding identity and ethnic orientation of the contingent under study. Interviews took place individually or in focus groups within the community based on age and gender. We have interviewed 30 (15 female and 15 male) Greek informants aged 50–70. As an important research component, we also focused on life histories. Free discussion and meeting groups were organized for exposing the specificities of interethnic dispositions, common orientations, and interests of ethnic groups in the region.

2 The Greeks of Ts'alk'a

In recent years, web documentaries on the life of the Greeks in Georgia, particularly in Ts'alk'a district, increasingly appear on the Internet; their rating is truly remarkable – they have an amazing number of viewers.[4] You can get information not only about the villages of Greeks, but also religious celebrations and events that Greek migrants organize in Ts'alk'a. They consider Ts'alk'a their homeland – their "soul and pride" – where their ancestors are buried, where they still have their lands and their own houses, perhaps ruined or destroyed, and where their Greek identity is manifested in the concept of the "Ts'alk'alides".

Some may wonder why we have chosen the Greeks of Ts'alk'a as a target group. Firstly, because the largest Greek community in Georgia was concentrated in Ts'alk'a, and today they still comprise the majority of both the region's and the state's Greek population. It is safe to assume that ethno-linguistic and socio-economic processes that occur among the Greeks of Ts'alk'a reflect tendencies typical to the Greeks of Georgia in general. It is the region where Pontic and Turkish (Urum)-speaking Greeks have lived together (though after their emigration in the last decades, Pontic Greeks are almost gone). Secondly, the Ts'alk'a district is the best choice for revealing Greeks' cross-cultural orientation

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLOndhvH9-k; https://www.youtube.com/watch? v=ol L6GBmd0po; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vzw06NnzwYI

because this diverse and complex society is composed of a multitude of culturally and ethnically different groups. Therefore, this article will refer primarily to this region and these groups.

Adrianople Peace Treaty put an end to the Russo-Turkish war of 1828–1829; under the treaty, Russia was expected to remove its troops from the Erzurum Vilayet, a move which would have left the local Greeks who had been on the Russian side during the war unprotected. At General Paskevich's request, Nicholas I allowed the Greeks to settle in Georgia (Komakhia 2005: 150). By 1830, about 18 Greek settlements had appeared in the Ts'alk'a district, in the territory of the depopulated Georgian province of Trialeti, then part of the Russian Empire. The Tsarist government contributed to their dense settlement in Georgia, naturally having certain covert political purposes.[5] We do not intend to speak here about the far-reaching imperialist plans of Russia, but it should be noted that this group was designed to preserve its own identity and sustain its ethnic boundaries, which was primarily made possible through settling them in a dense and isolated fashion.

In Soviet times, the vast majority of Ts'alk'a's residents were Greek. For example, at the end of the 1970's, 24 of the region's 43 villages were Greek, 12 Armenian, 4 Azerbaijani, 1 Georgian and 2 mixed (Armenian/Greek, Georgian/Greek). The Urum inhabited 20 villages, whereas Pontic speaking Greeks, who were considerably fewer, lived in four villages (Aklaev 1988: 63). It is worth mentioning that, when the process of emigration started in Georgia, the Ts'alk'a Urums were less exposed to relocation than the Greeks from other regions. However, migration still took place, and according to the official data, their number between 1989 and 2002 in the region decreased from 35,000 to 3,000 (Lewis 2012). In the Soviet era, Greeks in the Ts'alk'a district lived in isolated compact settlements, and nearly all of their villages were mono-ethnic, though in the town center they lived among other ethnic groups. This type of Greek settlement (compact, mono-ethnic) promoted the preservation of their language (at least its use in the family and neighborhood) and retention of cultural traditions. Due to the emigration of Greeks, the ethnic composition of Ts'alk'a region has changed dramatically. The structural transformations actually began in the late 1980s when ecological migrants from the mountainous

5 The resettlement of entire villages of Greeks was conducted with the permission and under the supervision of the Tsarist authorities. Greeks were allocated special places for settlement; a census and registration was probably also carried out. This was quite different from the independent relocation of individual Greek families on the coast of the Black Sea undergone in other time periods. The difference was manifested in two more ways: firstly, the majority of Greeks were given Russian citizenship and their names were recorded with the "ov" ending, and much more rarely in "-pulo", and "-idi" (Frangulandi 1991).

regions of Georgia – especially from the *avalanche danger* zones Ach'ara and Svaneti – populated Ts'alk'a in large numbers and other regions of Kvemo Kartli (Trier and Turashvili 2007: 9, 23–26). The resettlement of Svan and Ach'arian eco-migrants continued in 1997–2006; most of them occupied the abandoned houses of Greeks. The influx of non-Greek ethnic groups to the region turned the isolated Greek settlements into ethno-culturally mixed ones. Today, the Greeks no longer represent the majority in the region. According to unofficial data, their present number is about 1,500. Their age varies mainly between 50 and 70, and they still have the same area of residence; as a matter of fact, due to the inter- and intra-migrations, the Greek villages have become ethnically mixed, and Greeks have lived in multi-ethnic settlements ever since.

However, when their numbers considerably declined due to their migration, and the Greeks in Ts'alk'a appeared to live in an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous environment, the remaining Urum community has become more consolidated, and their identity maintenance impulses were activated. But upon what was the identity maintenance strategy of Ts'alk'a Greeks based?

3 The language of Ts'alk'alides in the context of Greekness

Generally, an ethnic group perceives its own identity through preservation of the components and symbols that determine ethnic identification, such as language, religion, symbolic practices, values, customs, norms of behavior, shared history, genetic ties, etc. However, for Ts'alk'a Greeks, the language factor is not as significant as the identity marker.

Language is often considered to be an important marker of ethnic identity construction, and an intrinsic connection between language and ethnic identity is supported by many studies. According to Liebkind, there are several conditions that contribute to this connection (Liebkind 1999: 143). In fact, it may be true for some people or ethnic groups, and may not be the same for others. Thus, its significance varies depending on the particular situation, and may be minimal for certain groups. Relation between language and identity depends on the social context in which a certain ethnic group exists. Consequently, the preservation and maintenance of the ethnic language is not a compulsory feature of group identity – for some groups language may be an increasingly important component of ethnic identity, for others not. Moreover, languages, along with other cultural attributes, vary in their relevance to ethnicity both within and across historical periods. As is known, many ethnic groups have been able to

continue their existence as separate communities, even after switching to a different language for communication. For example, Georgian became the native language for Jews in Georgia, though their ethnic identity is Jewish. Another group in Georgia is the Tsova-Tush, who speak Georgian alongside Tsova-Tush or the Batsbi language, which belongs to the so-called Nakh subfamily of the Northeast Caucasian stock and exists only as a spoken language. Tsova-Tush's ethnic identity is Georgian. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between concepts such as the use of language or linguistic competence, and linguistic identity (Liebkind 1999: 144). Eastman argues that the use of language is merely a superficial feature of ethnic identity, and thus, the adoption of a different language affects only the linguistic aspect of one's identity, rather than the ethnic identity itself (Eastman 1984: 275). This opinion seems to be a good fit in the case of the Ts'alk'a Urums – their language is a superficial feature of their ethnic identity (despite their Turkic spoken language, their identity is Greek).

Due to their Turkic language, Urums have faced certain confusions with regard to their ethnic identity: They have been labeled Tatars (which is the common name for Muslims in Georgia) and Turks by non-Greek ethnic groups; the Soviet censuses even listed Azeri as the mother tongue of the Ts'alk'a Urums due to their phonetic similarity. According to certain data, some Urums even attended Azeri schools (Aklaev 1988: 61), though our informants did not confirm this. In any case, their connection with Turkish and Azeri did not affect their ethnic affiliation (Lewis 2012). Soviet ethnographic studies found that "36 % of them considered Greek to be their mother tongue, despite their lack of knowledge of that language, and 96 % expressed their desire to learn Greek" (Aklaev 1988: 63). Our respondent recalls:

> I then worked in the mental hospital in the village of Bediani. One day there came a Greek man from the village of Olianga, his name was Angelov. He was also an educated man like you. Militia also came with him. All the stuff was gathered in a room. He brought a map, and put it up on the wall showing and telling us: Look here, – he said pointing to Turkey – you are not Turks, you are the Greeks. You left from here and settled in Georgia. Remember this! When they call you Tatars, this is not so! Memorize, that you are not Tatars, but you are Greeks! He told it because the other people (who lived in their neighbourhood – Georgians, Armenians, Ossetians) teased us as though we were Turks due to our spoken language. We felt offended, because we have different religion! (Field material, Ts'alk'a 2014).

In the view of our Urum respondent: "The only things we have in common with Turks is the language and the cuisine" (Field material, Ts'alk'a 2013).

During Soviet times, specifically since the second half of the twentieth century, the Greeks of Ts'alk'a received education in Russian schools – in the Greek (Urum) villages, only Russian schools were in use. Therefore, the family language

was Turkish or Pontic, and Russian was the *lingua franca*. Due to the fact that in the Soviet times the Georgian language was taught superficially – if at all – it disappeared from the communicative space. According to our respondents, almost all Pontic-speakers knew the language of Urums (and also Turkish) before they migrated to Georgia. In Georgia, Hellinophones were able to speak Urum, so there was no communication problem between them and Turkophones; accordingly, ethnically mixed families could speak each other's languages while also using the Russian language. Russian still remains the *lingua franca* in the area, and thus remains an important language of communication.

After Georgia gained independence, Georgian was declared the state language, officially replacing Russian; however, it was unable to perform the function of a working administrative language across all Georgian territories. In the beginning, only a very small number of the non-Gorgian population was able to speak Georgian, and for a long period there was no program of universal teaching of Georgian in multi-ethnic regions. The lack of command of Georgian brought about a number of problems for ethnic minority groups in terms of employment, education, social inclusion, etc. In the early years of independence, it rendered the minority populations prone to marginalization and catalyzed their emigration process. However, the situation has changed since 2003, and a new strategy of universal teaching of the Georgian language has been established. Russian schools were abolished and transformed into Georgian ones,[6] especially after the influx of the Georgian population in the region. A special situation occurred in the Greek settlements of Ts'alk'a, where at present almost only elderly Greek people remain. As a matter of fact, the younger generation of Greeks rarely grows up in that area, and the majority of the older generation does not speak Georgian. Some of them can speak Georgian, but they prefer not to.

While carrying out our fieldwork in 2010 in the Ts'alk'a district, we have observed several cases where – in spite of competence in the Georgian language – Urums preferred to speak Russian: first, because they are more comfortable in Russian, but also because some respondents deliberately disregard the state language – the language of majority. In doing so, Urums aim

6 By the Law of Georgia on General Education, all citizens of Georgia have the right to receive general education in the state language or in their native tongue. A further stipulation specifically requires non-Georgian language schools to teach Georgian language and literature, and requires teaching the history and geography of Georgia and other social science subjects in the Georgian language (Mekhuzla and Roche 2009: 11). Accordingly, in the Armenian and Azeri schools that remained in the minority populated districts, the number of Georgian language hours, and the rate of teaching of certain subjects in Georgian significantly increased.

to be distinct and to emphasize their own superiority. A fortiori, scholars recognize that ethnic identity is the perception of the "we–they" dichotomy in an ethnic group (Erasov 1994: 269)

4 Religion as an identity marker and the survival strategy of the Urum Greeks

The situation with respect to religion among the Ts'alk'a Greeks is different from the linguistic one. As argued by Jenkins, religion is recognized as one of the factors that help define culture, and accordingly, ethnicity. Religion is one of the ethnic "descriptors" – critical factors that may be observed to identify ethnicity. At certain stages of the development of ethnic communities, religion plays a dominant role. There are cultures in which religious identity is a primary defining factor, though in many cultures it does not matter at all (Jenkins 2014).

Religion has a particular value for the Urums. As they claim, they were compelled to make their choice between religion and language when they lived in Turkey under Ottoman rule. All of our Urum respondents tell us that they had sacrificed their native language and chosen religion instead – "We lost our language, but have kept our faith – Greek Orthodox Christianity" (Field material, Beshtasheni 2013).

The priest, Father Dimitry, from Ts'alk'a claims: "A long time ago the Turks gave my ancestors a choice: either faith or language. They were forced to abandon their language in order to keep their faith" (Antelava and Bit-Suleiman 2003). Popov considers the story about an exchange of languages to be the cost for the saving of their faith is the Urum Greeks' response to their marginal position in the Greek world (Popov 2004: 87).

Religion in the case of Urum Greeks can be regarded as an ethnic identity marker. Following Aklaev, many Turkophone Greeks regarded religion as an important for ethnic integration. The religious factor can be considered as part of a shared historical past. Ultimately, the reason for the loss of the Greek language by the Urums was their aspiration to keep their faith, which differentiated them ethnically and culturally from the Turkish majority. At the same time, religion was a kind of ethnic symbol that had an integrating and stabilizing effect for the community. It was not by chance that Orthodox Georgia was the centre of attraction for the Greek migrants (Aklaev 1988: 69). Religion had become their main distinctive feature vis-à-vis the Turkish-speaking non-Greek groups in the ethnically heterogeneous society of Georgia.

After migrating to Ts'alk'a, the Greeks maintained their religious practices, either converting Georgian temples in their parish churches and leaving them

unaltered, or constructing new ones on the ruins of old Georgian churches. Additionally, due to the communist ideological pressure, Urums established secret chapels and held covert religious services. In her significant work on the Greeks of the former Soviet Union, Sideri refers to the issue of building churches:

> Building churches and temples is not something new or limited to the Greek diaspora. Anthropologists have studied this practice in different contexts as a form through which displaced communities re-locate their identity within new geographical, cultural and social landscapes, re-mapping their history in the new territory; re-mapping their spiritual past in a materialized present in the same way that a name can map a family within the family/community genealogy (Sideri 2006: 73).

She shares the opinion of Nora, who argues that *lieux de memoire* ('sites of memory'), such as these 'Greek' churches in Georgia that comprise a fixed and crystallized storage of memory, hide within them the 'sentiment of continuity' (Nora 1997: 23, 28). We share Sideri's view that "the Greek churches in Georgia were testimony to the continuity of a community's Greekness and thus the continuity of the community itself" (Sideri 2006: 76).

The construction of small chapels in the yards of abandoned houses of Greeks in Ts'alk'a is a comparatively new practice. This tradition also exists in Greece. Greeks began to build such chapels in Ts'alk'a after their migration to Greece. They are abundant in the Ts'alk'a district in several villages: Jinisi, Khadiki, Tsints'q'aro, Kvemo da Shua Kharaba, Shipiyak, and Avranlo. Today, nearly all of these churches are closed because their owners have left Georgia. But those tenants who now live in their houses (even if they are from Ach'ara, i. e. Muslims), keep them tidy and display great reverence towards them. According to local residents, the motives for their construction are twofold. Some informants ascribe it to the dreams of migrants. Someone in Greece was told in a dream to build a small chapel in Georgia in the yard. Others believe that it is a kind of expression of gratitude towards the Georgian people by the Greeks. In any case, by constructing chapels, Urum Greeks try to identify themselves with Greece – this is a materialized expression of their ethnic identity, and a manifestation of their Greekness.

Urums still keep their religious traditions in Ts'alk'a and celebrate different Orthodox holidays. It is significant that, in the present day, some religious festivals have become important for Urums in two ways. One of them is Easter, which is related to the newly established tradition of arrival of emigrants to visit the cemeteries of their ancestors in Ts'alk'a (it is held as well on the Octave of Easter) and arrange feasting. This tradition, which was an ordinary one before their resettlement, acquired double significance: on the one hand, it

serves as a religious identifier of the Urums; and on the other hand, it has become a link between their "historical" homeland, Greece, and their homeland in Georgia. Our respondent tells us:

> Every Easter we arrive in Ts'alk'a and go to the cemeteries of our parents and other relatives. We hire a special bus or minibus for that purpose. Of course, some of our Greeks could not come, because of age or some other problems, but they ask us to go to their family cemeteries and honour the memory of their ancestors. Then we organize feasting. We visit our houses, relatives who live in Ts'alk'a and we are so happy to come back to our motherland (Field Material, Ts'alk'a 2013).

As assumed by Durkheim (1912), societies require continuity and connection with the past to preserve social unity and cohesion. His study of religious traditions suggested that rituals transmit traditional beliefs, values and norms, and that shared rituals provide a sense of "collective effervescence". Durkheim stated that collective thought requires individuals to physically join together to create a common experience that is shared by the group. He believed that totems, natural items that have been deemed sacred, held immense power, and suggested that they provided individuals with a device to individually remember the unity of the effervescent group experience (Durkheim 1912). The abovementioned traditions of constructing small chapels, and the collective celebration of Easter at the cemeteries, have become collective totemic objects that provide a connection to the "collective effervescent" experiences, thus symbolizing the identity of the ethnic group.

One more factor that contributes to the preservation of the identity of Ts'alk'a Urums is their collective memory. Halbwachs was the first sociologist to study societal remembrance. He expanded the idea of totems to include commemorative events that serve as reminders of a collective memory. As he claims, collective memory is a form of consciousness of the past reinterpreted in the light of present interests. He characterizes memory as a filter of past events that tends to preserve only those images that support the group's present sense of identity (Halbwachs 1992).

In our opinion, one of the markers of ethnic identity among Ts'alk'a Greeks is the so-called mnemonic unity. The Italian anthropologist Cappelletto introduced this term to denote a community that is united by the memory of a traumatic event; it may or may not have any other unifying structures beyond the shared memory (Cappelletto 2003). In the case of Ts'alk'a Greeks, we can assume that the persecution trauma is their unifying memory. Indeed, almost all of the Ts'alk'a Greeks will recount the history of their ancestors, their persecution by Turks, their flight from Anatolia, etc. "Ts'alk'alides" is a socium, a community sharing religion, traditions and languages, and is also a mnemonic

unity reinforcing their identity: "Routes in various forms, such as migration, deportation and refugeeness, seem always to have nourished their history, or at least its representation, with stories of fragmentation, violence and survival" (Sideri 2006: 2).

Today, the situation of Ts'alk'a's Greeks in terms of identity maintenance is complex and extraordinary, because the whole responsibility for its preservation rests almost entirely upon a small group of middle-aged and elderly Urum Greeks remaining in the region. In the present-day ethnically heterogeneous Greek villages, there are some relatively young, so-called "supervisors" who look after the villages, houses and lands of those who migrated to Greece. The latter send them money in order to keep their property in order. For example, one supervisor in the village of Beshtasheni does not allow non-Greek families to settle in the village to protect it. He does not give anyone the right to occupy the abandoned houses, and assures that, among the Greek villages of Ts'alk'a, Beshtasheni is relatively less populated by Georgian eco-migrants. However, as a result, the village is mostly empty and many houses are abandoned and destroyed. Still, the abundant lands of this nearly empty village, which remain in the possession of Greeks, are their source of income. It is obvious that the necessity for the survival of ethnic identity activated ethno-cultural self-defense mechanisms and formed a kind of public institution of control to preserve these "mature" Urum settlements and maintain Greek identity. And since the Greeks regard Georgia as their homeland ("Georgia is our 'homeland', it is the place, where you were born!"), their attempts to preserve their villages are comparable to the preservation of their homeland, where the emigrated Greeks allegedly plan to return in the future. In recent years, the economic crisis in Greece promoted the frequent movement of Ts'alk'alides from Greece to Georgia and in some cases the final return of the mostly retired Greeks to the Ts'alk'a region.

5 Aspects of cross-cultural orientation

Cross-cultural orientation primarily refers to the readiness of members of a group of different cultural orientation to interact and form a sustainable relationship with members of another group. This has become more salient – especially in the last period – due to the increasing number of migrations worldwide. Dozens of works have been dedicated to the study of cross-cultural behavioral competence and intercultural sensitivity, with the aim of explaining and predicting successful intercultural encounters (Mittal 2012; Chen and Starosta 1996). However, in our

case, we shall consider the cross-cultural orientation of Greeks from a different angle; we shall try to link it with the elements and symbols of ethnic identification and reveal how they influence the orientation of Greeks towards different ethnic groups in the Ts'alk'a district. What are those elements which give positive or negative direction to the dispositions of the Greeks?

As was mentioned above, after the emigration of Greeks and the influx of Georgian groups in the Ts'alk'a district, Greeks came to live in ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous settlements. Today, in most Greek villages of Ts'alk'a, the population is made up of Greeks, Ach'arians and Svans – rarely do we meet Azeris and Armenians. As mentioned above, the Soviet era played an important role in the harmonization of relations between different ethnic groups in Kvemo Kartli, Ts'alk'a among them. According to one of our Greek respondents:

> In times of the Soviet Union we had better relationship with each other, quite normal, because we do not have conflicts on language, religious and ethnicity basis. The situation has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The awakening of national interests of the peoples of the Soviet state and the strengthening of their aspiration for ethnic identity preservation intensified[7] (Field material, Ts'alk'a 2013).

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent rise of ethno-national sentiments, the question of cultural orientation became more and more important for ethnic minorities living in Georgia. This issue was directly linked to the question of intercultural communication, and both of these were organically related to the problem of civil integration of the minorities in the region.

Aside from the Georgian newcomers, Armenians and Azeries are the other solid non-Greek ethnic groups in Ts'alk'a. According to Weatley:

> The Armenian and Azeri populations of Ts'alk'a district have remained much more stable than either the Greek or Georgian populations. Both groups have experienced a modest reduction in their numbers since the end of the communist period (Wheatley 2006: 10).

Armenians and Azeris underwent a different path of socio-cultural development. Their historical fates, cultural traditions, behavioral norms, ethnic values, etc. are different; they speak different languages; they are of different religious orientation. Azeris and a small part of Georgians (Ach'arians) are Muslims,

7 During this period, some "hot spots" of ethnic tensions inspired by separatist or irredentist inclinations emerged in Georgia. Two of them took the form of armed conflicts in Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia. In other regions densely populated by minorities – Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti – this process has not attained any outright separatist or irredentist forms.