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## MIGRATION OF AHISGA (MESKHETI) TURKS TO THE UNITED STATES AND LIVING THERE

The purpose of this study is to assess what Ahisga Turks have adopted in the process of immigrating to the United States and to discuss the methods individuals have developed to preserve their culture in the process of acculturation. Many factors influence this process at the same time. The Ahisga Turks, consisting of about 600 families from the Krasnodar region of Russia, settled in various states of the United States and later in the State of Ohio, forming the source of information. This study is based on data collected through in-depth interviews with ten people, nine Ahisga Turks and one cleric from Turkey, living in Dayton, Ohio, USA. The article contains both interviews and literature studies about Ahisga Turks living in the United States. The return of Ahisga Turks, who were exiled to Central Asia by the Soviet regime in 1944 for strategic reasons, is still being postponed for strategic reasons. In many countries, including Turkey, where Ahisga Turks live, international organizations and think tanks continue to solve the issue from a political and strategic point of view. As a concrete example, it can be shown that although the return of Ahisga Turks to their land is a condition for Georgia's membership in the Council of Europe (1999), neither the Georgian state nor the Council of Europe can implement the return process as intended.

**Key words:** Ahisga Turks, US Refugee Program, migration to the USA, ethnic cleansing in Russia, interviews in the USA, Ahisga Turkish American Community Center.

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### Ахисгиндік түріктердің (месхетиялықтардың) АҚШ-қа қоныс аударуы және сол жерде тұруы

Бұл зерттеудің мақсаты Ахисга түріктерінің Америка Құрама Штаттарына қоныс аудару процесінде не қабылдағанын бағалау және аккультурация процесінде жеке адамдардың өз мәдениетін сақтау үшін жасаған әдістерін талқылау. Бұл процеске бір мезгілде көптеген факторлар әсер етеді. Ресейдің Краснодар өлкесінен келген 600-ге жуық отбасынан құралған Ахисга түріктері АҚШ-тың әртүрлі штаттарына, кейін Огайо штатына қоныстанып, ақпарат көзін құрады. Бұл зерттеу АҚШ-тың Огайо штатындағы Дейтон қаласында тұратын он адам, тоғыз Ахисга түріктері және Түркиядан келген бір дін қызметкерімен терең сұхбат арқылы жиналған деректерге негізделген. Мақалада Америка Құрама Штаттарында тұратын Ахисга түріктері туралы сұхбаттар да, әдебиеттік зерттеулер де бар. 1944 жылы кеңес режимі Орта Азияға жер аударған ахыска түріктерінің Грузиядағы ауылдарына оралуы әлі де стратегиялық себептерге байланысты кейінге қалдырылуда. Көптеген елдер, соның ішінде ахискандық түріктер тұратын Түркия, халықаралық ұйымдар мен талдау орталықтары бұл мәселені саяси және стратегиялық тұрғыдан шешуді жалғастыруда. Нақты мысал ретінде, ахисгиндік түріктердің өз жеріне оралуы Грузияның Еуропа Кеңесіне мүшелігінің шарты болғанымен (1999), Грузия мемлекеті де, Еуропа Кеңесі де қайтару процесін ойлағандай жүзеге асыра алмайтындығын көрсетуге болады. Кеңес Одағы ыдырағаннан кейін де жалғасқан.

**Түйін сөздер:** Ахисга түріктері, АҚШ Босқындар бағдарламасы, АҚШ-қа көші-қон, Ресейдегі этникалық тазарту, АҚШ-тағы сұхбат, Ахисга түрік-американдық қоғамдық орталығы.

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### **Миграция турок-ахисгинцев (месхетинцев) в США и их проживание там**

Целью данного исследования является оценка того, что турки-ахисга переняли в процессе иммиграции в Соединенные Штаты, и обсуждение методов, которые разработали отдельные лица для сохранения своей культуры в процессе аккультурации. На этот процесс одновременно влияют многие факторы. Турки ахисга, состоящие из около 600 семей из Краснодарского края России, поселились в различных штатах Соединенных Штатов, а затем в штате Огайо, что и стало источником информации. Данное исследование основано на данных, собранных в ходе углубленных интервью с десятью людьми, девятью турками ахисга и одним священнослужителем из Турции, проживающими в Дейтоне, штат Огайо, США. Статья содержит как интервью, так и литературные исследования о турках ахисга, проживающих в Соединенных Штатах.

Возвращение турок-ахисга, сосланных советским режимом в Среднюю Азию в 1944 году, в свои села в Грузии, до сих пор откладывается по стратегическим причинам. Многие страны, в том числе Турция, где проживают турки-ахисга, международные организации и аналитические центры продолжают решать этот вопрос с политической и стратегической точки зрения. В качестве конкретного примера можно показать, что хотя возвращение турок-ахисга на свою землю является условием членства Грузии в Совете Европы (1999 г.), ни грузинское государство, ни Совет Европы не могут осуществить процесс возвращения так, как предполагалось.

**Ключевые слова:** Турки-ахисга, программа беженцев США, миграция в США, этнические чистки в России, интервью в США, турецко-американский общественный центр Ахисга.

#### **Introduction**

Although Georgia's accession to the Council of Europe in 1999 led to new research and developments regarding the return of Ahisga Turks to Georgia, no serious steps were taken and Georgia continued to pursue a policy of slowing down this process citing internal political problems. While all these events were happening in Krasnodar, discrimination against Ahisga Turks continued, and it became clear that the return to Georgia would not happen shortly.

In 2004, while the search for a long-term solution to the problem of the Ahisga Turks continued, the United States of America decided to prepare a plan for the resettlement of the Ahisga Turks, who had been subjected to various forms of discrimination for a long time, with the idea of contributing to international efforts (Aydingun, 2006: 12). In other words, the inability of Ahisga Turks to return to their land despite all attempts and initiatives required the search and implementation of other permanent solutions. In this context, the need to transfer them to a third country that will ensure and protect their safety has emerged, international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration have started to work in this direction, and migration to the United States has been formed in that direction under these conditions and views (Aydingun, 2014: 121).

The continuation of the soft ethnic cleansing policy that the Ahisga Turks have been subjected to in

Russia, especially in the Krasnodar region, the fact that the local government in Krasnodar has made the Ahisga Turks stateless by not issuing a propiska, and therefore depriving them of all citizenship rights within the framework of systematic Turkish and foreign hostility, international organizations, human rights organizations and many attracted the attention of the activist. It should be noted that human rights organizations played an important role in the reactivation of the US Refugee Program and the inclusion of Ahisga Turks in this program. The collective ethnic discrimination suffered by the Ahisga Turks in Krasnodar can be considered the longest-lasting example of discrimination in the recent history of the Russian Federation. Xenophobia, anti-semitism, and even hostility and hatred towards all non-Slavic peoples reached their highest level during the tenure of Nikolay Kondratenko, who served as the Krasnodar governor from January 2, 1997, to January 5, 2001 (Aydingun, 2014: 122).

As a result, violations of human rights in Krasnodar have led international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration to investigate the issue.

#### **Materials and methods**

The purpose of this study is to assess what Ahisga Turks have adopted in the process of immigrating to the United States and to discuss the methods individuals have developed to preserve their culture in

the process of acculturation. Many factors influence this process at the same time. The Ahisga Turks, consisting of about 600 families from the Krasnodar region of Russia, settled in various states of the United States and later in the State of Ohio, forming the source of information. This study is based on data collected through in-depth interviews with ten people, nine Ahisga Turks and one cleric from Turkey, living in Dayton, Ohio, USA. The article contains both interviews and literature studies about Ahisga Turks living in the United States.

The age of the interviewees varies between 18-66. The average age of interviewees is 42.0. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. After conducting a literature review on this topic, the obtained data was divided into categories and analyzed. Interviews were analyzed through a coding and categorization system to develop problematic themes that were frequently reported by participants.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide. Demographic information was first entered into the interview guide: information about the person's age, length of stay in the United States, and origin was obtained. In addition, information on their home country's situation, reasons for migration, refugee status and experiences of applying for US resettlement, experiences during the resettlement process, and acculturation strategies were also included. The purpose of the interview was to allow participants to describe their resettlement experiences as a whole. Additionally, more specific questions related to resettlement challenges were included in the survey: employment, finances, language, family dynamics and roles, and future expectations.

### Literature review

During the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with the rise of the ideal of nationalism in the Soviet states, we see the emergence of some ethnic conflicts. The tension in 1989, known as the Ferghana Incident or the Ferghana Pogrom, led to another forced migration of Ahisga Turks in recent history. Some of the families who had to leave Uzbekistan settled in the Krasnodar Territory in the south-east of Russia. The local government of Krasnodar did not allow the Ahisga Turks to acquire Russian citizenship because they should be citizens of Uzbekistan, even though they were Soviet citizens. Legally, they were labeled as "illegal immigrants" and deprived of basic human rights [Kuznetsov, 2007: 227] [Bilge, 2012: 10]. Violation of human rights in Krasnodar Krai was brought up in international plat-

forms and political talks. As a result, with the contributions of non-governmental organizations, the US State Department made it possible for Ahisga Turks to settle as refugees in the US [Koriouchkina & Swerdlow, 2007]. As a result of interviews and negotiations, the United States sent about 16,000 Ahisga Turks, who documented their lives in Krasnodar Territory, as refugees to different states [Karipek, 2017: 386].

It is reported that the US government acted and granted refugee status to the Ahisga people for two reasons: First, the discrimination applied by the local government of Krasnodar, and secondly, the unwillingness of the Ahisga Turks of Georgia to return to their homeland – the Ahiska region [Bilge, 2012: 10]. Immigrants and ethnic minorities in the post-Soviet society continue to be discriminated against by the local government of the Krasnodar Territory, and researchers working on this topic describe these human rights violations as "soft ethnic cleansing". Ahisga Turks were condemned to live without a country. The regional government prevented Ahisga Turks from exercising their civil rights by not providing property ownership, higher education, legal marriage, and social and medical assistance.

Many international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Federal Union of European Nations (UFEN), have put human rights on their agenda. They dropped. However, until recently, in these studies, the focus was on the return of the Ahisga Turks to the Ahisga region of Georgia, their homeland, and no concrete steps were taken in this regard [Karipek, 2017, p. 387]. As a result of the research, a new alternative for the resettlement of Ahisga Turks living in Krasnodar Territory and suffering from deprivation of human rights to a new country has emerged. After investigations conducted in 2004, the US government accelerated its efforts to resettle Ahisga Turks living in the Krasnodar region to the United States. Ahisga Turks who immigrated to the United States received a green card within the first month, and those who fulfilled the citizenship requirements within five years received American citizenship [Karipek, 2017: 387].

### Results and discussion

It would be helpful to briefly state the logic of the US Refugee Program. Every year, the United

States admits more permanent refugees than any other country. Under this program, immigration to the United States is managed by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Health and Human Services. It is carried out in cooperation with the Office of Refugee Resettlement of the Department of Health and Human Services – ORR/DHHS. At this point, the nuance that should be noted is that the Refugee Act passed by the American Congress in 1980 and the US Refugee Program launched accordingly made it a historical duty for the United States to accept such immigrants who were forced to leave their homelands after being tortured. The United States accepted these immigrants to help people. This concept is an indicator of the importance that the United States attaches to human rights. Ahisga Turks were the largest group to immigrate to the United States through the Refugee Program, which was largely suspended after the September 11, 2001 attacks. Within this program, the Turks of Ahisga are defined as “refugees in need of special humanitarian care”. This definition follows the recommendations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and US embassies (Swerdlow, 2006: 1854- 1857).

Ahisga Turks drew attention not only for their ethnic origin, history, traditions, lifestyle and the Turkish language they used, but also for the problems they faced (Yuzbey, 2008: 681). Since migrations shaped the history of Ahisga Turks, first of all, their migration processes and the problems they experienced during migration were analyzed. Ahisga Turks expressed their thoughts about the discrimination and forced migration process they experienced in Krasnodar: “We wrote letters to the countries of the world and asked them to help us, but only Australia and America responded. They came from America and spoke to us through a translator. We explained what we experienced. They asked, why do you want to go to America? I explained that I wanted to enter the university and become a pilot, but they did not allow me to study in that department. After he asked me neither my wife nor my children, he said “You are not going” and left. America accepted us and we were forced to we had to come here in 2006” (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 197)

To end the “statelessness” and “nobodies” status of Ahisga Turks in Krasnodar Territory after the US intervention, the US State Department proposed the “Relocation and Resettlement” law to the US

Congress for the first time since the 9/11 terrorist attack. In the American laws, the name of Ahisga Turks was mentioned as “American Meskhetian Turks”. The “Special Immigrant Law” issued for the Ahisga Turks took its place in the law books as the Ahisga Turks Act of America. According to this law, designated groups of immigrants, including Ahisga Turks, will be resettled in America every budget year under this law (Steinbock, 2003: 951, 952). After America accepted Ahisga Turks as refugees and began to settle in America as immigrants, Ahisga Turks unexpectedly became the main news of American media organizations. Susan B. Glasser, one of the well-known correspondents of “The Washington Post” newspaper, known for her serious news and comments about America, wrote a serious article about Ahisga Turks in the newspaper (Glasser, 2002). Christopher Smith, a member of the American House of Representatives and former head of the Helsinki Commission of the American Congress, who is very interested in the settlement of Ahisga Turks in America, defended them in the official “Hearings” of the House of Representatives of the American Congress while informing the members of Congress about the Ahisga Turks and said: “I will give you brief information about the second issue is the plight of the Ahisga Turks in Krasnodar Krai. These people were forced out of their homes and left destitute without identity, without nationality, without a homeland to live in, deprived of their rights to permanent residence and citizenship, and deprived of the natural rights that a person usually has at birth. The city administration of Krasnodar Krai has shown a blatantly racist stance by denying the Ahisga Turks residence documents and citizenship cards. I hereby appeal to President Putin and the esteemed members of the Duma: Please ensure that this arbitrary situation against the Ahisga Turks, which ignores their rights regardless of which country they are citizens of, comes to an end as soon as possible” (Aslan, 2014: 72).

Ahisga Turks, who attributed the discrimination they experienced to being Turkish and Muslim, stated that they had some problems because they could not obtain citizenship of the country they lived in: “We lived in Uzbekistan, most of us we were educated, we all had professions, but they didn’t give us jobs. We could work in markets and fields for a short time. They knew that we were Turks, and if they needed us, they employed us, otherwise, Uzbeks worked. Every day they said to leave here. Our father and grandfather came here from Ahisga, we were born here, but they still told us to leave. There are so many people living there,

but none of them have a house, or rather, they have one, but they don't own it. The title deed belongs to either Russians or Uzbeks. Life became unbearable for us there" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 198).

Ongoing discrimination in the Krasnodar region, the Ahisga Turks living in Krasnodar and without a valid identity document, who were forced to move from Uzbekistan to Russia under the US Refugee Program, which gives priority to those in a humanitarian situation, at the initiative of the International Organization for Migration, were allowed to go to America as immigrant-refugees. In this context, as a result of studies and assessments conducted together with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and other experts, the Turks of Ahisga were given Priority 2 (P2) status. (Swerdlow, 2006: 1857).

Turks of Ahisga face legal and economic problems such as lack of passports, unemployment, and inability to own property. Besides, they stated that another of the problems they experienced was security-related concerns: "I came here in 2006. They were oppressing us. They told us that you are stateless, leave here. There is no passport in Krasnodar, they are not allowed to live there. They said that there is no security there, there is no place here every day, go wherever you want. Living has become a massacre" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 199).

The US Refugee Program grants asylum in the United States to individuals who are persecuted for racial, religious, national, or political reasons, and this status is granted based on a case-by-case evaluation through one-on-one interviews. After immigrating to the United States, the food, shelter, clothing, and other basic needs required for the first phase of resettlement are provided by private voluntary agencies. The International Organization for Migration has taken over the costs of transporting the Turks of Ahisga to the United States on the condition that they be returned. This information was also confirmed in the interviews conducted in the United States. Immigrant refugees receive a permanent residence permit one year after arriving in the United States, and four years later they have the right to apply for American citizenship (Aydingun, 2014: 123).

The Ahisga Turks, whose efforts paid off, began to migrate to different states of the United States in 2005: "Never a place did not take care of them, the Turks of Ahisga were very bored. After that, they turned to America and America took us. Thanks to America, our people were helped. The Americans came with the International Organization for Migration and checked our documents. They looked at our

situation and then told our leaders to come and tell us your problem in the American Parliament. Our leaders came and talked about what we experienced during the Bush administration" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 199).

The US Refugee Program is administered by the International Organization for Migration and began operating on February 1, 2004. On July 21, 2004, the first group headed by Tianshan Svaridze left Krasnodar for the United States. In June 2005, the International Organization for Migration stopped accepting applications. By the end of 2006, about 12500 people went to the United States, some of whom did not live in Krasnodar. Later, in 2007, it was reported that approximately 2400 people would leave. Some changes were made to the rules established at the beginning of the Refugee Program during the implementation of the program, and even those with Russian passports and registrations were reported to have gone to the United States. As a result of the work that started in 2004, by 2006 Ahisga Turks who went to the United States were settled in more than thirty states. So, until 2006, about 9 thousand Ahisga Turks were settled in thirty-three states and Washington. Pennsylvania (795 people), Washington (509 people), Illinois (508 people), Kentucky (499 people), Arizona (497 people), Idaho (471 people), Texas (417 people), Virginia (417 people), New York (394 people) and Colorado (365 people) are the regions where they live the most (Aydingun, 2006: 26). However, as of today, these numbers have changed. After receiving citizenship, the need to stay in the places where they settled disappeared, and Ahisga Turks began to concentrate in certain regions.

As mentioned, one of the issues against which Ahisga Turks living in Krasnodar are discriminated against is that they are deprived of the right to education, and those who study at a university in another country have problems finding work: "One of my brothers is an electrical engineer and the other is an architect, but they didn't give us jobs. However, we could work in the fields and sell what we grew in the market. The atrocities they committed against us were unbearable. We had houses, but we didn't have documents, we sold them all for the price of a chicken. We did not see daylight in Krasnodar. They brought us to America in 2005" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 198)

Until 2004, there were not enough Ahisga Turks in the United States engaged in any lobbying activities and working for the admission of Ahisga Turks to the United States. However, it can be said that the regular reports prepared by the United Nations

High Commissioner for Refugees on the situation in Krasnodar throughout the 1990s and the fact that many human rights defenders in Russia and abroad kept the issue on the agenda are the reasons why the relevant agencies of the United States did not raise the situation of the Ahisga Turks can be said to be the most important reasons. The USA, the OSCE and the EC were also monitoring the investigations of the Ahisga Turks and participating in these investigations. In 2002, the meeting in Krasnodar between two human rights activists (Tamara and Vadim Karastelev) and the officials of the US Refugee Program organized by the officials of the Washington office of Amnesty International was one of the important events that paved the way for the US to accept the Ahisga Turks as immigrants. is one (Swerdlow, 2006: 1861). It is not difficult to guess that the research conducted by the United States on the Ahisga Turks has determined their suffering, their distance from radical religion, their lack of problems with the governments of the countries they live in, their hard work and skills, and their ability to adapt to new environments. These characteristics of Ahisga Turks, on the one hand, coincide with the logic of the US Refugee Program, and on the other hand, since they are a group that does not pose any threat to the security of the United States in the post-September 11 conjuncture, the Ahisga Turks are an extremely suitable immigrant for the United States.

As part of preparations for the US Refugee Program, various criteria for immigration have been established and it is possible to apply for those who meet these requirements. It was determined during the research that these criteria have led to new divisions in some families. For example, the condition of accepting the applications of stateless persons meant that those who went to Uzbekistan and obtained Uzbek citizenship in order not to become stateless could not apply, and applications were rejected. In other words, the US Refugee Program's refusal to accept those with Uzbekistan passports meant that 10% of Ahisga Turks living in Krasnodar were unable to immigrate to the US as the result of an error of assessment and continued to be victims of the mild ethnic cleansing in Krasnodar. Although these Ahisga Turks were told that they could enter the program if they renounced their Uzbekistan citizenship, the applications of those who applied in this way were also rejected. Thus, Ahisga Turks, who were preparing to go to America and sold their houses and property, were left at the mercy of the Krasnodar local authorities, deprived of some of their family members – because there were persons who had different statuses in the same family – their

houses and valid identity documents due to this wrong practice (Aydingun, 2014: 126).

The statements of another participant confirm that they experienced discrimination before moving to America: “We used to live in Uzbekistan. From there we went to Krasnodar, where we stayed for almost 10 years. We came here from there. They didn't give us a day in Krasnodar. They called us black people, tortured us, we couldn't go to the doctor, and we didn't have any documents (identity cards). When going from one city to another in Russia, 10 people were stopped by the police and asked for money, they asked, “Who are you? Where are you going?” (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 198)

Reunification of separated families after the end of the Refugee Program was left to their initiative, depending on their financial situation and American laws. Among the conditions for applying, Turkish to be, to have been exiled from Uzbekistan, and to have been a resident of Krasnodar before January 1, 2004. This situation was also expressed in the interviews, and of course, migration could only take place from Krasnodar. The data obtained within the framework of the ethnographic research showed that some Ahisga Turks who lived in Krasnodar completed their registration in Rostov and were able to apply by proving that they lived in Krasnodar. It is noteworthy that there are various rumors on this topic. For example, although the refugee application can be submitted only from Krasnodar, there were opinions that Ahisga Turks from Rostov, Voronezh, Stavropol and even other settlements also applied claiming to live in Krasnodar and the Refugee Program was suspended for this reason. At this point, it is perhaps necessary to assess the terms of application of the program. So, during the application, some changes were made to the previously defined conditions. It should not be forgotten that the necessary flexibilities or some imprecise expressions arise from the specific problems of the Ahisga Turks. In other words, it is clear that Ahisga Turks living in Russia, regardless of whether they have registration or citizenship, face more difficulties and more violations of human rights compared to those living in other parts of the former Soviet geography. Therefore, this fact should be taken into account when determining the criteria for long-term solutions for Ahisga Turks – migration to the United States or other solutions – and further splitting of families should not be allowed (Aydingun, 2014: 127).

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On the other hand, in the interviews given by Ahisga Turks, it was mentioned that the local authorities in Krasnodar encouraged them to immigrate to the United States. Alexander Tkachev, the governor of Krasnodar at that time, in his speech on a TV channel in 2004, said that Ahisga Turks came to the region thirteen years ago, they took advantage of many opportunities for free, but they stayed here too long, they did not keep up with the way of life of the region, so they migrated to a third country, clearly stated that it is the most correct way. During this period, it was also reported that the attacks against the Ahisga Turks increased to encourage migration. Undoubtedly, the Turks of Ahisga had great difficulty in selling their houses and other possessions and suffered great losses due to the exactness of their departure (Swerdlow, 2006: 1867-1868). However, another issue mentioned in the interviews was that a significant number of Ahisga Turks left Krasnodar and the remaining Ahisga Turks were unexpectedly allowed to stay in the Krasnodar region since 2005, as the result of the discrimination in Krasnodar being raised in international platforms. The Ahisga Turks, who moved from Krasnodar to America and settled in a scattered manner, complained about this situation, mobilized the most important tool of their survival strategies, the wide kinship ties as much as possible, and made the best use of the available opportunities offered to them. In the interviews, all Ahisga Turks openly expressed their satisfaction with the treatment they received when they arrived in the United States.

In many interviews, it was reported that hearing why the United States wanted to take Ahisga Turks under the Refugee Program scared and worried many Ahisga Turks in the first days. The fear of further discrimination is a concern of many Ahisga Turks (Aydingun, 2014: 125).

After five years, a significant part of Ahisga Turks, who had the right to legal citizenship, did so, and some of them did not succeed financially or in exams, etc. reasons caused delays. In the US, stability, regular job opportunities, regular salary payments, humane treatment, which is extremely important for Ahisga Turks, and the absence of problems in terms of official documents made the post-immigration in-

tegration process possible despite all the difficulties (Aydingun, 2006) (Koriouchkina and Swerdlow, 2007). Of course, it is necessary to pay attention to the difficulty of building a new life in a new country. Although the Ahisga Turks have experience living in different places, it should not be forgotten that this spatial mobility took place outside the post-Soviet geography with which they were familiar in a certain sense. In other words, Ahisga Turks had to start a new life in such a foreign country for the first time (Aydingun, 2014: 129).

Within the framework of the Refugee Program, the Ahisga Turks, who settled in different provinces and settlements, began to show a tendency to gather together in certain centers.

It should be noted that local refugee settlement institutions are important contributing factors to the implementation of the Refugee Program. Their mission was to help incoming immigrants settle and adjust during their first months in the United States. In other words, they have tasks such as teaching immigrants English, finding jobs, explaining the health care system, getting a driver's license, and providing information about the education system. Many agencies rely on the support of local charities, religious groups and volunteers. These vary from region to region. Social services provided under the Refugee Program are actually for five years, after which individuals are expected to provide them within their means. This five-year period, as mentioned earlier, is because each immigrant is eligible to apply for permanent residence after one year and citizenship after four years (Koriouchkina and Swerdlow, 2007: 402-403).

The migration to America, which is considered the third exile by a significant part of Ahisga Turks outside of America, is explained very differently by Ahisga Turks in America. For the Ahisga Turks, who cannot go anywhere from Krasnodar because they do not have identity documents, migration to America is, of course, the result of the desperation they have already expressed. But while they continue to long for their homeland and their loved ones, they make it clear that they are happy with the rights they automatically have in America simply because they are human. According to the data obtained in the ethnographic study, the Ahisga Turks, who try to meet their longing for their relatives by visiting with the opportunities provided by technology and the savings they get, never give up their efforts to protect their social networks, culture and traditions. The determination to preserve the traditions of the Ahisga Turks, who had to live in many different countries, has been expressed by many researchers who have

studied this community. Among the noteworthy elements are the importance given to religion and language, respect for family elders, etc. elements can be enumerated. In interviews conducted in the United States, the Ahisga Turks openly expressed their satisfaction with the respect shown to their cultural characteristics. The Ahisga Turks, who expressed in every environment that they were able to preserve their religion, language and traditions despite all the difficulties and prohibitions during the Soviet period and after, have expressed in their interviews that they are offended by some Turkish groups who try to inform them about Islam. Elderly women in particular expressed their concern to the visitors, suggesting that the reason for these attempts was based on their ignorance of their religion. On the other hand, some Ahisga Turks stated that they were able to carry out Christian propaganda in the institutions responsible for them because they were connected to the church, but they also reacted to them in this regard. In this context, it is clear that the Turks of Ahisga have preserved their religion by sticking to their traditional concepts (Aydingun, 2014: 130).

Many researchers have written that Ahisga Turks, who are generally satisfied with their lives in the United States and who face conditions far different from their expectations, have a very high functional integration ability in their places of residence. The Ahisga Turks who were taken to America from Krasnodar Territory were placed in the provinces and cities of America where the population density is low and labor force is needed. American society was very fond of its newcomer neighbors. The security and police forces were also pleased by the almost absence of crime among the Ahisga Turks, most of whom were educated and brought up with family upbringing. Young adults coming to America know that to have better positions and higher-paying jobs, they must first get a good college education. Today, the Assembly of American Turkish Associations is organized in all 50 states of America. Organized in each province, ATAA provides voluntary counseling to newly arrived Ahisga Turks and provides English-Turkish courses after work day and night so that young people can learn English as soon as possible and prepare for university exams (Aslan, 2014: 73).

Steve Swerdlow, who has been following the settlement of Ahisga Turks in America and the difficulties and concerns they have faced since the beginning and published his research on this topic, states that the settlement of Ahisga Turks in different states far from each other has created moral anxiety and "spiritual distress" among Ahisga Turks. Ahis-

ga Turks want to live close to each other in America, as they did in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan before. S. Tienshan, who lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, expressed his thoughts and concerns about this issue to Steve Swerdlow in December 2004: "Every weekend I constantly travel from city to city, from village to village, meeting with Ahisga families who have just arrived from Krasnodar. We encourage incoming Ahisga families to live in the city or the countryside if possible, or geographically close to each other if possible. I think we can all get along in Pennsylvania. At least we all live in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, or at least the Northeast states. There are Ahisga families who came from Krasnodar and live in distant states such as Idaho, Oregon and Georgia. We also want to bring them here. At least our people will live in one place, close to each other, as before" (Swerdlow, 2006: 1876).

Despite this, it is a concrete fact that Ahisga Turks do not feel that they belong to most of the places where they live. When Ahisga Turks were asked where they felt they belonged or where they saw their homeland, different opinions were expressed. According to research results, among the main reasons for these differences are factors such as the generation gap, country of residence and living conditions. However, despite all this, it would not be wrong to say that Turkey has come to the fore as a political affiliation.

Interviews conducted in the United States showed that, although Ahisga Turks do not feel at home and have some problems, they are generally extremely happy and impressed with being in America, the environment of freedom, people's treatment and humanitarian approach, and institutions that take care of them. However, Ahisga Turks work in low-paid jobs, in some cases far below their educational level. This situation was not only in the United States because Ahisga Turks who settled in Krasnodar, Rostov or other parts of Russia from Uzbekistan had already experienced significant low mobility.

The situation in the United States was no different. Like all immigrants, even if they are at the bottom of the stratification system of the country they move to, they experience the satisfaction of being safe and having legal status, and they express it openly.

Dayton is a city where many Ahisga Turks have settled in recent years. Undoubtedly, some events that happened in Dayton have been effective in attracting Ahisga Turks there. After the economic crisis, the city of Dayton, which suffered a signifi-



cant decline due to factory closings, was looking for ways to attract immigrants to the area to revive its economy. was one of the most important factors that attracted Turks to the region (Aydingun, 2014: 132).

In the interviews, it was emphasized that it is possible to buy a house for 10 thousand dollars, although serious repairs are required. Many Ahisga Turks living in Dayton and elsewhere have turned their home repair skills into a profession, making a living by buying, repairing and then selling homes. However, in the interviews, it was stated that there are Ahisga Turks who suffered losses in some cases due to reasons such as lack of knowledge about the legal status of their homes and lack of knowledge of the legal system. Considering the ability of Ahisga Turks to build and repair houses, it is not difficult to guess that they carry out repairs themselves in family solidarity. In fact, during the research, it was observed that this is also the case in Dayton and that the face of the city has changed a lot due to the large number of Ahisga Turks coming to the city and repairing the houses they bought in the neighborhoods where Ahisga Turks are concentrated. So, according to various sources, 400 families settled in Dayton until 2013. Both the administrators and the people of the city of Dayton have adopted an extremely “immigrant-friendly” approach to overcome the bottleneck within it (Preston, 2013).

As a result of the interviews conducted in Indiana and Ohio, Ahisga Turkish men were more likely to drive trucks. Among them, 160 people work in various repair jobs – mainly home repair, and women in various service sectors – cleaning, supermarket cashier, food industry, etc. It was known that he works in the works. In addition, it was determined that Ahisga Turks, who live in large families and traditionally take care of their elderly parents, also earn income thanks to the privatized elderly care system. The daily cost of out-of-home care is reported to be around \$27 as private aged care centers encourage in-home care and become cheaper. The Turks of Ahisga report that caregivers are paid \$700 per month for elderly people who are cared for at home. Therefore, taking care of two elderly people means an income of \$1,400 per month for the family. For this reason, some family members prefer to stay at home and be the caregiver rather than work. Among the information provided by the Turks of Ahisga is that the elderly are given free medicine (Aydingun, 2014: 133).

On the day of the opening of the Ahisga Turkish American Community Center in Dayton, as a result of the speeches and one-on-one interviews of local administrators, it became clear that the Ahisga

Turks changed the face of the traditional face of the city of Dayton, their life and relations attracted the attention of the local population and this caused great respect.

Among the speeches made, it can be said that one of the speeches that best expresses how the Ahisga Turks are perceived by the people of Dayton is the speech given by Mayor Gary Leitzell. Leitzell said that they appreciate the hard work, efforts and family life of Ahisga Turks who are not against the American social structure, they want to see more Ahisga Turks in Dayton, and they will support all Ahisga Turks who want to realize the “American Dream”.

Ahisga Turkish American Community Center, created under the leadership of Islam Shabbenderov, became a member of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations. The former chairman of the Assembly of Turkish American Associations, Günay Evinç, who participated in the opening, as a Turk of American origin, drew attention to the fact that the Community Center offers extremely important opportunities, especially for young people, and noted that the houses repaired by Ahisga Turks beautify Dayton.

Ethnographic studies have shown that different structures were formed in different places. But in the case of the United States, it would not be wrong to say that the elite or community leaders who led the Ahisga Turks before the migration faced a significant challenge, and this challenge had the potential to undermine their power. Despite the experience of living in many places, Ahisga Turks encountered a completely foreign social, political and cultural structure in the United States for the first time. For the first time, they had to rebuild their lives outside the Soviet world – other than Turkey. The unity of language and culture was extremely important in overcoming many difficulties in Turkey. The most important difficulty they faced was undoubtedly the language problem (Aydingun, 2014: 134, 135). Although it is possible to talk about the overall effort and relative success in learning the language, it can be said that young people are more successful in this regard and therefore can communicate more easily with local authorities. In the observations conducted in Ohio and Indiana states, it was noted that this situation poses a threat to the traditional structure of the Ahisga Turks. In other words, traditional influential elders, regardless of where they lived in the Soviet geography, were in contact with local authorities and could respond to the problems of their communities in different ways. Ahisga Turk’s elders and intellectuals were respected both within their communities and by other groups and local forces in the post-So-

viet space, and their authority within the community was established on legal grounds. It has been observed that this situation has begun to change at least to some extent in the United States. It is concluded that young people who can adapt more easily to this new environment and learn English more easily may tend to disobey the authority of community leaders, albeit to a limited extent.

From the statements of the Ahisga Turks, traditional kinship ties, which retain their importance as one of the reasons for the chain migration emerge. Another reason for chain migration is that relatives who moved here before are satisfied with their lifestyle. Ahisga Turks, who experienced many socio-economic problems before the migration, do not want to experience more problems, so they want to migrate to places where they think they will live comfortably based on the information they received from their relatives: "I said I would not come, we did not know what kind of place this was. Our religion is different, our language is different, and we do not know English. The first Ahisga people came in 2005. My relatives came here first. We decided to come after 6 months, but there were problems and we were able to come only in 2007" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 201).

There is no doubt that in the coming years, especially the young people studying in the United States will play a more active role in the group. Certainly, this is a very difficult situation to accept because it would mean a change in the traditional hierarchy for the leaders and elders of the community. Despite this, time will show whether the youth of Ahisga Turks who will grow up in the United States will not be able to get rid of the peculiar assimilation feature of the American system. In this context, it can be argued that living in an open society, that is, the absence of pressure, can make it difficult to preserve certain cultural and identity characteristics.

One of the most important problems in terms of organization in the United States is the problem in question during the Soviet era and after, that is, the dispersion of Ahisga Turks. Although Ahisga Turks in the United States tend to gather in certain cities and regions in recent years, various associations are operating in different places, even in the same residential areas, and it is not difficult to predict that this situation will continue in the future.

It may also be that different associations feel an affinity with different groups from Turkey, and this causes divisions among Ahisga Turks. Even though they moved to the United States, their relations with Turkey put the Turks of Ahisga in close contact with other Turkish associations and Turkish em-

bassies and consulates, and because this closeness is mutual, Turkish associations and representations give them various contributions and support. In this context, Turkey's politics are closely followed by Ahisga Turks, and even political problems and divisions in Turkey can affect them.

It is observed that the Ahisga Turks are already slowly making their voices heard in America, and first of all, they are paying attention to the ongoing discrimination in Krasnodar. Although the citizenship problem of some of the Ahisga Turks who remained in Krasnodar after moving to the United States was resolved over time, i.e. they gained legal status and were accepted as citizens of the Russian Federation, it is clear that cases of discrimination continue in practice. Undoubtedly, this situation is also observed by Ahisga Turks, who have gotten used to life in the United States over the years and have taken important steps towards integration into society. A significant number of them still have first-degree family members and close or distant relatives in Krasnodar. In other words, Ahisga Turks, who began to concentrate in certain regions of the United States, are improving their relations with local authorities, Turkish Turks living in the United States, and their associations. As a result of these relations, it would not be wrong to say that they started making their voices heard and almost lobbying. In this context, one of the most important issues they try to highlight is the ill-treatment, discrimination and human rights violations that the Ahisga Turks who remain in Krasnodar are still subjected to. It is observed that the efforts of Ahisga Turks in the United States to bring the situation of Krasnodar to the agenda are beginning to bear fruit. For example, Senator Sherrod Campbell Brown of the state of Ohio, where the city of Dayton, where the Ahisga Turks have been concentrated in recent years, is located, wrote a letter to the Secretary of State John Kerry, stating that there has been discrimination against the Ahisga Turks living in the south of Russia, oppression and pressure has increased, and he emphasized the importance of restoring the migration program (Aydingun, 2014: 135, 136).

What is noteworthy about the migration process of Ahisga Turks another issue is related to the sense of identity. Two participants said that although they had the opportunity to migrate to geographically closer countries, these countries accepted them on the condition that they renounced their Turkish identity, and therefore preferred to move to a far-away country that they did not know at all: "We said They accepted us to go to Georgia, Ahisga, but they said, leave your Turkishness aside, come. They

would change our names and make our surnames Georgian. We did not accept either. Georgia used to say, "Give up your Turkishness, I will accept it that way", but we didn't accept it either" (Poyraz & Guler, 2019: 201)

The problems experienced by the Ahisga Turks after migration were also revealed during the interviews. These problems are the longing for their relatives in Russia and the United States. because of their lack of language skills. The elderly do not know English, so even if they pass the written test, they cannot get an American passport, and because they cannot speak English during the interview, they cannot visit their relatives abroad.

The situation of Ahisga Turks living in the United States, which is the main topic of the research, is of great importance in ensuring the continuity of the group dynamics of Ahisga Turks living in the diaspora today. Almost all individuals of Ahisga Turks living in the United States have acquired citizenship rights over time, have been able to move freely to continue their religious and national culture in this geography, and today continue to live in better economic conditions than Ahisga Turks living in other countries. For this reason, these fundamental differences stand out as the characteristics that distinguish Ahisga Turks living in the United States from other Ahisga Turks. In the light of all these similarities and differences, it is very useful to study the demographic situation of Ahisga Turks living in the United States, which is one of the countries farthest from their homeland, and to determine their cultural identity, expectations and concerns about the future.

When the living conditions, economic and social positions of Ahisga Turks in Dayton, Ohio, USA are examined, Ahisga Turks show differences in economic, cultural and religious dimensions. Adults can be seen using their previous knowledge and experience to adapt economically to American economic life. In the light of the information obtained from the interviews, the financial success of the entire group was achieved. Second, families take various measures to protect their cultural and religious identity. The first thing to do is to define a common place. The availability of affordable housing in the Dayton, Ohio area facilitated the formation of this shared space. The Ahisga Turks gathered in the Dayton area strive to establish cultural centers, mosques and madrasahs to preserve their national and religious identity, thanks to the opportunities provided by strong intragroup dynamics. The process of forming these socialization and educational centers is still ongoing. In order to use

these religious and cultural centers more effectively, we are trying to establish a relationship with official institutions and organizations in Turkey.

### Conclusion

Ahisga Turks are encouraged by the authorities of America, Russia, Turkey and Georgia to leave the places of their birth and fertile lands in the Republic of Turkey and their unions, where they live to this day, and go to America as immigrants. As a Turk who has lived in Washington, the capital of America for 20 years and who knows closely how the American Parliament, the White House, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and related General Administrations work, he described the Ahisga Turks of America as immigrants, and then called them "National Security of America" and "Restoration of Depopulated Areas". It is not accidental that it is placed in suitable places, in the right districts and cities, depending on its programs. This is a "Social Engineering Project". By implementing this project, the Washington administration "kills several birds with one stone." America and England want Azerbaijani oil and "residual" based energy materials to flow to the "West" without any interruption through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The territory of South Georgia, the ancient homeland of the Ahisga Turks, is the most reliable route for the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The biggest obstacle for Ahisga Turks to return to their "homeland" is the "reliable route" problem of the Oil Belt. On the other hand, the Georgian government is worried about the uprisings of Georgian citizens of Armenian origin living in the Ahalsikh (Ahisga) and Ahalkelek (Ahilkelek) regions. The wounds of the uprisings of Georgian citizens, who rebelled with the support of Russia, have not yet healed. Georgia does not seem to have enough power to evacuate Armenian citizens in the Ahisga region and replace them with Ahisga Turks. The lands that are the "old homeland" of the Ahisga Turks are considered to be the lands that pose a great risk for Georgia and the countries participating in the Baku-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline project. Georgia, Turkey and other "partner" countries do not want the continuation of peace and tranquility in the region and do not want the rebellion and independence movement to start. Ahisga Turks, who were brought to America under the name of "immigrants", are put as a "patch" in regions where the "population density" of that country is lower than American standards. The project of Ahisga Turks moving to America is an American-run "Social Engineering Project".

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