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Original article



Returning home: some problems of repatriates' adaptation in post-Soviet Abkhazia

Albert K Dudaiti

North Ossetian State University named after Kosta Levonovich Khetagurov, 44–46, Vatutina Street, Vladikavkaz, RSO-Alania, Russian Federation

✉ adudaiti@mail.ru

Abstract

Introduction. The article considers socio-political problems of the Abkhaz ethnic group in Turkey, in particular, the formation of its pro-Russian position during the Caucasus crisis of 2008. It notes the inconsistency between the pro-Russian position of the ethnic group and Turkey's position in the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. It is emphasized that Ankara was interested in the development of Turkish-Georgian relations and, accordingly, supported the territorial integrity of Georgia and condemned the aspirations of the rebellious republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to achieve independence.

Materials and methods. The author adheres to the objectivity principle. Many issues related to the repatriation process are considered in the problem-chronological order, historical-comparative and historical-systemic methods of research, used in this research, allow to reveal the degree of study of problems related to ethno-political conflicts in Georgia in the post-Soviet period.

Results. The authors analyze the complex of problems associated with the return of Abkhazian repatriates to their historical homeland. It reveals the difficulties faced by repatriates in the process of adaptation in Abkhazia, including the high cost of living, lack of housing and jobs. In addition, some Abkhazian repatriates lacked language skills, which also created difficulties in settling in their new place of residence. At the same time, it is noted that the repatriates' gradual acquisition of life skills and mastering of new forms and methods of economic management contributed to their adaptation to local daily life.

Discussion and conclusion. It is concluded that the life practice received in Abkhazia, combined with that acquired in the diaspora in Turkey, played an important role in establishing new boundaries in the life of Abkhazian repatriates and contributed to their firm establishment in the system of socio-political, socio-economic and cultural life in their historical home.

Keywords: Abkhaz ethnic group, Turkey, repatriates, historical homeland, adaptation

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Возвращение на родину: некоторые проблемы адаптации репатриантов в постсоветской Абхазии

А.К. Дудайти

Северо-Осетинский государственный университет имени Коста Левановича Хетагурова, Российская Федерация, РСО-Алания, г. Владикавказ, ул. Ватутина, 44–46

✉ adudaiti@mail.ru

Аннотация

Введение. Рассматриваются общественно-политические проблемы абхазской диаспоры в Турции, в частности, формирование ее пророссийской позиции в период кавказского кризиса 2008 г. Отмечается несоответствие пророссийской позиции диаспоры с позицией Турции в урегулировании грузино-абхазского и грузино-югоосетинского конфликта. Подчеркивается, что в Анкаре были заинтересованы в развитии турецко-грузинских отношений и, соответственно, поддерживали территориальную целостность Грузии, осуждали стремление мятежных республик — Абхазии и Южной Осетии, к достижению независимости.

Материалы и методы. Автор придерживается принципа объективности. Многие вопросы, связанные с репатриационным процессом, рассматриваются в проблемно-хронологическом порядке, использованы историко-сравнительный и историко-системный методы исследования, позволяющие выявить степень изученности проблем, связанных с этнополитическими конфликтами в Грузии в постсоветский период.

Результаты исследования. Анализируется комплекс проблем, связанных с возвращением абхазских репатриантов на свою историческую родину. Выявлены сложности, с которыми сталкивались репатрианты в процессе адаптации в Абхазии, среди них — дороговизна жизни, отсутствие жилья, нехватка рабочих мест. Кроме того, у некоторой части абхазских репатриантов отсутствовали языковые навыки, что также создавало трудности в их обустройстве на новом месте проживания. В то же время отмечается, что постепенное приобретение репатриантами жизненных навыков, осваивание новых форм и методов хозяйствования способствовало их адаптации в местную повседневную жизнь.

Обсуждение и заключение. Сделан вывод, что полученная в Абхазии жизненная практика в сочетании с той, которая была приобретена в диаспоре в Турции, сыграла важную роль в утверждении новых границ в жизнеустройстве абхазских репатриантов, способствовала их прочному закреплению в системе общественно-политической, социально-экономической и культурной жизни на исторической родине.

Ключевые слова: абхазская диаспора, Турция, репатрианты, историческая родина, адаптация

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Introduction. Among the Caucasian ethnic groups in Turkey, Abkhazians occupy a special place, which can be explained by a number of reasons: firstly, their place of residence is located in the southwestern part of the Caucasus, close to the Turkish border; secondly, Abkhazian migrants to the Ottoman Empire, unlike other Circassian migrants, used overland routes, which resulted in fewer human casualties; thirdly, among representatives of the Abkhazians supporting the self-proclaimed state recognized by Russia, the Republic of Abkhazia, pro-Russian sentiments appeared especially during and after the Caucasus crisis of 2008 [1, p. 104; 2, p. 2018]. The latter circumstance contradicted the official position of Turkey. Being interested in maintaining a high level of relations with Georgia, through whose territory oil and gas pipelines with access to Turkey passed, the leadership of the country supported the territorial integrity of Georgia and condemned the aspirations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to independence [3; 4, p. 76].

Unlike other Caucasian ethnic groups (Circassians, Chechens) who demanded that the Turkish authorities protect their rights and interests in the international arena by recognizing the facts of 1862–1864 as genocide, the Abkhazians were against creating tension in relations between Turkey and Russia and was in favor of their mutually beneficial cooperation in the Black Sea region. Such a constructive approach to Turkish-Russian relations was fully in line with the pro-Russian policy of the Federation of Abkhazian Associations (FAA), the leading organization of the Abkhazian ethnic group established in Turkey in 2010 [5, p. 125; 6, p. 23].

Following Georgia's recognition of muhajirs' forced relocation as a "genocide of the Caucasian peoples", the Circassian and Chechen ethnic groups supported it in its confrontation with Russia, while at the same time condemning the "opportunistic" position of the Abkhaz one. Consequently, by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Caucasus crisis, Russia managed not only to strengthen its position in the South Caucasus, but also to split the relations between the Caucasian ethnic groups in Turkey [7, p. 147; 8, p. 115].

In the context of Turkey's complicated relations with Russia due to the Russian military's intervention in the Syrian conflict, the FAA leadership demonstrated loyalty to the country's authorities, but at the same time, it refrained from criticizing the Russian military's actions in Syria. In November 2015, when the Turkish Air Force shot down a Russian SU-24 warplane, FAA representatives visited the Russian ambassador in Ankara to discuss the prospects for developing Turkish-Russian relations and establishing bilateral dialog [6, p. 234].

In April 2016, a round table was held in Sukhum, attended by Abkhaz diaspora activists, officials of the republic, Russian MPs, businessmen and representatives of the expert community. During the discussion of issues related to the normalization of Turkish-Russian relations after the "Syrian" events, representatives of the Abkhazian diaspora stood out for taking a conciliatory tone toward Russia, which played a significant role in the improvement of Turkish-Russian relations [9]. On the other hand, Turkish-Georgian relations were complex and contradictory, in which not the least role was played by the anti-Georgian position of the diaspora in the conflict in Abkhazia. In particular, after Georgia imposed sanctions against the rebellious republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, leaders of the Abkhazian diaspora intensified efforts to create a pro-Abkhazian lobby in the Turkish elites. The results of these efforts were not long in coming: trade ties between Turkey and Abkhazia soon began to be established bypassing the sanctions regime against Abkhazia. At the same time, representatives of the Abkhazian diaspora began to visit Abkhazia using the transit route through the territory of Russia. For their part, the Abkhaz authorities viewing the diaspora as an important political and economic ally and demographic resource tried to encourage the arrival of their ethnic brethren in their historical homeland.

Materials and methods. In researching the process of repatriation of representatives of the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey to their historical homeland, the author tried to adhere to the principle of objectivity. Many issues related to the repatriation process were considered in a problem-chronological order, and historical-comparative and historical-systemic methods of research were used to reveal the degree of study of problems related to ethno-political conflicts in Georgia in the post-Soviet period.

Results. The first repatriates began arriving in Abkhazia in the late 1980s, when the USSR leadership significantly simplified the legislation on the rules of entry and exit to the country. Faced with many difficulties in their homeland (high cost of living, problems of housing, employment), repatriates practically did not show civil mobility there and were not involved in social and political life in the republic. At the same time, many of them, having retained dual citizenship, continued to own real estate in Turkey, received pensions and medical care. A significant number of repatriates took part in the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992–1993 [10, p. 15; 11, p. 169–170].

In the post-war years, some of the repatriates established their own businesses in Abkhazia using funds and experience gained in the diaspora. These people were mainly engaged in trade in coal, timber and scrap metal, which were transported to Turkey on sea vessels. Foodstuffs such as pepper salt, smoked cheese, tea, wine, balsam, buckwheat, corn flour, smoked meat, dried persimmon were also exported. Textile products, clothes, footwear, household goods, as well as foodstuffs like olives and olive oil, wheat, lentils, etc. were brought from Turkey. Since residence in Abkhazia was not a prerequisite for acquiring citizenship (it was open to all ethnic Abkhazians living outside the republic), the number of repatriates with Abkhazian passports grew rapidly [12, pp. 559–560].

Since the second half of the 1990s, the repatriation process has been stagnant due to the sharp deterioration of living conditions in Abkhazia as a result of the strengthening of the sanctions regime on the part of Georgia. A difficult situation of repatriates was also aggravated by the fact that in February 1995 amendments were made to the Law on Citizenship of the Russian Federation tightening the rules for obtaining Russian citizenship. As a result, economic stagnation in Abkhazia accompanied by an increased threat to the security of the republic led to an exodus of some repatriates to Turkey. Upon arrival in the diaspora, they became involved in local political life and tried to better inform Turkish society about the situation in Abkhazia. Individuals were involved in the work of the Repatriation Committee, which aimed to improve the living conditions of people who returned to the diaspora [13, pp. 132–133].

In the early 2000s, stagnation in the repatriation process was replaced by a revitalization of diaspora ties with the homeland, which caused a new influx of repatriates to Abkhazia. Compared to those who had arrived in the republic earlier, new repatriates were in a better position: for example, they enjoyed the right to settle in two or more settlements, free movement from the diaspora to the homeland and back. This created favorable conditions for establishing business in Abkhazia where post-conflict living conditions have also significantly improved. In general, however, the problem of

adaptation of repatriates in their homeland remained acute: state policy was needed to solve the everyday problems of ethnic compatriots who had arrived in the Republic.

A difficult barrier in the adaptation process was the lack of knowledge of the Abkhaz language on the part of many young repatriates. As a result, they had difficulties finding employment and setting up business in their homeland. To help solve the problems of adaptation, with the support of the World Abkhaz-Abazian Congress and the State Committee on Repatriation, the Adaptation House of Returnees was established where a language school also functioned. There they discussed the living conditions of returnees and organized courses for them to learn the Abkhazian language [14, p. 29].

Along with language problems, repatriates faced difficulties in acquiring housing (permanent or rented), finding a job, setting up their own business due to the lack of production and trade facilities. Repatriates had little understanding of local politics, their participation in the political life of Abkhazia was largely determined by the level of language skills. During elections repatriates supported different parties, but as a rule, their preferences were given to nationalist parties. Repatriates tried to understand local and regional politics in order to keep abreast of developments in the Caucasus, and after the visa regime for Turkish citizens was abolished in 2010, their mobility increased significantly. Through Internet connections, returnees followed and participated in political debates around Abkhazia, seeking to realize their rights to permanent residence in the republic through political activism.

Discussion and conclusion. Thus, repatriates from Turkey had to face many difficulties in their return to Abkhazia. Some of them who spoke Abkhazian, or had mastered it in a relatively short period of time, adapted relatively easily to local conditions. As for repatriates who did not have language skills, as well as those who did not have the means to establish a business or buy housing there, the adaptation process took longer for them. However, gradually this part of the repatriates acquired the necessary skills, established new connections, mastered forms and methods of economic management, which made it possible to fit into the local daily life. Ultimately, the new life practices, combined with the old ones acquired in the diaspora in Turkey, played an important role in defining the new boundaries of repatriates' existence, their socio-political, socio-economic and cultural anchoring in the historical homeland.

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About the Author:

Dudaiti Albert Konstantinovich, Ph.D. (Advanced Doctorate) in History, Professor, Head of the Department of General History of the North Ossetian State University, North Ossetia-Alania (44–46, Vatutina Street, Vladikavkaz, RSO-Alania, 362025, RF), [ORCID](#), adudaiti@mail.ru

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Об авторе:

Дудайти Альберт Константинович, доктор исторических наук, профессор, заведующий кафедрой всеобщей истории Северо-Осетинского государственного университета имени К. Л. Хетагурова (РФ, 362025, РСО-Алания, г. Владикавказ, ул. Ватутина, 44–46), [ORCID](#), adudaiti@mail.ru

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