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Infrastructures of belonging: cultural sustainability in the post-exile context of the Ahıska Turks

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Ahıska Turks – deported from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944 – sustain cultural continuity and reconstitute belonging under shifting post-Soviet political and institutional regimes. Drawing on published documentary collections and intergenerational oral histories (2005–2025), it analyses how language practices, ritual calendars and diaspora organizations operate as infrastructures of belonging that reproduce memory and solidarity across dispersed geographies. Conceptualizing 'citizenship-in-exile' not as a legal status but as a lived condition of cultural resilience, the article situates the Ahıska case within debates on diaspora governance and post-socialist transformations. Engaging recent discussions in Central Asian Survey on identity, informality and visibility regimes, the analysis shows how social infrastructures mediate tensions between displacement, adaptation and heritage preservation. Findings indicate that cultural sustainability emerges through the interplay of memory work, community institutions and transnational mobility, offering a concise framework for understanding belonging in post-deportation and post-Soviet contexts, with implications for future research.

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Introduction

The mass deportation of the Ahıska Turks from Georgia to Central Asia in November 1944 inaugurated a protracted history of exile that continues to reverberate across Eurasia. While the geopolitical calculus of Stalinist population transfers is well documented, the mechanisms through which this community has negotiated cultural continuity and belonging across shifting political geographies remain less systematically examined. This article addresses that gap.

Drawing on published documentary collections and intergenerational oral histories collected between 2005 and 2025, I show that cultural continuity among Ahıska Turks is co-produced by memory work and by the institutional logics of post-Soviet citizenship and mobility regimes. Belonging is not merely inherited from a traumatic past; it is

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continually re-assembled through language use, family solidarity, ritual repertoires and diaspora organizations operating within uneven legal and socio-economic landscapes. In doing so, the article contributes to debates on exile and identity in Central Asia and the Caucasus and adds empirical depth to research on the governance of diasporas and the remaking of home in post-Soviet contexts.

Building on Brubaker's notion of diaspora as a stance, Darieva's work on diasporic infrastructures and home-making, and Reeves's analysis of border subjectivities, I reconceptualize the Ahıska case as a mode of post-Soviet citizenship-in-exile – a condition in which memory work, organizational infrastructures and mobility regimes co-produce belonging across dispersed polities (Brubaker 2005; Darieva 2011; Reeves 2014).

Cultural sustainability – understood as the intergenerational preservation and transmission of values, identities and practices (Throsby 2008; UNESCO 2001) – is acutely tested by forced migration and exile, which disrupt collective memory, weaken institutions and accelerate assimilation (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014; Malkki 1995). Recent cultural-policy debates emphasize safeguarding intangible heritage, cultural rights and community participation as pillars of resilience; diaspora communities, in turn, become test cases for how belonging and transmission are negotiated across borders (Belfiore and Bennett 2008; Bennett 1995; Gray 2010).

The Ahıska Turks – deported en masse in 1944 and later dispersed across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia and the United States – offer a critical lens on these dynamics (Hasanoğlu 2015; Kolukırık 2011; Yüzbey 2008). Their deportation remains one of the most tragic and long-suppressed chapters of Soviet history; on 24 February 1994, President Boris Yeltsin publicly acknowledged these policies as 'shameful', underscoring the systemic character of Soviet-era repression (Bugay 1995, 302–303). Prior research has emphasized the historical and political dimensions of the deportation; far less attention has been paid to cultural sustainability and the policy frameworks that condition it. By analysing oral histories, intergenerational interviews and diaspora practices, I position the Ahıska Turks as a case for understanding how heritage and belonging are sustained under transnational conditions.

Against this backdrop, this article treats the 1944 deportation as a decisive rupture that set in motion long-term dispersal and the reconfiguration of communal life. The Ahıska region – today within Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti – comprised the centres of Ahıska, Adigön, Aspindza, Akhalkalaki and Bogdanovka, along with more than 200 surrounding villages (Bugay and Gonov 1998; Uravelli 2009). Labelled a 'security risk' in a strategic borderland, the Turkish-speaking population became the target of mass deportation as part of wartime homogenization policies (Bugay 1995, 165). Under State Defense Committee decree No. 6279/ss (31 July 1944), hundreds of settlements were emptied in mid-November; approximately 91,095 Ahıska Turks were sent to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, while some 7000 Armenian and Georgian households were settled in their place (Arı and Güngör 2022; Bugay and Gonov 1998, 176, 213; Devrisheva 2019; Zeyrek 2006). Of nearly 40,000 Ahıska men conscripted into the Red Army, about 25,000 were killed, while those left behind undertook forced labour on the Borjomi –Ahıska railway – immediately used for the deportation (Bugay 1995, 163–164; Zeyrek 2006).

The deportation journey itself unfolded under inhumane conditions, as vividly recalled in survivor testimonies. As one survivor (P.1) recalled:

> We were transported in cold cattle wagons full of holes … Due to unsanitary conditions, cold and hunger, many of our people perished. It was impossible to bury the dead; at each station the Russian soldiers forced us to hand over the corpses, which were simply left on the steppes.

Another participant (P.2) similarly recounted: 'We travelled for twenty-four days. In temperatures of minus thirty to forty degrees, many elderly people and children froze to death … The dead were thrown by the roadside, without shrouds or graves'. Another participant, P.4, remembered: 'In the middle of the night Russian soldiers came to our door … During the months-long journey even the little food we had ran out. Many froze or died of hunger'. These testimonies reveal not only physical displacement but also a trauma transmitted across generations.

The Ahıska deportation formed part of wider Soviet forced-migration policies during World War II; Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Karachays, Balkars, Crimean Tatars and others shared a similar fate (Bugay 1995, 164–165; Bugay 2007). Ministry of Internal Affairs records show that thousands of Caucasian soldiers were demobilized from the front and immediately deported, underscoring the logic of collective punishment. The consequences persisted into the postwar era. For instance, Taşdemir Yusufoğlu, a decorated front-line soldier, returned to an emptied village and reunited with his family only years later in Kazakhstan (Fominskaya 2002, 9). NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) records indicate that in 1946–1947 around 3180 additional individuals were relocated from Georgia (Bugay 1995, 170), embedding a 'double trauma' within collective memory.

As 'special settlers' in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Ahıska Turks faced restrictions on movement, compulsory labour and surveillance for more than a decade; access to education, housing and healthcare remained constrained. Yet, despite such limitations, the community demonstrated notable resilience in preserving language, faith, rituals and family structures. The existing literature predominantly analyses Stalin's decision in geopolitical and demographic terms (Bugay 1994, 1995, 2007) and explores migration routes, settlement patterns and legal status issues (Faigov 2020; Poyraz and Güler 2019; Zulpiharova 2022). Systematic research on cultural sustainability and identity-preservation mechanisms remains limited. Some studies highlight family structures, oral narratives and religious practices, while others stress the role of diaspora organizations (Arı and Güngör 2022; Cohen 2008; Safran 1991); a different strand emphasizes assimilation pressures, intergenerational ruptures and legal uncertainties (Assmann 2011; Safran 1991). These divergent perspectives call for an interdisciplinary approach.

Conceptual framework and literature review

Forced migration refers to the displacement of individuals or groups under coercive circumstances – such as war, political repression or persecution – rather than voluntary movement (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014, 28–31). Deportation represents a particular and intensified form of forced migration, in which states orchestrate the mass relocation of populations to distant regions as a means of demographic and political engineering (Malkki 1995, 498–502). Within this framework, the 1944 deportation of the Ahıska Turks by the Soviet Union stands as a paradigmatic case. During the final stages of the Second World War, Stalin's regime categorized the Turkish population of the Ahıska

region – strategically located along the border with Turkey – as a potential 'security threat'. The deportation was thus motivated not only by immediate wartime anxieties but also by broader geopolitical objectives and efforts to consolidate control over ethnically diverse frontier zones (Aydıngün et al. 2006; Zeyrek 2006).

To move from macro-level accounts of forced migration and exile to the everyday conditions under which displaced communities sustain social life, this article adopts an expanded understanding of infrastructure as a central analytical bridge. In this study, infrastructure is approached as a multi-layered category that encompasses material, institutional and symbolic–affective registers. Material infrastructures refer to the physical and sensory environments – association buildings, community centres, ritual objects and everyday spaces – through which cultural practices are enacted and made durable (Larkin 2013, 329–331). Institutional infrastructures involve organizational and logistical arrangements, including diaspora associations, educational initiatives and transnational support networks, that enable dispersed communities to coordinate collective life across shifting political contexts (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012, 460–462). Complementing these dimensions, symbolic and affective infrastructures capture emotional attachments, shared narratives, ritual calendars and moral grammars that bind community members together and provide continuity amid displacement (Wilson 2023, 82–84). Conceptualizing infrastructure in this expanded sense clarifies how the Ahıska Turks sustain belonging not only through formal organizational structures but also through affective atmospheres and symbolic repertoires that carry cultural meaning across generations.

In this study, the distinction between cultural sustainability, cultural resilience and heritage preservation is central to the analytical framework. Cultural sustainability refers to the long-term capacity of a community to maintain and transmit its cultural practices, values and identities across generations within evolving social settings (Soini and Birkeland 2014, 215). Cultural resilience, by contrast, highlights adaptive forms of continuity that emerge when communities reorganize cultural knowledge creatively under conditions of displacement or political and economic strain. Recent research shows that cultural heritage often becomes a resource for resilience planning in urban and translocal settings, helping communities rebuild cohesion after periods of rupture (Altay-Kaya and Yeşilbağ 2025, 78–79). Heritage preservation, meanwhile, involves more formalized, policy-driven mechanisms that safeguard tangible and intangible cultural forms through documentation, regulation and community-based custodianship (Smith 2006, 29–34). Distinguishing these concepts clarifies how the Ahıska Turks sustain continuity through a combination of everyday adaptability, intergenerational transmission and selective heritage practices.

This forced exile generated long-term socio-cultural consequences. The dispersal of the Ahıska Turks across various Soviet republics fractured their linguistic cohesion, communal ties and cultural continuity. Yet, paradoxically, the collective memory of deportation became a unifying force, transforming trauma into an enduring framework of belonging. The aspiration for return – rooted in nostalgia and intergenerational narrative – emerged as a key dimension of cultural sustainability (Cengiz and Şahin 2024).

Durkheim's notion of mechanical solidarity offers a valuable theoretical lens for interpreting the post-deportation reconstitution of communal life, referring to forms of social cohesion grounded in shared moral frameworks, collective rituals and a strong sense of sameness rather than functional differentiation (Durkheim 1984, 13–18). For the Ahıska

Turks, solidarity after deportation became both a moral bond and a survival mechanism. The preservation of family structures, the reinforcement of kinship networks and the continuation of collective rituals such as weddings, funerals and religious gatherings reinforced communal resilience. These dynamics echo broader diaspora theories: Cohen (2008, 21–36) identified collective memory and solidarity as defining characteristics of diasporas, while Safran (1991, 83–85) underscored the centrality of belonging in the endurance of dispersed communities. The Ahıska Turks' capacity to sustain identity despite geographic dispersal aligns closely with these theoretical perspectives.

Collective memory has played a pivotal role in preserving the cultural existence of the Ahıska Turks. Drawing on Assmann's theory of cultural memory, the trauma of deportation is conceptualized not merely as an individual recollection but as a shared historical experience transmitted across generations (Assmann 2011). This intergenerational transmission has been maintained through oral narratives, laments, epics and everyday practices – forms that simultaneously record and reproduce identity. Turkish-language scholarship supports this interpretation: Zeyrek (2006) demonstrated how kinship and local networks provided solidarity during migration to Türkiye, while Doğan (2023) showed how oral history serves as a primary medium for preserving memories of exile and shaping collective identity.

The Ahıska deportation also aligns with what Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004, 1–10) identified as a cultural trauma formation, wherein a community interprets a historical rupture as fundamental to its collective identity. In this framework, trauma becomes socially operative through the work of 'carrier groups' – leaders, elders, ritual specialists and community organizations – who articulate narratives of suffering and moral injury. Among the Ahıska Turks, these narratives are transmitted through family storytelling, commemorative practices and diaspora organizational networks, which together embed the deportation as a defining lens through which belonging, vulnerability and moral responsibility are interpreted. This trauma framework illuminates why displacement continues to inform social cohesion, intergenerational solidarity and diaspora activism across host states.

In this light, cultural sustainability encompasses the processes through which communities safeguard and transmit their cultural heritage, diversity and values to future generations (Throsby 2008; UNESCO 2001). It extends beyond language and traditional customs to include rituals, belief systems and modes of life. Within diasporic settings, such sustainability is achieved through family socialization, community networks, religious institutions and inter-diasporic communication channels (Akyüz 2008; Aliyeva 2015; Kaymak 2025). The Ahıska Turks exemplify how solidarity and collective memory operate as central mechanisms of cultural sustainability: oral histories and ritual practices not only preserve identity but also function as living archives that anchor the community's ongoing struggle for cultural endurance and belonging.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify the analytical use of the term diaspora in this article. Here, diaspora is not employed as an administrative or legal label imposed by Soviet or post-Soviet authorities to classify minority populations, nor does it deny the legal nativeness of second- and third-generation Ahıska Turks born in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or other host states. Rather, diaspora is used as an analytical concept to capture a historically produced condition of displacement, transgenerational memory and multisited belonging shaped by the 1944 deportation and subsequent waves of forced

migration. In this sense, the term highlights how communal life, identity and social organization continue to be oriented by a shared history of rupture and dispersal, even as individuals are locally rooted within different state contexts.

Building on the foregoing discussion of deportation, collective memory, solidarity and infrastructural practices, I use post-Soviet citizenship-in-exile to denote a situated mode of belonging that emerges when displaced populations negotiate recognition, mobility and rights across fragmenting state spaces. Brubaker's (2005) notion of diaspora as a stance offers an interpretive lens that emphasizes everyday orientations, practices and claims rather than fixed group boundaries. In the case of the Ahıska Turks, this stance emerges through routine acts of linguistic maintenance, moral obligations toward kin and the symbolic centrality of the deportation narrative, which together sustain a shared sense of dispersed community. Darieva's (2011) concept of diasporic infrastructures complements this perspective by drawing attention to the organizational, ritual and communicative arrangements through which diasporas materially and symbolically reproduce themselves across space. These infrastructures – associations, communal celebrations and transnational support networks – provide durable platforms for negotiating belonging under shifting political conditions. Reeves's (2014) analysis of bordered subjectivities further illuminates how post-Soviet bureaucratic regimes produce specific modes of identification, mobility and vulnerability. For Ahıska families navigating diverse host-state regulations, bordered subjectivity is experienced through registration systems, resettlement procedures and uneven pathways to citizenship. Taken together, these perspectives help conceptualize citizenship-in-exile as a lived condition shaped simultaneously by grassroots practices of belonging, infrastructural formations and the institutional boundaries of post-Soviet statehood.

The term *citizenship-in-exile* has appeared in research on protracted displacement and statelessness, particularly in reference to communities whose political membership is shaped by absence from the homeland and limited access to host-state rights. Previous scholarship has used the term to describe the normative and emotional attachments through which displaced groups maintain claims to political belonging despite lacking territorial presence or full legal incorporation. In this study, the concept is adapted to the Ahıska case to capture a broader sociopolitical condition: one in which communal life is organized across multiple states, legal statuses remain unstable, and membership is enacted through cultural practices, organizational participation and transnational kinship obligations rather than formal citizenship alone. By reframing citizenship as a set of lived practices, rather than solely a legal category, the concept allows us to account for how Ahıska communities sustain continuity and assert belonging across heterogeneous political environments.

Materials and methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. By integrating historical analysis, oral history techniques and field data, it examines both the collective memory surrounding the 1944 deportation and subsequent migration processes, as well as the contemporary dynamics of identity and cultural sustainability among the Ahıska Turks.

In addition, and in line with contemporary anthropological standards, I explicitly articulate a reflexive orientation to the research design, understood as a systematic awareness

of how the researcher's positionality shapes access, interpretation and knowledge production.

I therefore adopt a reflexive ethnographic stance. As a researcher engaged in Turkish-speaking academic and community networks, I occupied an intermediary position-both insider and outsider. This positionality enabled access and rapport while simultaneously requiring sustained attentiveness to interpretive authority and ethical responsibility. Guided by principles of reciprocity, reflexivity informed both data collection (interview design, consent procedures and transcription) and analysis (coding decisions, triangulation with published historical sources, and the framing of 'citizenship-in-exile'), making explicit how my situated presence conditioned what could be observed and narrated.

Most of the existing research on the Ahıska Turks has concentrated primarily on the historical dimension of the deportation (Aydıngün 2013; Aydıngün et al. 2006; Bugay 1995, 2007; Doğan 2023; Malkki 1995; Uravelli 2009). By contrast, studies explicitly addressing the sustainability of cultural identity, language and traditions remain limited. While the available works (Afanasieva et al. 2021; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015; Bayraktar 2012; Faigov 2020; Kolukırık 2011; Sereda and Homanyuk 2024; Yüzbey 2008) emphasize the decisive role of diaspora organizations and family structures in cultural transmission, they have not systematically examined these dynamics through broader analytical frameworks concerned with long-term cultural sustainability. This article addresses that gap by developing an empirically grounded analysis of cultural sustainability in diaspora, using the case of the Ahıska Turks to examine how identity, memory and organizational practices are maintained over time under conditions of displacement.

The research was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, published documentary collections, official reports and scholarly studies were examined to reconstruct the historical background of the 1944 deportation and the subsequent migration trajectories of the Ahıska Turks. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members living in Kazakhstan and Turkey in order to explore how cultural practices, identity markers and intergenerational memories are sustained under different host-state conditions.

In addition to interview data, the study draws on published archival materials and secondary historical sources – most notably Bugay (1994, 1995, 2007) and Bugay and Gonov (1998) – which compile and interpret Soviet administrative documents related to deportation and resettlement policies. Although original archival documents were consulted for verification, the analysis relies primarily on these published materials as secondary evidence that contextualizes individual narratives within broader historical and political processes.

The study group consisted of a total of 12 participants, six from Kazakhstan and six from Turkey. Participants were selected to represent different age cohorts, thereby enabling an examination of intergenerational transmission. Accordingly, five participants belonged to the first generation born in the 1930s, three to the second generation born in the 1960s and four to the third generation born in the 1980s. In this way, the sample reflected both the generational distribution and proportional representation within the community, making comparative analysis possible. The gender distribution included eight women and four men, a composition that also highlighted the significant role of

women in cultural transmission within the community. Each interview lasted approximately 1.5–2 h and was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The interview questions focused on themes such as language use, traditional rituals, family structures, diaspora organizations and perceptions of identity. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, following iterative cycles of initial coding, categorization and theme development. This approach is better suited to the study's aim of identifying patterned meanings across narratives, as it emphasizes interpretive depth rather than the quantification of content frequency. The findings were then interpreted in relation to analytical debates on cultural sustainability, social inclusion and resilience in diaspora contexts.

In addition to the recent field interviews, the study also draws on the author's long-standing oral history archive on the Ahıska Turks. This archive was compiled during extensive fieldwork conducted in 2005, 2012, 2016 and 2025, and it constitutes a rich repository of testimonies collected from different generations across various periods.

For the purposes of this research, selected interviews from the archive were incorporated. The selection was guided by the aim of tracing intergenerational cultural transmission and examining how identity, belonging and sustainability dynamics have evolved within the community. Accordingly, particular emphasis was placed on interviews with first-generation participants recounting memories of deportation, second-generation participants reflecting on post-Soviet identity and adaptation, and third-generation participants highlighting how cultural continuity is maintained in the contemporary diaspora. By integrating both the author's two decades of archival accumulation and the targeted selection of thematically relevant interviews, the study situates the intergenerational transmission of culture among the Ahıska Turks within a broader historical framework. All participants provided their informed consent. In compliance with ethical standards, only age, gender and country of residence were recorded, while personal identities were kept confidential (Table 1).

Since the study is based on in-depth interviews conducted through purposive sampling, it allows for analytic rather than statistical generalization. While manual transcription and coding ensure sensitivity to detail, they remain subject to researcher influence; therefore, triangulation and inter-coder reliability checks are recommended. Longitudinal (panel) designs, combined with repeated measures tracking language and

Table 1. Oral history sources- participants.

Participant	Generation	Birth year	Marital status	Gender	Country	Education	Interview date
P.1	First	1932	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary	4 May 2005
P.2	First	1932	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Primary	3 June 2012
P.3	First	1933	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Primary	10 July 2012
P.4	First	1930	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	Primary	5 June 2012
P.5	First	1932	Married	Female	Turkey	Primary	1 February 2016
P.6	Second	1962	Married	Male	Turkey	Secondary	17 June 2025
P.7	Second	1964	Married	Female	Kazakhstan	Secondary	12 March 2025
P.8	Second	1964	Married	Female	Turkey	Secondary	19 June 2025
P.9	Third	1982	Married	Female	Turkey	College	15 July 2025
P.10	Third	1982	Married	Female	Turkey	University	29 July 2025
P.11	Third	1980	Married	Female	Turkey	University	15 June 2025
P.12	Third	1980	Married	Male	Kazakhstan	University	14 March 2025

Source: Field research and oral history interviews conducted by the author (2005–2025).

identity indicators among younger generations, would further clarify intergenerational dynamics.

Participants

The selection of interviewees was based on two primary criteria: their direct relevance to the research topic, and their voluntary willingness to participate. In line with ethical principles, participants' names have not been disclosed; instead, anonymized codes were used in presenting the data.

Operationalization: I read organizational routines (courses, calendars, aid) as diasporic infrastructures (Darieva), language socialization as a stance-making practice (Brubaker) and ritual continuity under constraint as everyday border work (Reeves). I trace these through intergenerational narratives (P.4, P.6, P.7, P.9 –P.12), linking quotes to mechanisms (infrastructure, stance, border). See the section 'Diaspora organizations as infrastructures of safeguarding'.

Findings: mechanisms of cultural sustainability

Despite the harsh conditions faced after deportation, the Ahıska Turks developed multifaceted strategies to preserve their cultural identity and transmit it to future generations. Oral history interviews and fieldwork findings demonstrate that cultural sustainability operates through various mechanisms, including language preservation, family and communal solidarity, the maintenance of traditional rituals, diaspora organizations and educational practices.

These findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from three generations, complemented by field observations. All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and subsequently transcribed manually by the researcher. The transcripts were then examined through content analysis in order to identify recurring themes and intergenerational differences. In this process, coding and thematic categorization were informed both by the narratives themselves and by the researcher's prior field experience, familiarity with published historical materials and relevant scholarship on diaspora, memory and cultural sustainability.

This methodological approach allowed for a systematic evaluation of the qualitative data, enabling comparative insights across generations and providing a reliable basis for understanding the mechanisms through which the Ahıska Turks have sustained their cultural identity in diaspora contexts. Accordingly, this section examines the principal mechanisms of cultural sustainability identified in the data, focusing on language use, intergenerational transmission, ritual practice and organizational life.

Language preservation

Language constitutes one of the most decisive factors in safeguarding cultural identity and ensuring community survival across generations. Although dispersed across different geographies and exposed to the official languages of their host states, the Ahıska Turks attached great importance to maintaining the Turkish language, particularly in family communication and religious practices. This illustrates that language functions

not only as a medium of communication, but also as a core element of identity and belonging. As Aliyeva notes, uncertainties regarding written language and the use of multiple alphabets complicate cultural sustainability in diasporic contexts, causing fragmentation in mother-tongue use and ruptures in intergenerational transmission (Aliyeva 2015). The multilingual experience of the Ahıska Turks thus reveals the fragility of cultural continuity.

Field data illuminate this process further. First- and second-generation participants openly emphasized their efforts to sustain Turkish at home. A 63-year-old participant from Kazakhstan stated, 'I always spoke to my children in our own language, but they had to learn Russian at school. Knowing both languages became a necessity for us' (P.1). Another recalled, 'Outside, we spoke Kazakh and Russian, but at home, we always spoke our own language' (P.2). Such accounts highlight domestic communication as a key resistance mechanism.

Third-generation testimonies, however, reveal greater challenges. One participant in Kazakhstan observed, 'My children speak Kazakh and Russian. But they can only learn their mother tongue, Turkish, by speaking it at home' (P.12). Another added, 'We still use Turkish with our elders at home, but among the youth, Russian or mixed speech is more common' (P.10). These narratives underscore the growing risk of language loss among younger generations.

The findings confirm that language erosion is one of the most sensitive dimensions of cultural sustainability in diaspora settings. As the Ahıska case illustrates, community members simultaneously adapt to dominant languages in daily life while preserving Turkish within families and rituals, thus enabling the reproduction of identity. This dual process functions as both a defence against assimilation and a dynamic mechanism of cultural sustainability.

Family and social solidarity

Family structures served as a 'space of resilience' for the Ahıska Turks under conditions of exile, assuming a central role in the preservation of cultural existence. Participants' accounts demonstrate that collective events such as weddings, funerals and religious festivals reinforced social solidarity. One respondent linked oral tradition and personal loss in the following words: 'Our elders, for instance my uncle, knew many stories- Latif Shah, Mahmut, Âşık Garip. I also knew them, but after losing my two sisters, I forgot everything from crying so much' (P.2). This example shows that oral cultural transmission was not merely the transfer of knowledge, but a process intertwined with grief, memory and collective identity.

Mutual assistance within families and communities was vital in overcoming the harshest conditions of exile. Sharing food, caring for the sick and elderly, providing labour support and addressing housing shortages collectively embodied what participants often described as a spirit of 'shared destiny'. As one interviewee in Kazakhstan recalled, 'Everyone from our nation looked after each other. Whoever had a little flour or bread shared it. If a neighbour's child was freezing, we took them into our house. We survived the hardest times by helping one another' (P.4).

Extended family structures and solidarity networks not only ensured survival in everyday life but also played a decisive role in preserving cultural identity. Many participants

emphasized how elders passed down stories, songs and daily rituals to children and grandchildren. A participant in Turkey explained, 'Every Eid al-Adha, we gathered the family, retold old stories and played traditional games together. This was the bond that kept our identity alive' (P.6). Another added, 'When raising our children, we tried to teach them our traditions – from table etiquette to holiday celebrations' (P.7).

These findings align closely with diaspora scholarship, which often highlights mutual aid networks as defining features of diasporic communities. Cohen (Cohen 2008) and Safran (Safran 1991) both emphasized collective memory and solidarity as key elements of diasporas. In the Ahıska case, family and communal support mechanisms functioned not only as social safety nets, but also as fundamental pillars of cultural sustainability.

Continuation of traditional rituals

Weddings, songs, folk dances and religious practices occupied a central role in safeguarding the cultural identity of the Ahıska Turks. These rituals functioned not only as vehicles of intergenerational transmission, but also as spaces of collective healing, reinforcing psychological resilience in the aftermath of deportation. One participant from the village of Candoson, Kazakhstan, recalled, 'In the evenings, after work in the kolkhoz fields, we would gather in a house, talk at length about life back in the Caucasus, sing songs and tell tales, and plan the next day's tasks. We dreamed of returning to the homeland' (P.3). This testimony illustrates how daily practices merged with cultural memory, with rituals fostering both solidarity and hope.

Community unity was also reinforced through relationships with local populations. As one participant recalled,

> During the war, the Kazakh people themselves were half-starving. But if they had even a single spare room, they gave it to us and shared their bread. Thanks to them, we survived. We lived side by side for sixty-one years. During weddings and holidays, they always showed respect and invited us, and we never excluded them. (P.2)

Such narratives highlight how rituals have supported both internal cohesion and cross-community solidarity.

Although many religious and traditional rituals were prohibited under Communist ideology, the Ahıska Turks continued to practice them secretly. As one participant explained,

> Our religious books were taken from us. We had to practice traditions in secret. We performed prayers in closed rooms. For sacrificial rituals, we would make a small cut in the ear of the sheep, let the blood flow and later slaughter it with the intention of sacrifice, distributing the meat. Otherwise, there were heavy punishments, even imprisonment. (P.4)

This testimony underscores that rituals served as acts of resistance under repression.

While there has been a decline in ritual practices among third-generation members in the post-Soviet period, there is also evidence of renewed cultural consciousness. One participant noted,

> I had little knowledge of our traditions and religion before, but after the Soviet era, I had the chance to learn more. I could better understand the hardships our people endured. Despite all the oppression, I am grateful to our elders for keeping our culture, language and traditions alive. (P.7, P.10)

A third-generation participant in Turkey, however, pointed to difficulties: 'Young people today do not know many of the rituals, foods, customs or wedding traditions as well as previous generations. We try to maintain and pass them on as best we can' (P.9). Another explained, 'For us, funerals and weddings are not just ceremonies but occasions of solidarity that bring families and relatives together' (P.11).

In summary, the Ahıska case demonstrates that rituals function not merely as individual practices or heritage from the past, but as essential components of collective identity, social solidarity and cultural sustainability. Even under Soviet repression, secret practices reflected strong resilience, while in the post-Soviet context, rituals have reemerged as vital instruments of intergenerational transmission.

Diaspora organizations as infrastructures of safeguarding

Recent diaspora and post-Soviet scholarship has emphasized that belonging is constructed not only through symbolic representations but also through institutional and material infrastructures. Within this framework, diaspora organizations can be conceptualized not merely as vehicles of identity reproduction but as 'infrastructures of safeguarding' – assemblages that mediate between memory, cultural practice and policy (Brubaker 2005; Darieva 2011; Larkin 2013). Examples of such infrastructures include the Bursa Gürsu Ahıska Turks Cultural Association, the İzmit Ahıska Turks Cultural Center and the Antalya Ahıska Community Association in Türkiye; the Almaty Ahıska Ethnocultural Center and Taraz Ahıska Community Union in Kazakhstan; and the Dayton Ahıska Turkish Community Center and the Louisville Ahıska Turks Association in the United States. These organizations provide not only social support but also ritual spaces, educational programmes and symbolic anchors that reinforce communal belonging across host states.

In the case of the Ahıska diaspora, these infrastructures operate as moral economies, understood here as shared systems of obligation, reciprocity and ethical responsibility through which collective memory is translated into sustained organizational practice. Language courses, ritual transmission, solidarity networks and advocacy for the right of return constitute tangible programmes through which collective memory becomes organized practice. As one participant explained, 'In our association we provide language courses for the youth, teach traditional foods and handicrafts; in this way, our identity does not disappear' (P.7).

These practices resonate with Appadurai's (1996) notion of the 'production of locality', illustrating how dispersed communities reconstruct social space through everyday routines. Ahıska associations function not only as cultural archives but also as social infrastructures that stabilize the rhythm of diasporic life through ritual calendars, commemorative gatherings and intergenerational events (Larkin 2013). Participant narratives confirm this on two levels. The first concerns everyday reproduction: 'Every Eid al-Adha we gathered the family, retold old stories, played traditional games; this bond kept our identity alive' (P.6). The second reflects solidarity in times of crisis: 'When the war began, the association became not only a cultural centre but also a place of safety and refuge' (P.9).

An infrastructural perspective also reveals how these organizations mediate between structural constraints and community agency. Likewise, ritual infrastructures persisted even under periods of repression:

> Our religious books were confiscated; we had to perform prayers in closed rooms. For sacrifice, we made a small cut on the sheep's ear to let blood flow and later slaughtered it with intention and shared the meat; otherwise, there were heavy punishments, even imprisonment. (P.4)

In the post-Soviet era, rituals have re-emerged as vehicles not only of internal cohesion but also of inter-communal solidarity: 'Funerals and weddings are not merely ceremonies but occasions that bring kin and neighbours together' (P.11).

From this perspective, diaspora organizations enact safeguarding as a living process rather than a static preservation of the past. Their activities align with UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) (2003) that link local agency to global cultural-policy frameworks (UNESCO 2003; United Nations 2015). The Ahıska diaspora thus emerges not merely as a community of loss but as an institutional actor of cultural continuity. Through organizational routines, transnational networks and the routinization of memory, identity becomes materialized – embedded in association spaces, communal calendars and collective initiatives that constitute the infrastructural backbone of cultural sustainability (Brubaker 2005; Darieva 2011; Larkin 2013).

Informal education and intergenerational transmission

In the Soviet Union, schooling increasingly functioned as an instrument of Russification: from the late 1930s onward, decrees on compulsory Russian in non-Russian schools and the ideologically unified teaching of history and literature reframed minority pasts within a single Soviet narrative and narrowed the space for alternative scholarly voices (Martin 1998, 99–103; Rumyantzeva 2018, 44–48).

Informal education plays a crucial role in sustaining cultural continuity, functioning alongside – but not identical to – language transmission within families. Rather than focusing solely on linguistic practices, this dimension highlights community-led educational initiatives, religious instruction, weekend schools and peer-learning environments that reinforce shared values and moral orientations. These informal settings help consolidate the norms, obligations and affective dispositions that shape Ahıska identity across generations, particularly in contexts where formal education in heritage languages is limited. Importantly, such collective spaces establish the broader moral and cultural framework within which family-based forms of knowledge transmission subsequently take shape.

For the Ahıska Turks, this left little space for cultural expression, making oral traditions the primary vehicle of identity transmission. As one participant explained, 'I always told my children and grandchildren about Ahıska, tried to teach them. I would have wanted them to receive education in Turkish, but it never happened- it was forbidden' (P.7). This testimony highlights that cultural transmission among the Ahıska Turks functioned largely through family- and community-based mechanisms. Despite official repression, the oral transfer of language, history and traditions created both vulnerabilities and powerful forms of resistance.

The educational sphere embodied both assimilationist pressure and cultural resilience: while schools hindered Turkish transmission, families and oral traditions sustained it. Cultural sustainability emerged through five mechanisms – language, solidarity, rituals,

diaspora organizations and informal education – understood here as forms of cultural participation and heritage safeguarding directly linked to policy debates.

Findings: challenges in preserving identity

Although the Ahıska Turks developed multiple strategies to safeguard their cultural identity after the 1944 deportation, interview data show that these efforts were constrained by several interconnected challenges. These challenges operated at individual, familial and communal levels, shaping the conditions under which cultural transmission unfolded. This section examines the main challenges identified in the empirical material, focusing on generational ruptures, linguistic attrition, structural constraints in host societies and the uneven capacity of community institutions to sustain cultural continuity.

Language and education under assimilation pressures

Assimilation pressure posed a major challenge: in host societies, new languages and norms demanded adaptation, particularly in schools and workplaces. For the second generation, this reduced the space for cultural transmission within families. A participant in Turkey explained, 'I spoke to my children in our language, Turkish, but they were educated in Russian at school. Sometimes I struggled to pass down our traditions' (P.7). Another reflected on the effort to preserve language: 'We learned Kazakh and Russian on our own. Outside, we used those languages, but at home we always spoke our own' (P.2). A third-generation participant expressed the sense of multiple belonging: 'We are both Kazakhstani and Ahıskalı, but wherever we are, we feel Turkish' (P.12).

These testimonies show how the dominance of Russian and Kazakh in education and public life pushed the community toward multilingualism, while domestic use of Turkish served as a protective mechanism. Participants frequently emphasized the emotional and symbolic role of Turkish as a marker of belonging. Younger generations, however, noted decreasing opportunities to use Turkish outside the household, revealing a gradual shift in linguistic environment shaped by schooling, peer relations and work conditions.

Economic challenges

Economic difficulties also directly shaped efforts to preserve cultural identity. High unemployment, low incomes and limited resources in settlement regions restricted families' ability to devote time and resources to cultural practices. Many participants from Central Asia noted that the heavy demands of collective farm labour left little energy for cultural rituals. One participant recalled, 'We left for work before sunrise and returned after dark. With that exhaustion, we had no strength to celebrate holidays or continue old traditions. The struggle to survive came before everything else' (P.2).

These accounts show how material hardship influenced everyday rhythms of life, often limiting opportunities for communal celebrations or regular gatherings. Participants described how, during periods of severe economic strain, safeguarding cultural practices depended largely on informal, small-scale family interactions rather than larger community events.

Fragmentation of diaspora communities

The continuation of migration chains and forced dispersal across multiple geographies also weakened cultural bonds. The violent events in Uzbekistan in 1989 compelled Ahıska Turks to flee en masse, with many resettling in the Krasnodar region of Russia. This second major wave of forced migration initiated a new adaptation process and disrupted social cohesion. From 2003 onwards, increasing pressures in Russia triggered another migration wave to the United States, where many families resettled across the Atlantic. These successive displacements fragmented the diaspora and further complicated cultural transmission. A participant in Turkey described these disruptions:

> When our relatives left for America, our ties were broken. Before, we came together for weddings and holidays, but now the distance is so great that it is impossible to keep our traditions alive together. We cannot continue our language and customs as before. (P.8)

Such testimonies highlight how physical distance, restricted mobility and repeated displacement limited the possibilities for organizing communal rituals or maintaining dense kinship networks. Participants noted that, although technology partially eased communication, the embodied and ritual dimensions of culture – weddings, funerals, religious gatherings – became increasingly difficult to sustain across dispersed geographies.

Legal status issues

Legal status has posed another major obstacle to preserving cultural identity. In the post-Soviet period, unequal and often insecure access to citizenship, permanent residency or legal documentation in certain host states – most notably in the Krasnodar region of the Russian Federation during the 1990s and early 2000s – restricted opportunities for education, community organizing and participation in cultural activities. Participants emphasized that these legal constraints disproportionately affected younger generations, whose schooling and socialization unfolded under conditions of legal uncertainty. One participant noted: 'Without citizenship rights, we could neither find proper places in schools nor establish our own associations. Our children grew up among other nations, distant from their language and culture' (P.6).

Participants frequently described how uncertainty surrounding residence permits, restrictions on internal movement and barriers to property ownership shaped everyday life. These legal difficulties limited the establishment of community institutions – such as associations, cultural centres and weekend schools – that were widely regarded by participants as essential for transmitting cultural knowledge and sustaining collective identity (P.3, P.6, P.9). Families recalled that without secure legal status, even organizing communal events was perceived as risky and often remained informal or irregular.

Intergenerational differences

Finally, intergenerational differences presented another challenge. The first generation directly experienced deportation and retained vivid memories, whereas the second and third generations constructed identity largely through inherited narratives transmitted via family storytelling, commemorative conversations and ritualized recollections of the deportation within domestic and communal settings. This generational mediation led

to losses and transformations in the transmission of cultural values. A first-generation participant recounted: 'We lived through the deportation. We remember how we starved for weeks on the trains, how we were torn from our villages. At every holiday and every meal, we told our children so they would know and not forget' (P.5). A second-generation participant emphasized the limitations of inherited memory: 'We did not witness the deportation; we only learned from our elders. Their stories taught us, but the feeling is not the same for us. We try to continue our traditions, but something feels missing' (P.6). Among third-generation youth, this rupture became even more evident: 'Our language has weakened. We know some traditions only by name. Unless we hear them from our elders, we cannot learn them. We try to understand by searching the internet' (P.10).

These accounts show how cultural memory and identity evolve across generations. While the first-generation anchored identity in lived trauma, later generations encountered a more fragmented and mediated set of narratives. Participants noted that generational differences also shaped ritual participation, language use and emotional connection to homeland stories.

Discussion

The patterns identified in the previous section – ranging from linguistic pressures to legal fragility – reveal the structural conditions under which cultural sustainability is negotiated across the Ahıska diaspora. These obstacles shape the broader dynamics examined here: how diasporic infrastructures mediate belonging, how memory circulates across generations, and how post-Soviet institutional regimes intersect with family and community practices. By synthesizing these empirical insights with existing scholarship, the discussion below provides a conceptual bridge to the analytical synthesis that follows.

The findings of this study speak to recent *Central Asian Survey* debates at the intersection of identity, belonging and institutional and infrastructural formations. The special issue edited by Ismailbekova (Fawn, Kluczewska, and Korneev 2022) demonstrates how state–society interactions and border regimes are reproduced through everyday practices, rendering belonging an ongoing institutional and discursive negotiation. Research on informality and the shadow economy (Polese et al. 2023), as well as on regimes of visibility and privacy (Wilkinson 2024), further shows how diasporic life is shaped by social infrastructures and normative climates. Against this backdrop, the Ahıska case frames citizenship-in-exile as an infrastructure of belonging that links informal and institutional networks – such as associations, ritual calendars and language courses – with bordered subjectivities manifested in bureaucratic encounters and regimes of visibility. Integrating diaspora as stance (Brubaker 2005), diasporic infrastructures and home-making (Darieva 2011) and bordered subjectivities (Reeves 2014), this study shows how organizational routines and ritual calendars enact a post-Soviet citizenship-in-exile by turning memory into institutional practice, circulating rights claims through transnational networks, and configuring belonging through everyday engagements with state space.

Post-deportation practices of preservation and transmission are multilayered and context-sensitive, shaped by historical trauma and host-country political economies. This aligns with migration–displacement frameworks (Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2014) and anthropological debates on how nation-state orders reconstitute knowledge and affect in displacement (Assmann 2011; Cohen 2008; Malkki 1995; Safran 1991). Parallels

appear in other deported/diasporic communities – Crimean Tatars, Circassians and Vaynakh groups – where homeland/return imaginaries and mnemonic axes structure identity (Campana 2012; Shami 1998; Uehling 2004).

Language is pivotal yet fragile: declining use in second and third generations underscores the importance of mother-tongue learning and community-based initiatives, as well as broader legal and institutional frameworks that recognize linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism within host societies (Aliyeva 2015; Aydıngün 2013; Aydıngün et al. 2006; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015; Poyraz and Güler 2019; UNESCO 2001). In the ICH domain, weddings, religious holidays, funeral rites and child-focused ceremonies operate as key carriers of cultural consciousness across the diaspora (Akyüz 2008; Arı and Güngör 2022; Faigov 2020; Yüzbey 2008), illustrating how ritual practices contribute to the intergenerational transmission of identity and belonging.

Geographical dispersion and heterogeneous migration regimes weaken communal spaces and kin–neighbour networks, making transmission more fragile (Aliyeva 2015; Aydıngün et al. 2006; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015; Devrisheva 2019; Doğan 2023; Kolukırık 2011). Comparative literatures show similar rescalings of memory/belonging (Campana 2012; Shami 1998; Uehling 2004; Williams 2001). Community solidarity remains a key variable: diaspora organizations and routine calendars reproduce skills and belonging (Arı and Güngör 2022; Aydıngün et al. 2006; Aydıngün and Aydıngün 2015; Poyraz and Güler 2019; Zeyrek 2006). From an analytical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of cultural spaces and heritage bearers in sustaining community life under conditions of displacement (UNESCO 2001, 2003; United Nations 2015).

Intergenerational fragility persists: first-generation witnesses sustain intense narrative continuity, whereas later cohorts adopt more symbolic, selective patterns (Aydıngün 2013; Çağırkan 2017, 5–7; Devrisheva 2019; Doğan 2023; Poyraz and Güler 2019). Cohort-specific measures – extra-school mother-tongue programmes, intergenerational mentorship and digital archiving – are therefore necessary (Assmann 2011).

In sum, cultural sustainability depends on intra-community agency and the broader institutional conditions under which cultural practices are reproduced. Drawing on field evidence and the wider literature on the Ahıska Turks, this study shows that language transmission, ritual practice and community-based organization constitute interrelated mechanisms through which cultural continuity is sustained under conditions of displacement (Arı and Güngör 2022; Aydıngün 2013; Aydıngün et al. 2006; Bayraktar 2012; Doğan 2023; Faigov 2020; Kolukırık 2011; Poyraz and Güler 2019; Yüzbey 2008).

A brief comparative perspective further clarifies the analytical stakes of the Ahıska case. Similar to the Crimean Tatars, whose collective displacement and fragmented return trajectories have been extensively documented (Uehling 2004, 77–82; Williams 2001, 112–118), the Ahıska Turks navigate a diasporic landscape in which memory of deportation operates as a central moral anchor shaping aspirations for homecoming. Circassian communities likewise demonstrate how forced migration histories crystallize into transnational infrastructures of solidarity, ritual renewal and symbolic attachment to an ancestral homeland (Campana 2012, 145–148; Shami 1998, 623–628). Research on Ahıska resettlement in Georgia and the United States shows a comparable pattern: dispersed families reconstruct belonging through community organizations, ritual calendars and dense kinship networks that function as institutional and affective infrastructures in new contexts (Aydıngün et al. 2006, 19–25; Doğan 2023, 130–133; Kaymak 2025, 9–14).

When viewed alongside these cases, the Ahıska experience illustrates how displacement-driven communities mobilize shared memory, organizational structures and symbolic repertoires to sustain continuity across heterogeneous political environments.

Taken together, the findings from the final two sections show that the mechanisms sustaining Ahıska cultural life operate simultaneously at material, institutional and affective levels. Language maintenance, ritual continuity and family-based transmission anchor cultural practices in everyday routines, while diaspora organizations function as institutional infrastructures that stabilize communal life amid fragmented migration regimes. At the same time, intergenerational narratives and shared memories of displacement act as symbolic and affective infrastructures that reinforce belonging across diverse host states. These dynamics reveal that cultural sustainability among the Ahıska Turks depends on the interaction of internal agency, community-led initiatives and the broader institutional conditions under which cultural practices are reproduced. This integrated perspective provides the foundation for the policy recommendations that follow.

Conclusions

The experience of the Ahıska Turks demonstrates that exile is not merely a state of dispossession but an ongoing process of cultural reconstruction. Their endurance across diverse political and geographical settings reveals that identity and belonging are not static inheritances but are continually renegotiated through the interrelation of memory, solidarity and adaptation. Although the 1944 deportation fractured social cohesion and dispersed the community across multiple states, it also generated new forms of cultural continuity anchored in family, ritual practice and organizational life.

The findings of this study indicate that cultural sustainability in exile depends upon both communal agency and structural conditions. Post-Soviet citizenship regimes, migration policies and socio-economic inequalities define the parameters of belonging, while collective memory and intergenerational transmission provide the means through which culture persists. The resilience of oral traditions, family narratives and community institutions illustrates how displaced populations transform vulnerability into continuity.

In comparative perspective, the Ahıska case deepens our understanding of exile and diaspora within Eurasia. It invites scholars to move beyond essentialist frameworks and to view belonging as a negotiated process between state power, memory and transnational mobility. Recognizing diaspora organizations, kinship networks and informal educational initiatives as infrastructures of safeguarding may inform broader scholarly discussions on cultural governance and belonging. Ultimately, the story of the Ahıska Turks affirms that even under conditions of displacement and precarity, communities can reconstruct home, meaning and continuity through the enduring work of cultural remembrance.

While this study provides an empirically grounded analysis of cultural sustainability among the Ahıska Turks, it is limited by the scope of its qualitative sample – twelve participants interviewed in Kazakhstan and Turkey – and by its reliance on oral histories, which may involve selective recollection. Future research could extend this analysis by incorporating larger, multi-country samples, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, and adopting longitudinal designs to trace intergenerational change over

time. Comparative studies with other communities shaped by deportation, such as Crimean Tatars or Circassians, may further contextualize the Ahıska case within broader debates on cultural sustainability.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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