REEEC is very glad to welcome Ekaterine Pirtskhalava, Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Iv. Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (www.tsu.ge) in the Republic of Georgia, as our Visiting Scholar.

The main fields of her scholarly experience and professional background, including her research project “Transformation of Gender Roles and Changes in the Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks) Family in the USA,” are social psychology and sociology. Her primary research interests are in the family and family relationships as well as issues related to Muslim Meskhetians.

Who are the Meskhetian Turks or Muslim Meskhetians? Some researchers call them Meskhetian Turks, but Prof. Pirtskhalava calls them the Muslim Meskhetians because they are a Muslim people from Meskhetia (a region in southwest Georgia now called Meskhet-Javakheti). The Muslim Meskhetians (or Meskhetian Turks) refer to a local population that has historically lived in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia, near the Turkish border. They converted to Islam in the 16-17th century, during the Ottoman occupation of southwest Georgia. In the 1940s, as a result of Stalin’s social policy to clean the southern border of the Soviet Union from “undesirable peoples,” the Muslim population, predominantly comprised of the Turkish-speaking Meskhetians, were deported from the South Caucasus to Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan). Since 1944, they have been living far from their homeland – Georgia. The Muslim Meskhetians had to overcome many obstacles in order to return to their homeland. Only a small part of the population was able to return back; a significant part still resides outside Georgia. Today, repatriation of the Muslim Meskhetians to Georgia is on the Georgian government’s agenda. Therefore, Prof. Pirtskhalava emphasizes the importance of studying issues connected to the integration of the Muslim Meskhetians into the local communities.

In 2006, the U.S. government made a decision to shelter Muslim Meskhetians. Priority 2 (P-2), the designation which encompasses the Krasnodar Meskhetian Turks, is used for groups of “special humanitarian concern,” as identified by the U.S. Department of State, nongovernmental organizations, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and other experts. Within the former Soviet Union, the P-2 designation, as identified in the Lautenberg Amendment, also includes Jews, Evangelical Christians, and Ukrainian Catholic and Orthodox religious activists with close family in the U.S. Refugee processing procedures prior to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) eligibility interviews vary. In the case of the Krasnodar Meskhetian Turks, applicants are eligible to apply for the program directly (Trier, T. Khanzin, A. “The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads of Integration. Repatriation or Resettlement?” 2007).

According to data from the International Organization for Migration, as of mid-2006, over 10,000 Muslim Meskhetians immigrated from the Krasnodar Krai to the United States. They have resettled widely across the United States, with preference given to cities where local communities and resettlement agencies have the capacity and resources to accept new refugee arrivals. Out of approximately 21,000 applications, nearly 15,000 individuals in total will be eligible for refugee status and will likely immigrate during the life of the program. As of part of the population was able to return back; a significant part still resides outside Georgia. Today, repatriation of the Muslim Meskhetians to Georgia is on the Georgian government's agenda. Therefore, Prof. Pirtskhalava emphasizes the importance of studying issues connected to the integration of the Muslim Meskhetians into the local communities.
mid-June 2006, approximately 9,000 Meskhetian Turks have been resettled in 33 states. The District of Columbia, Pennsylvania (785 individuals) and Georgia (623) have hosted the largest numbers. Sizable populations are also found in Washington (590), Illinois (508), Kentucky (499), Arizona (497), Idaho (471), Texas (417), Virginia (417), New York (394), and Colorado (365) (Koriouchkina, E & Swerdlow, S. (2007)). The number is supposedly much bigger nowadays, but the data is not available at the moment. According to some researchers, the Muslim Meskhetians continually change their place of residence to try to find better and cheaper living conditions.

Prof. Pirtskhalava’s interest in the Muslim Meskhetians first started in 2004, when she participated in the study “Meskhetian Turks Integration, Repatriation, Emigration,” implemented by the European Center of Minority Issues (ECMI), supported by the Volkswagen Foundation, and carried out in Georgia. Similar studies have been held in the other eight countries where Muslim Meskhetians were deported and currently live: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Turkey and the USA. Within this project’s framework, her duties and responsibilities included, but were not limited to, living with families of Muslim Meskhetians, observing them, talking to them, preparing diaries and writing notes from her observations. In short, her goal was to know more about the Muslim Meskhetians, study their lifestyle and values, and understand them better.

After becoming interested in the issues related to the Muslim Meskhetians, she began doing her own research on them. She found out that they have been studied only sporadically. The available studies primarily focused on their national identity and historical origin.

In 2006, Prof. Pirtskhalava had the opportunity to work on the issues of the Muslim Meskhetians. As a fellow of the H. Boll Foundation, she was one of the participants in the research project “Women’s Personal Histories and Historical Memory.” The goal of the research was to study Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim women living in Georgia (Guria, Imereti and Meskhet-Javakheti regions) who witnessed deportations of Muslim Meskhetians. After that, her interest on the Muslim Meskhetians increased. She then decided to apply to the Carnegie Fellowship Program to continue her study interests, which included the immigration and emigration issues of the Muslim population. A description of her research results is in her report “Meskhetian Turks (Muslim Meskhetians) in the USA and Georgia – Integration or Separation: similarities and differences in a process of adaptation.”

When people migrate from one nation or culture to another, they carry their knowledge and expressions of distress with them. On settling down in the new culture, their cultural identity is likely to change and that encourages a degree of belonging; they also attempt to assimilate or be bicultural (Buhrga, D. 2004). Prof. Pirtskhalava’s interest in this research is the act of migration and its impact on relationships in the family, especially from a gender perspective.

Currently, her main research interests are to study the impact of new social and economic environments on Muslim Meskhetians, and to identify new challenges and how they reflect on their family lives, specifically on family structure, gender roles within the family, the decision-making structure and power divisions. Her interest towards family-related issues
started earlier in her scholarly career than her interest towards Muslim Meskhetians. She has been studying issues related to the family and family relationships since 1997. In 2005, she was awarded the H. Boll Foundation (South Caucasus Regional Office Heinrich Boll Foundation) Scholarship for conducting the study “Transformation of Gender Roles and Change Family Power Structure in Georgian families.” Her doctoral dissertation, entitled “Peculiarities of Mutual Perception of the Family Members” and completed in 2009, also analyzed family relationships.

As an H. Boll Foundation fellow, Prof. Pirtskhalava participated in the 2006 International Conference "East-West Migration: Problems, Programs and Policies" in Florence, Italy, where she met Cynthia Buckley, now Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. At that time, she was mostly interested in social and economic issues related to women's labor migration. In 2012, they met again at the Association for the Study of Nationalities (ASN) conference at Columbia University, and made plans for future collaboration. She is glad to work with Professor Cynthia Buckley here at the University of Illinois.

Prof. Pirtskhalava’s aim is to become familiar with the best practices of scholarly research dealing with migration issues, and to work on new courses for the students of Applied Social Psychology in the Faculty of Social and Political Science at Tbilisi State University. These courses will consist of such topics as theories of migration; remittances and development; diaspora; gender and migration; assimilation and migration; migration and influence of environment. The primary goal of her research project is to carry out an analysis of the American Muslim Meskhetians' family. Participants in her project “Transformation of Gender Roles and Changes in the Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks) Family in the USA” will be families of Meskhetian Turks living in the United States. The respondents will be interviewed from a pool of 508 Muslim Meskhetians who have settled in Illinois.