

## Challenges of Diversity in Turkish Politics: Circassians

Ayhan Kaya / Istanbul Bilgi University

Turkey is a multi-ethnic and multi-denominational country with a republican tradition based on a constitution underlining the values of equality, freedom, and secularism. However, Turkey faces various problems such as the right to be different, and the lack of equal access to education. In this regard, Turkey has a very intricate history with regard to the culture of *tolerance*. The Ottoman *millet* system praised the act of tolerance during the heydays of the Ottoman Empire, while the nationalist rhetoric promoted a homogeneous nation based on Sunni-Muslim-Turkish elements.

This research investigates the way the regime of tolerance has been implemented in Turkey as far as the political participation of the Circassians is concerned since the late nineteenth century. The work first scrutinizes the political and cultural claims raised by the Circassians, and then explores which claims have so far been tolerated by the state, what political practices are considered to be tolerant, or intolerant, and what values/norms are considered to promote, or undermine, tolerance in Turkish political life.

Today, it is estimated that there are around 2.5 million Circassian-origin inhabitants residing in Turkey with quite a few diverse sub-identities, such as Adygei, Kabartay, Abkhaz, Ubikh and Chechen. Escaping from the Russian atrocities in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Circassians were welcome by the Ottoman Empire to settle in different parts of the Empire ranging from the Balkans, to the Central and Eastern Anatolia, and to the Middle East. It is stated that the Ottomans instrumentally used the Circassians against the centrifugal minority nationalisms challenging the unity of the Empire such as the Armenian, Greek, Kurdish, Arab nationalisms. The linkages between the Circassian communities and their counterparts in the homeland (North Caucasus: Adygei, Kabartay-Balkar, and Karacay-Cherkesk Republics in the Russian Federation) have increased remarkably since the dissolution of the USSR.

The common belief in Turkey concerning the Circassians is that they are more privileged than the other ethnic groups. This belief may be correct to a certain extent, however research shows that the Circassians have also been subject to various exclusionary acts during the nation-building process. Hence, the basic premise of this research is that Circassians have been discriminated by the Turkish state in political, social,



Circassians in Exile (1864)

economic and cultural spheres of everyday life despite their strong national identification with Turkey as their nation state. The fact that the voices of the Circassians have not been heard so far in public space reflects to some extent the power of both the formal and the popular majority nationalism to which they have been subjected.

## Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

### Circassian Claims to Equal Citizenship in Turkey:

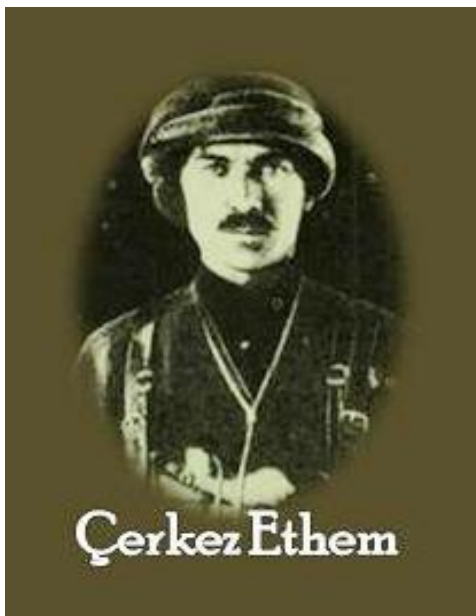
#### Institutionalizing Political Participation

Despite being a ‘constitutive element’ of the Turkish nation, the Circassians became subject to various discriminatory policies during the nation-building process, especially after the 1930s when the specter of Fascism and National Socialism was rampant in Europe. In the current Turkish political context, the Circassians, who have been mobilized along with other ethno-cultural claimants such as Kurds, Alevis, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Lazis, and Arabs, protest against the suppressive and discriminatory policies and practices of the Turkish Republic. By mobilizing through ethno-cultural associations, protests, conferences and campaigns, the Circassians aspire to be one of the driving forces of the democratization process whereby they vocalize their claims for the elimination of discrimination against ethnic minorities, and for respect for individual rights as well as cultural rights. Although the political mobilization of Circassians contributes to the democratic consolidation of Turkey, the Circassians cannot yet raise their voices through legitimate parliamentary channels as much as they wish to.

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Since the deepening of the European integration process in the early 2000s, the Circassians have become more vocal in raising their claims to the recognition of their right to education in their mother tongue, recognition of their ethno-cultural identity, their right to

dual citizenship with the Russian Federation, recognition of the contribution to the foundation of the Republic made by the politicians, military officers and bureaucrats of Caucasus origin, and the removal of the descriptions of *Çerkes Ethem* as a “traitor” from school textbooks. Ethem was described as a “traitor” by the Grand National Assembly led by Mustafa Kemal, despite his great contribution to the Turkish War of Independence, suppressing revolts in both the Marmara and Central Anatolia regions (1919-1920) in which his co-ethnic Circassians were heavily involved.



(Circassian) Ethem Bey

This study finds that the current state policies generated to respond to the Circassian claims with regard to the broadcasting in Adygei language, erasing the stereotypical statements in the school text books, and politicization of Circassian identity cannot be considered as a discourse and practice of *respect* and *recognition*. On the contrary, the policies of the contemporary government (Justice and Development Party, AKP) spring from a discourse of toleration towards the Circassians, who are actually in search of constitutional citizenship, equality and respect with regard to their ethno-cultural and linguistic differences.

The study also reveals that cultural and folkloric forms of representations demonstrated by ethno-cultural minorities are tolerated by the Turkish state. In other words, the state tolerates ethno-cultural associations when they organize folkloric festivals, concerts, cultural activities and publications. It is assumed that such cultural-based activities demonstrate the multicultural nature of Anatolia. However, the state actors are not yet tolerant of the politicization of minority claims, as in the case of the Circassians. Intolerance of the state actors towards the politicization of ethno-cultural minority claims is mainly based on the rationale of the 1980 military coup, which brought about a clear-cut

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distinction between what is cultural and what is political. The Turkish political culture is still overshadowed by the legacy of the 1980 coup as far as political claims are raised by ethno-cultural minorities. Because the state perceives their political claims as threats posed against the national security, but not as a quest of justice and equality.

## Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

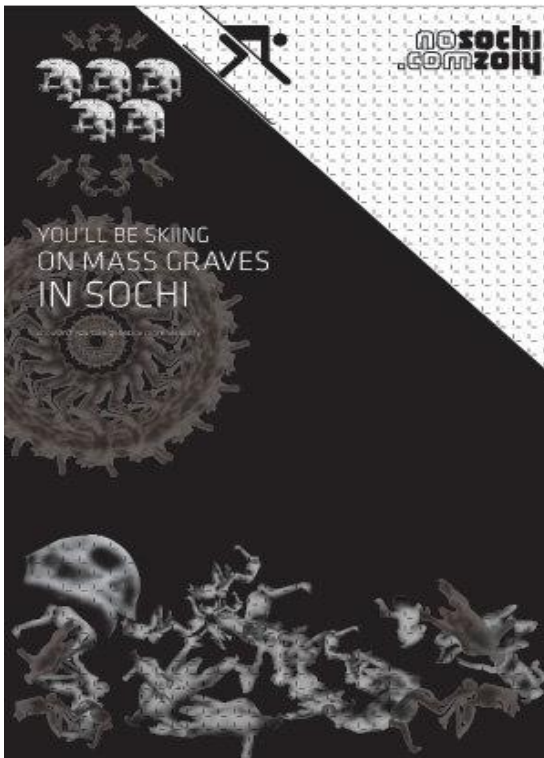
Circassians constitute an organized segment of the Turkish society, and they are mobilized by means of various ethno-cultural associations, political organizations and websites. Until the early 2000s, they used to express their identity through folkloric forms of representation, which have always been considered by the majority of the Turkish society as a distinctive feature of the “rich Anatolian culture”. However, they were also aware of the fact that their claims to make their cultural and political identities public were not tolerated at all by the Turkish state, as they have been subject to the homogenizing policies of the state through several different forms of technologies of citizenship, starting with the nationalist curriculum.

The Europeanization process of Turkey has also prompted the Circassians to publicly express their political and cultural claims rather than only being limited to the vocalization of claims related to strengthening links with their homeland, which have been mostly tolerated by the state and the majority society. On the other hand, new societal and political expectations have risen with regard to the formation of a democratic constitution, as opposed to the 1982 constitution bearing the legacy of the military coup of 1980. Several different Circassian-origin groups organized along ethno-cultural, religious, ideological and generational lines have lately become quite vocal in raising their projections and expectations for a new constitution. KAFFED and Young Circassians are just two of these groups. Circassians concentrate on the recognition of their right to education in the mother tongue, recognition of their ethno-cultural identity, the right to dual citizenship,

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recognition of their contribution to the foundation of the Turkish Republic, and removal of descriptions of *Çerkes Ethem* as a “traitor” (*hain*) from school textbooks.

The study has revealed that cultural and folkloric forms of representations demonstrated by ethno-cultural minorities are tolerated by the state institutions in Turkey. However, the state actors are not yet tolerant towards the politicization of minority claims as in the case of the Circassians, who have been subject to a political isolation since the establishment of the Republic. It seems that the state actors as well as the majority society become tolerant *vis-à-vis* the minorities in times of prosperity when national pride is stronger than usual. However, tolerance becomes very minimal in times of crisis, when parochial nationalism is embraced by the majority society.



<http://www.nosochi2014.com>

Transnational connections and global communication channels have also shaped the ways in which Circassian diaspora have recently started to raise their claims in a way that transcends the hegemonic power of their countries of settlement such as Turkey. Circassians no longer want to be recognized by the Turkish state only as individuals, but also as a collective group. It was also revealed that transnationalization of the social movements among Circassians impact the ways in which their claims are recently being raised in a manner that challenges the traditional patriarchal structure of the Circassian communities.



## Key Messages for Policy Makers

**1. Tolerance vis-a-vis Circassians in politics** is not being discussed with reference to the right to difference. Homogenizing regimes of nation-state have so far been in denial of ethno-cultural differences.

→ Policy makers should openly discuss about the fact that **Turkish society is composed of various ethnic, cultural and religious groups.**

→ **Generating a debate on the right to difference** could contribute to the generation of a public understanding, which does not see any problem in raising the reality of ethno-cultural diversity in public space.

→ It could also contribute to the **de-securitization of ethno-cultural diversity** by highlighting the normality of diversity, which is a historical phenomenon peculiar to Anatolia.

**2. Education in primary and secondary schools promotes the trinity of Sunni-Islam-Turkish identity** at the expense of disrupting social cohesion and silencing those who do not fit into the officially designed Turkish national identity (Sunni-Muslim-Turk).

→ **Curriculum of the history courses should be changed**, and should include information recognizing the contribution of the Circassians to the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Descriptions of *Çerkes Ethem* portraying him as a “traitor” (*hain*) should also be removed from school textbooks.

→ Circassians should be granted the **right to education in their mother tongue.**

**3. Circassians have become more vocal in raising their claims to their right to dual citizenship** due to the fact that they are becoming more and more affiliated with both Turkey and the North Caucasus.

→ Policy makers should introduce **the right to dual citizenship** for the Circassians together with the Russian Federation.

→ Policy makers should refer not only to tolerance (*hosgörü*) in settling the cultural conflicts but also give credit to the notions of **respect, recognition, pluralism, equality and justice** in order to create a cohesive society in a different fashion from the Ottoman culture of tolerance, which was not egalitarian.

## Methodology

**Data Collection:** This study undertakes a textual discourse analysis of various policy documents, public statements, newspaper articles, NGO reports, academic works, blogs and websites regarding Circassian political participation. In addition, some in-depth interviews were held with the community leaders of the Circassian diaspora and executive members of their associations who are involved in the public debates and initiatives with regard to the recent constitutional changes and other legal arrangements regarding the recognition of political and cultural rights of ethno-cultural minorities. I also made active participant observations in the meetings of various Circassian associations engaged in preparing their suggestions for the new constitution.

**In-depth Interviews:** Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with the community leaders and executive members of the Circassians associations. Most of the interviews were conducted in Istanbul, while some of them were held in Ankara with the leading members of Circassian associations between December 2011 and January 2012. Two complementary interviews were conducted in April 2012.

**Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** The data collected through the interviews were evaluated on the basis of the interlocutors' reflections on some common denominators such as tolerance, Europeanization, political participation, democracy, citizenship diversity and transnational space. These interviews were analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method. CDA is a method of discourse analysis focusing on the investigation of the relations between discourse and social/cultural developments in everyday life. It views discursive practices as an important form of social practice contributing to the constitution of the social and cultural world including social identities and relations.

## Project Identity

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|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Acronym:</b>            | ACCEPT PLURALISM  |
| <b>Title:</b>              | Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe  |
| <b>Short Description:</b>  | <p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p> |
| <b>Website:</b>            | <a href="http://www.accept-pluralism.eu">www.accept-pluralism.eu</a>  |
| <b>Duration:</b>           | March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)   |
| <b>Funding Scheme:</b>     | Small and medium-scale collaborative project  |
| <b>EU contribution:</b>    | 2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837  |
| <b>Consortium:</b>         | 19 partners (15 countries)  |
| <b>Coordinator:</b>        | European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)  |
| <b>Person Responsible:</b> | Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou  |
| <b>EC officer:</b>         | Ms Louisa Anastopoulou, Project Officer   |