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Circassian Claims to Equal Citizenship in Turkey: Institutionalizing Political Participation

Ayhan Kaya
Istanbul Bilgi University

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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

Circassian Claims to Equal Citizenship in Turkey: Institutionalizing Political Participation

AYHAN KAYA

ISTANBUL BILGI UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



İSTANBUL BİLGİ UNIVERSITY
European Institute

**Work Package 4 – National Case Studies of
Challenges to Tolerance in Political Life**

**D4.1 Final Country Reports on Concepts and
Practices of Tolerance Addressing Cultural
Diversity in Political Life**

Ayhan Kaya

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Ayhan Kaya is a Professor of Political Science and Jean Monnet Chair at the Department of International Relations, and the Director of the European Institute at the İstanbul Bilgi University.

Contact Details

Istanbul Bilgi University, European Institute
Dolapdere Campus, Kurtuluş Deresi Cad. No:47
34440 Dolapdere / İstanbul, Turkey

Tel. +90.212.3115306, Fax. +90.212.2508748
ayhan.kaya@bilgi.edu.tr
<http://eu.bilgi.edu.tr>, <http://www.bilgi.edu.tr>

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Executive Summary

This study 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 paper 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.

Circassians embody one of the largest ethno-cultural minorities living in Turkey. Though they are not legally defined as a minority like the non-Muslim minorities (Jews, Greek-Rums, and Armenians), sociologically and anthropologically they constitute a minority. So far, they have not been considered by the majority society to be facing any major obstacle since their arrival in Anatolia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, recent studies carried out in Turkey demonstrate that it is not only the non-Muslims, Kurds and Alevis who have been subject to a kind of structural exclusion with regard to having equal access to political and cultural rights, but also that the Circassians have experienced discriminatory acts of the state and the majority society.

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 in the nation-building process. Hence, the basic premise of this study is that Circassians have been exposed to some acts of discrimination by the Turkish state, and that while having a strong orientation towards their homeland, most of the Circassian population in Turkey still feel themselves to be guests. 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.

Despite being a ‘constitutive element’ of the Turkish nation, the Circassians became subject to various discriminatory policies in the nation-building process, especially after the 1930s when the spectre 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, protest against the suppressive and discriminatory policies and practices implemented by the state throughout the history of the Republic. By mobilizing through ethno-cultural associations, protests, conferences and campaigns, along with the other cultural minorities 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. Therefore, although the political mobilization of Circassians contributes to the democratic consolidation of Turkey, the Circassians cannot yet raise their voices through legitimate political channels as much as they wish to. Rather, the Circassian challenge *vis-à-vis* the nation-state is predominantly handled by government policies making a specific reference to all-encompassing principles and concepts, such as constitutional citizenship, equal citizenship rights, and respect and recognition for cultural differences.

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, 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. Circassian claims for constitutional citizenship, recognition and respect, along with the government’s initiative for constitutional reform and legal arrangements to secure political and cultural rights, can be categorized as a good example of accommodation of the ethno-cultural diversity challenge regarding tolerance in political life.

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.

This study finds that the current state policies generated to respond to the Circassian claims 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 differences. The study also reveals that cultural and folkloric forms of representations demonstrated by ethno-cultural minorities are tolerated by the Turkish state. However, the state actors are not yet tolerant of the politicization of minority claims, as in the case of the Circassians.

One of the important findings of this study is that the Circassians have recently discovered the power of transnationalizing their cause in order to put pressure on the Turkish state to extend political and cultural rights to the Circassians. The European Parliament and the Council of Europe have become important venues for the Circassian diaspora to express their concerns on the international platform. Transnational connections and global communication channels have shaped the ways in which the 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 are no longer content with the ways in which they are perceived by the Turkish state. They want to be recognized by the Turkish state as a collective group, not only as individuals. The research also reveals that the transnationalization of the Circassian social movements and the use of the social media impact the ways in which their claims are currently being raised in a way that challenges the traditional patriarchal structure of the Circassian communities.

Keywords: Circassians, diaspora, Turkey, political participation, democratization, European integration, citizenship, transnational space, tolerance

1. Introduction

This study aims to investigate the meaning and practices of tolerance when it comes to the issues of political participation of the Circassians (*Çerkes* in Turkish) residing in Turkey since the late nineteenth century. It will scrutinize the political and cultural claims raised by the Circassians. The work will then explore which claims have so far been tolerated by the state institutions, 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. Furthermore, the research will also study how the embodiment of tolerance in political norms and practices relates to concepts such as multiculturalism, respect, recognition, pluralism and transnationalism.

The contemporary ethnic and cultural resurgence in the Circassian diaspora does not necessarily correspond to an ethno-cultural essentialism generated by the Circassians living in exile. Despite the fact that Circassians are Sunni Muslims who were given the opportunity by the Sublime Porte (Istanbul) to flee to Anatolia, the Balkans and the Middle East upon the Russian atrocities that began in the mid nineteenth century, Circassians have always felt themselves to be guests in Turkey (Pinson, 1972). Furthermore, they were convinced at the very beginning of the Kemalist Revolution in the early 1920s that they were one of the constitutive elements of the newly-established Turkish nation, but they have been subject since the mid 1930s to various forms of political, social and cultural acts of exclusion that accompanied the racialization and ethnicization of the Turkish nation *vis-à-vis* not only non-Muslims but also non-Sunni and non-Turkish elements of the Muslim-origin population.

When ethno-cultural and religious minorities are not permitted by the dominant political and legal structure to express their claims through legitimate political institutions such as parliament and political parties, these groups are then inclined to produce a *politics of identity* by highlighting their cultural, ethnic and religious particularities (Macintyre, 1971). 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. The linkages between these communities and their counterparts in the homeland (North Caucasus: Adygei, Kabartay-Balkar, and Karacay-Cerkesk Republics in the Russian Federation) have increased remarkably since the dissolution of the USSR.

After being subject to a long period of structural, political and social-economic exclusion, Circassians have become outspoken in the aftermath of the Helsinki Summit of the European Union in December 1999 when Turkey was given the right to be a candidate for the Union. Their vocal political participation was interrupted after 2005 when the democratization and Europeanization process in Turkey was hijacked by parochial Turkish nationalism and Kurdish minority nationalism. The period between 2005 and 2012 corresponds to an interval when minorities were silenced by the hegemonic discourse of Turkish nationalism. Turkish politics has been through a tremendous change since the beginning of the accession negotiations in December 2005.

The landmarks of this change are as follows: the assassination of the Armenian origin journalist Hrant Dink in 2007¹, the failure of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to incorporate the Kurds and the Alevites, the constitutional change to lift the headscarf ban in public institutions, the Constitutional Court's rejection of the lifting of the headscarf ban, the prosecution of the AKP with the aim of closing the party down, and the *Ergenekon* case (a paramilitary plot). All these landmarks

¹ Hrant Dink was a prominent journalist of Armenian origin, who was assassinated on 19 January 2007. He had earlier been sentenced to six months' conditional imprisonment on the charge of 'insulting Turkish national identity'. In an article published in early 2004, Dink had called for Armenians to "renounce the hatred towards the Turks that poisons their blood". Consequently, protests ensued under the mottos "We are all Hrant Dink" and "We are all Armenians", which were employed by Armenians and Turks. The media paid specific attention to these protests. Subsequently, the Armenian community's presence in the political and social spheres became more visible. See Kaya (2009).

seem to reveal that the AKP leadership has so far instrumentalised the European cause in a way that has led the liberals and EU circles to question the AKP's commitment to the European Union. However, prior to the constitutional Referendum in late 2010, minorities had become outspoken again with the intention of being more attentive to the idea of creating a completely new and democratic constitution to be prepared in the new parliament to summon after the general elections of 12 June 2011.² This research reveals that the Circassians have become very much engaged in this process.

This case is also very relevant to measure the impact of the transnational communities on the democratization process of Turkey along with the European integration process. Circassians have also recently become very active at the European level, making their voices heard in Turkey through the European Parliament and other relevant circles such as the Council of Europe. Circassian associations' claims concentrate on the recognition of their right to education in the mother tongue, recognition of their ethno-cultural identity, the right to dual citizenship, recognition of their contribution to the foundation of the Republic by politicians, military officers and bureaucrats of Caucasus origin, and removal of descriptions of *Çerkes Ethem*³ as a "traitor" (*hain*) 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 claims for constitutional citizenship, recognition and respect, and the government's initiative for a constitutional reform and legal arrangements to secure cultural rights can be categorized as a good example of accommodation of the ethno-cultural diversity challenge with reference to tolerance in political life. Since the founding principles of the Turkish Republic do not recognize politics of identity based on ethno-cultural differences, the Kemalist state elite attempted to incorporate ethnic minorities, including Circassians, Kurds and Alevis, into the political space by maintaining their status as 'constitutive elements'. This work argues that the current state policies employed to respond to the Circassian claims 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) can be perceived as loaded with a discourse of toleration towards the Circassians, who are actually in search of constitutional citizenship, equality and respect with regard to their ethno-cultural differences.

2. Methodology

This study makes use of policy documents, public statements, newspaper articles, NGO reports, academic works, blogs and websites on which a textual discourse analysis of the Circassian political participation is instigated. Besides the textual discourse analysis, twelve 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 constitutional changes and other legal arrangements to raise an awareness of recognition and respect for ethno-cultural diversity in Turkey. In addition to analyzing the secondary literature, I also investigated the official documents to reveal the ways in which ethno-cultural minorities have been defined by the Turkish state. Additionally, the manuscripts prepared by different Circassian groups depicting their proposals for the new constitution have also been analyzed.

The fieldwork was conducted between December 2011 and late January 2012. I conducted twelve semi-structured qualitative interviews with the community leaders. Most of the interviews were conducted in Istanbul and Ankara, where the Circassian associations are very active. As someone working on the Circassian diaspora for the last ten years, I have been in touch with the members of the

² For a detailed analysis of this process, see Yılmaz (2011).

³ For more detailed information about *Çerkes Ethem* see footnote 10.

community residing all around Turkey. This has given me the chance to follow the changes in their political orientations, expectations and manoeuvres. This is why it was enough to conduct around twelve in-depth interviews. In addition, I also made active participant observations in the meetings of various Circassian associations engaged in preparing their suggestions for the new constitution.

The data collected through the interviews were evaluated on the basis of the interlocutors' reflections on some common denominators, such as tolerance, pluralism, political participation, political representation, respect, identity and transnational linkages. These interviews were analyzed using the discourse analysis method (Wodak et al., 1999; and Wodak, 2002; 2010). Discourse analysis focuses 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.

3. Global and Local Political Context: Growing Euroscepticism and Nationalism

Despite all the reforms and good will, the public in the EU countries remained unconvinced concerning prospective Turkish membership. For instance, the Eurobarometer 69 (November 2008) public surveys indicated that only 31 percent of the European public supports Turkey's entry into the Union, while 55 percent are against. It is needless to emphasize that the decisions made by the EU countries concerning Turkey's membership have had a strong impact on the democratization process in all walks of life within the country. Since the military coup in 1980, Turkey has never been so politically polarized. Especially since 1999, the main fault-line dividing Turkey in all spheres of life has been the EU debate. The debate has taken place between pro-Europeans (liberals, social democrats, moderate Muslims, ethno-cultural and non-Muslim minorities) and Eurosceptics (nationalist right, nationalist left, patriots, Kemalists and fundamentalist Islamist groups). One should note that every time any negative or pessimistic statement has been made in EU circles or by individual EU countries, it has strengthened the position of the Eurosceptics. The debates on Cyprus, the Armenian 'massacre'/'genocide'/'deportation', Islamophobia, Kemalist values, decentralization and devolution have always reinforced the position of the Eurosceptics in one way or another.⁴

Euroscepticism, nationalism and parochialism in Turkey have been triggered by popular disapproval of the American occupation of Iraq, limitations on national sovereignty posed by the EU integration, the wave of feeling aroused by the ninetieth anniversary of the Armenian 'deportation'/'genocide' among the Armenian diaspora (2005), the perceived risk that Turkey would recognise Southern Cyprus for the sake of European integration, anti-Turkish public opinion in the EU countries (e.g. France and Austria) instigated by conservative elements, and Israel's attacks on Lebanon in 2006. All these external factors were strong enough to revive a Eurosceptical and Occidental discourse in Turkey. On the other hand, some internal developments also played a role in triggering this parochial reaction. For instance, the summer of 2005 was marked by debates about the sale of the country, piece by piece, in the form of real estate to foreigners, especially Israelis and Syrians,. The Constitutional Court subsequently issued a decree banning the sale of real estate to foreigners. It did not then take long for the pro-Islamist Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) and similar groups to make a correlation between the sale of real estate to foreigners and the 'sale of the country' or the so-called "Second Treaty of Sèvres".⁵ This is why many Turks, demoralised by poverty, insecurity, unequal political representation, uncertainty and ambiguity about the future, could not resist drifting back into the

⁴ For a detailed account of the Eurosceptics see Güneş-Ayata (2003), Bilgin (2005).

⁵ The Treaty of Sèvres (10 August 1920) was the peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Allies at the end of World War I. The Treaty was designed to colonize the remaining boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. In the end, the Treaty was not implemented, but always remained as a tool to be used by Turkish nationalists obsessed by the fear of the partition of the country and the nation.

‘Sèvres syndrome’, i.e., the perception that they are surrounded by enemies attempting the destruction of the Turkish state (Öniş, 2004: 12).

Debates and even offensive disputes took place within the framework of the assessments of the Progress Report before the EU summit of 17 December 2005, which identified the Kurds and the Alevi as ‘minorities,’ and the vicious public debates revolving around the critical report of the Human Rights Commission delegated by the Office of the Turkish Prime Minister brought the discourse of ‘external enemies trying to divide our country’ to the forefront once more.⁶ It is possible to say that the concept of ‘minority’ that is occasionally used in the EU Progress Report to identify the Kurds and the Alevi was misunderstood by the public. Not only were non-Alevi and non-Kurds attracted by the nationalist, parochial and Eurosceptical discourse, but the Alevi and Kurds also rejected their “alleged minority status”, and they underlined “their being a constitutive element of the Republic”.

The latest general elections held in July 2011 consolidated the power of the AKP with a landslide victory of more than 50 percent of the vote. Economic prosperity, growing Turkish Lira nationalism, strong political determination against the traditional legacy of the Turkish army, becoming a soft power in the region, developing friendly relations with the Middle Eastern countries, Caucasus, Russia and North African countries, creating a political climate to receive the claims of several different ethno-cultural groups in the process of preparing a new constitution and similar factors were decisive in the consolidation of the AKP’s power in Turkey. Circassians’ claims should then be analyzed within the parameters of the kind of global and local context summarized above. The question is whether the changing Turkish state apparatus is going to allow Circassians as a community to raise their claims, or whether it is going to go on allowing them to raise their claims as individuals only.

4. General Outlook of the Circassian Diaspora in Turkey

Circassians constitute one of the largest ethnic groups living in Turkey. They were not, hitherto, considered by the majority society to be facing any major obstacle since their arrival in Anatolia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. However, recent studies carried out in Turkey demonstrate that it is not only the non-Muslims, Kurds and Alevi who were subject to a kind of structural exclusion with regard to having equal access to political and cultural rights. 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, but there is not enough scientific data to confirm such a belief. Scientific research indicates that Circassians have also been subject to various exclusionary acts in the nation-building process, the details of which will be given below (Bilmez, 2011; Şener, 2001; Ülker, 2007; Kaya, 2004, 2005) . Hence, the basic premise of this study is that Circassians have been exposed to some acts of discrimination by the Turkish state, and that while having a strong orientation towards their homeland, most of the Circassian population in Turkey still feel themselves to be guests. The fact that the voices of the Circassians have not been heard so far in the public space reflects to some extent the power of both the formal and popular-majority nationalism to which they have been subjected.

⁶ The Human Rights Commission appointed by the Office of the Turkish Prime Minister was composed of prominent Turkish scholars, led by İbrahim Kaboğlu, a professor of law, and gave a critical view of the contemporary human rights record of Turkey. The Commission resigned on 7 February 2005. İbrahim Kaboğlu stated at a press conference that: “We weren’t pushed out for neglecting our work, we were pushed out for performing our work properly. Some circles reacted negatively when we made a certain decision or became angry when we proposed something they did not like” (*Turkish Daily News*, 8 February 2005).

Map 1: Circassians Migration Routes in Exile



The Ottoman government faced immediate problems in integrating its new subjects, along with the Crimean Tatars and Nogai who preceded them and the Muslims from the Balkans who followed. Nevertheless, these newcomers constituted a valuable source of human capital for a country that had been ravaged by successive wars, economically impoverished and increasingly overwhelmed by separatist movements in the Balkans, the Middle East and southeast Anatolia. The new human capital primarily served the Ottoman government in two ways: *as a source of manpower for the Ottoman army and as a buffer against the separatist powers in the country*. The Ottoman government accommodated the refugees in selected places where there had already been separatist centrifugal forces in opposition to the centre, such as the Kurdish, Balkan and Arab nationalists. Therefore, the Circassians were at first considered by the Ottoman political elite to be a kind of balancing instrument and a new stock of military potential for the stability of the empire. They were often used as security detachments and pioneers in remote and uncontrollable areas (Dündar, 2001: 130–4; Ülker, 2007). As a reliable, countervailing force used to interdict and discipline Kurds, Turkomen, Druze, Bedouin and other nomads, they were an asset for the empire from a demographic and military standpoint.

4.1 Circassians' Political Participation in the Republican Period

Throughout the ideological confrontation of the Cold War period, the relations between the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and the northern Caucasus remained minimal. Circassians developed strong anti-Soviet sentiments due to the propaganda pervading Turkey. The diasporic subjects (especially those inhabiting the northern regions of Turkey) were only able to receive news from their homeland by means of Soviet radio broadcasts in the Adygei language. Nevertheless, in the post-communist era the northern Caucasus has developed strong links of communication and transportation with the rest of the world. I shall now discuss the political participation strategies developed by the Circassians in Turkey since the early 1970s. In explaining these strategies, I will refer to the 'institutional channelling theory' developed by Patrick R. Ireland. Why do migrants withdraw from 'host-society' political life?

By which means do they politically mobilize themselves? Patrick Ireland (1994, 2000) has drawn our attention to the legal conditions and political institutions of the receiving countries in mapping out the nature of immigrant political mobilization. He states that ‘certain immigrant communities have withdrawn voluntarily from host-society political life in the face of institutional indifference and hostility’ (1994: 8). Ireland also claims that the reason why migrant groups organize themselves politically along ethnic lines is primarily because ‘host-society’ institutions have nurtured ethnicity through their policies and practices.

I argue that Circassians have so far organized themselves politically in Turkey along ethnic lines principally because the institutional context in which they have found themselves has made them do so. Looking at the Circassians in Turkey through the prism of this theory, one can understand why Circassians have so far developed an ethnicity-oriented political participation strategy. The legal and political structure that excludes non-Turkish and/or non-Muslim ethnic minorities from political participation may lead these ethnic groups to mobilize themselves along ethnic lines. However, their move to search for another form of politics in the 2010s indicates that they are willing to become more decisive in the consolidation of the Turkish democracy along with the European integration of Turkey.

The common perception of the interlocutors interviewed is that Circassians have been made weaker by the Republican regime in comparison to the way their ancestors were treated by the Ottoman political and military establishment. It seems that this perception has made them generate a less conspicuous visibility in the public space, at least until the 1950s and onwards, when they started to become more and more urbanized. One of the interlocutors made such an interpretation in defining the difference between the ways in which the Circassians were treated by the Ottoman and Republican states:

“During the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians were rather privileged compared to their political status in the Turkish Republic. The modern Turkish state excluded and marginalized the Circassian elite through the nationalist assimilation policies. These kinds of exclusionary policies of the state were very decisive until the time when at least some of the Circassians started to accumulate an economic power through the newly emerging process of urbanization in the 1950s and onwards. Despite the fact that our ancestors became relatively stronger in economic terms throughout the republican history, they remained politically inactive and incapacitated” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 19 December 2011).

This does not necessarily mean that Circassians were completely inactive in politics. On the contrary, they were rather mobile in politics as well as in the military and civil bureaucracy. However, they had to conceal their Circassian identity in these processes of political participation, and underline their loyalty to Turkishness. One of the interlocutors stated that Circassians started to get engaged in politics in the 1960s by means of the Turkish Labour Party (TIP, *Türkiye İşçi Partisi*) in a way that made it possible for them to timidly use their ethnic identity in public space:

“Circassians have always been active in politics, from the extreme right to the extreme left, at the expense of concealing their particular ethnic identity. They were heavily engaged in extreme right-wing Turkish nationalist movements... We have only started to do politics in the Turkish Labour Party in the 1960s explicitly but still timidly using our Circassian identity. And then we became more occupied in the 1970s with the cultural associations, where we started to celebrate our Circassian identity, folklore and culture” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 24 December 2011).

Circassians became more outspoken in the 1970s in expressing their claims regarding their identities, cultures, political engagements, ideological positions and orientations to the homeland. In what follows, these engagements will be delineated. It will be argued that since the 1970s Circassians have so far generated various forms of political engagement with regard to their orientation to Turkey and their homeland: a) revolutionaries and returnists of the 1970s; b) Turkish nationalists and Circassian nationalists of the 1980s; c) activists of minority politics of the 1990s; d) activists of diasporic politics of identity of the 2000s; and e) bearers of democratic political claims of the 2010s.

4.1.1 1970s, Devrimci and Dönüşcü

The Circassian ethnic revival first became publicly apparent in the 1970s. Due to ideological confrontation and related political changes within the country, Circassians had developed some political organizations along with two opposing dominant formulations: the *Devrimci* (revolutionaries) and the *Dönüşcü* (returnists). The *Devrimcis* argued that the betterment of Circassian rights would be achieved through a socialist revolution in Turkey, while on the contrary, the returnists advocated return to the homeland. They accused the revolutionaries of being too naïve in believing that a socialist revolution was possible in Turkey. They developed a platform in Turkey by means of Circassian ethnic associations through which rural migrants and young people maintained a strong orientation towards their homeland. The returnists are still active in Turkey. A number of them actually went back to the Caucasus after 1989; some stayed and some returned to Turkey.

4.1.2 1980s, Circassian-Turk and Circassian nationalist

The military *coup d'état* of 1980 silenced the Circassian associations as well as many other civil society organizations. Under the new constitution of 1982 with its metaphysical-theological discourse and a Turkish-Islamic synthesis, Circassians carried on developing two new antithetical political participation strategies in the 1980s: the discourse of *Circassian-Turk* and the *Circassian nationalist* discourse. Right-wing conservative Circassians followed the Turkish nationalist historiography that, by then, had a strong Turkish-Islamic orientation and subsumed northern Caucasians under the category of 'Circassian Turk' or 'Caucasian Turk'. Nevertheless, starting with the 1989 ethnic war in Georgia between the Georgians and the Abkhaz groups and the break-up of the Soviet Union, communal concern arose, ethnic resurgence came into play and national press and media coverage of the Circassian peoples, cultures and histories proliferated. By then, the Circassian difference was hardly ever expressed as an opposition that would directly challenge the hegemonic Turkish majority nationalism. This is the time of the rise of Kurdish nationalist sentiments, which also encouraged the resurgence of other ethnic groups such as Alevis and Circassians. Thus, as opposed to those who were engaged in the Turkish nationalist discourse that considered the Circassians to be of Turkish 'racial' stock, there were also Circassian nationalist intellectuals who challenged this discourse. Yet neither discourse was embraced by the masses owing to the restrictions imposed to counter the formation of ethnic associations.

4.1.3 1990s, Minority Politics

Since the early 1990s, with the politics of ethnicity, identity and culture gaining global momentum, Circassians have developed a new form of political participation strategy: *minority politics*. Minority politics becomes visible when formal and popular majority nationalism poses a detrimental challenge to diverse cultural and/or ethnic groups. The 1980s in Turkey was characterized by the ascendance of the neo-liberal form of governmentality based on Turkish-Islamist nationalism. Restrictive nationalist policies in the country caused uproar among various ethnic and cultural groups, such as the Kurds, Alevis and Circassians, in a way that brought about a kind of *ontological warfare* (Levinas, 1987) between the majority and minorities. Thus, Circassian ethnic associations as well as many other ethnicity-based associations became subject to surveillance by the state. These groups could not raise their voices during the repressive political regime of the 1980s. It was the newly emerging democratic political climate of the 1990s that encouraged such groups to raise their demands. The ways in which Circassians, Kurds, Alevis and Laz raised their voices were also ethno-nationalist in nature. Ethnic associations then started to use an ethnic minority discourse in reaction to the previously held formal state nationalism and newly emerging popular Turkish nationalism. Popular Turkish nationalism was again the reaction to the politicization of the Kurdish issue in the country. Within the context of a

relatively more democratic political and legal structure in the 1990s, the Circassians established many different associations, which were mainly mobilized around the idea of an eventual return to the homeland. The ethnic elite emphasized that their ancestors had been expelled from their homeland and had been tools in the political machinations of the Russian and Ottoman empires; they concluded that a return to the homeland was inevitable (Shami, 1998).

4.1.4 2000s, Diasporic Identity

Nowadays it is likely that minority politics is challenged from within the Circassian diaspora itself. The elder generations primarily developed the above-mentioned political participation strategies as a set of survival strategies. Conversely, the new generations followed different patterns, depending on the changing notions of time and space. This new strategy is constituted by the construction of modern diasporic identity, which is facilitated by contemporary means of transportation and communication, making it easy to simultaneously live on both banks of the same river, 'diaspora' and 'home', or in other words 'here' and 'there'. The construction and articulation of diasporic identity occurs through the interplay of diasporic nationalism and diasporic transnationalism. While diasporic nationalism refers to the process of ethno-cultural reification in diaspora, diasporic transnationalism refers to the process of globalization experienced by diasporic formations.

Circassian ethno-cultural resurgence in Turkey has recently become apparent especially in the urban space. The rise in the number of ethnic associations (*derneks*) in the urban space is an indicator of this tendency. Ethnic associations provide diasporic subjects with a safe haven from capitalist urban life. All associations in every city are alike. Each has similar aims, such as organizing language courses, cultural evenings, folk dances and trips to the homeland. Ethnic associations play an instrumental role in the processes of construction and articulation of Circassian diasporic identity. Historically speaking, *Dost Eli Yardimlasma Derneği* (1946), *Kuzey Kafkasya Kültür Derneği* (Northern Caucasia Culture Association, 1964), *Kafkas Derneği* (*Kaf-Der*, Caucasian Association, 1993), *Kafkas Vakfı* (the Caucasian Foundation, 1995) and *Birleşik Kafkasya Derneği* (the United Caucasian Association, 1995), and *Kaf-Fed* (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu*, Federation of Caucasian Associations, 2004). Nowadays, there are approximately 80 different associations throughout the country.

However, the replacement of minority politics by a modern diasporic identity highlighting the cultural and ethnic element has also been reinforced by some other recent social and political developments in Turkey. It is apparent that many ethnic minority groups in Western Europe have been trying to bypass the nation-states to which they have been subject by bringing their concerns directly to European Union (EU) bodies. Basques, Corsicans and Catalans, for instance, have taken their demands on a transnational basis into the European Commission to be resolved. Circassians as well as Alevis and Kurds are also engaged in similar political manoeuvres. In fact, they have rational reasons to do so. The European Union has recently declined the use of the minority discourse due to the escalation of the minority problem in Europe. As could be clearly seen in the Accession Partnership text, which maps out the requirements of Turkey in the integration process into the EU, the term 'minority' has been replaced with the term 'cultural diversity' in order to celebrate *unity in diversity*. Circassian associations such as *Kaf-Der* and *Democratic Circassian Platform* abandoned minority politics in the early 2000s to contribute to the democratization process of Turkey on the way to the European Union. As known, the post-Helsinki period was very decisive in the expansion of societal movements ranging from employers' associations to labour unions, or from ethnic groups to religious groups. Kurds, Alevis, Circassians, Armenians, Romans and Assyrians are some of these groups that vocalized their concerns in the aftermath of the Helsinki Summit. Such attempts were consequential in weakening the oppressive hegemony of the Turkish state *vis-à-vis* non-Sunni, non-Turkish, and/or non-Muslim groups.

Following the political and cultural claims of different Muslim-origin minority groups in Turkey, the Turkish government started to enact some important reforms such as broadcasting in languages other

than Turkish. On 7 June 2004, Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), the public broadcasting organisation, started television and radio programs named “Our Cultural Affluence” on weekdays in Bosnian, Arabic, Circassian, Zaza and Kirmanchi. The content of the programs and audience profiles are determined by public opinion research conducted by TRT. These broadcasts continue. From Monday to Friday everyday the TRT broadcasts in the following languages for two hours each, respectively Bosnian, Arabic, Kurmanchi Kurdish, Circassian (Adygei) and Zaza Kurdish. In the official discourse, this reform was explained to the public within the framework of tolerance in line with the international covenants and agreements such as the related documents of the UN, EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe.⁷ However, the period of democratization between 1999 and 2005 was interrupted after the accession negotiations started. This was the time when Turkey became more parochial, nationalist and defensive against the destabilizing effects of both globalization and Europeanization. This was also the time when the EU itself ceased to be the lighthouse for Turkey, lighting her road towards democratization, liberalization and peace.

It seems that the vicious circle between 2005 and 2010 has now been left behind as the Turkish public is now likely to test a new process of consolidation of democracy. One notes that several different ethno-cultural and religious groups are recently becoming more and more visible and vocal again, as in the immediate aftermath of the Helsinki Summit of 1999. For instance, the leaders of the Circassian associations are gathering in two weeks’ time to discuss the future of their communities in Turkey and their relations with the homeland. However, there is one substantial difference between the two. The former was partly mediated by the European Union, whereas the recent move made by several different ethno-cultural and religious groups including the Circassians, Kurds, Alevis, and Armenians is lacking the EU anchor. I argue that recent ethno-cultural and religious claims raised by various minorities are likely to constitute a kind of test for the consolidation of Turkish democracy. I personally believe that the recent move is a much more valuable indicator for the consolidation of Turkish democracy, as it is taking place in a time characterized by the political and economic turmoil within the European Union.

4.1.5 2010s: A Quest for Politics

The Circassians have now become more vocal in raising their claims to see a more democratic and inclusive constitution, which should be prepared with the inclusion of all the segments of the society. They express their willingness to see a country in which rights are granted to all communities in Turkey without having to resort to violence or racism. In the meetings held by the Caucasian Federation in different cities of Turkey in 2010 and 2011,⁸ it was commonly agreed that the constitution should be renewed to better ensure individual rights and to remove any mention of ethnicity, specifically referring to their wish to see a change in Article 66 of the Constitution, defining Turkish citizenship: “Everyone bound to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk.”⁹ The other claim raised in these meetings was to make sure that rights are granted in Turkey on the basis of citizenship, but not on ethnicity favoring the Sunni-Muslim-Turks. The introduction of the Circassian language in the high schools and universities as an optional language is another claim raised by the Circassians. One of the Circassian-origin intellectuals who is engaged in the Circassian

⁷ See the relevant online presentation of the European Union General Secretariat in Ankara, a state department which recently became a Ministry in 2011, http://www.abgs.gov.tr/tarama/tarama_files/23/SC23DET_Minority%20Rights.pdf, entry date 15 October 2011.

⁸ The first meeting was held in Bolu on 4-5 December 2010, and others followed in Istanbul, Ankara, İzmit, and Kayseri (http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2012/280112_oat.htm).

⁹ It is quite interesting to note that Emir Marshan Pasha (1860-1940), a Circassian origin MP from Sivas in the first Turkish Grand National Assembly, was the first person who openly expressed his concerns in the general assembly in 1921 about the overuse of the term “Turk” in the Parliamentary meetings. It is because of this intervention that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had to make his famous speech in Parliament to underline that the Parliament is not only composed of Turks, or Circassians, or Kurds, or Alevis (Karadaş, 2010; Aydemir, 1991).

Research Network (www.cerkesarastirmalari.org) states that he does not consider himself an equal citizen in Turkey:

“I consider myself as an equal citizen with regard to civil and social rights granted to me. But, as a Circassian-origin person, I am not an equal citizen as far as cultural and political rights are concerned” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 30 January 2012).

As stated earlier, the Turkish political elite has been struggling with the construction of equal citizenship for several decades. It is obvious that Turkish citizenship is inclusive for those who fall into the category of Turkish-Sunni-Muslim, and exclusive for those outside this category. Another intellectual and activist of Circassian origin refers to the limitations of Turkish citizenship in recognizing ethno-cultural differences constituting contemporary Turkish society:

“I see myself as an equal citizen as long as I deny my identity, culture and language. But this would be a self-deception. I know that I can’t practice politics through my own identity; I can’t call my child with an Abkhazian name and can’t use my tribal name as my surname; I have no right to education here in my mother tongue, no radio, no TV, and no newspaper. These are all the limitations of the last 80 years. There are recently some timid changes, but still Turkishness dominates everything... Nowadays, there is a popular demand for the preparation of a modern democratic and inclusive kind of constitution. Now, the ‘identity genie’ is out of the bottle, and it will change our lives” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 24 December 2011)

Circassians recently also claim that all the discourses that falsely accuse communities including Circassians should be removed from history textbooks and official history, including the allegations about Ethem Bey, once a national hero during the early days of the Turkish War of Independence, then declared a traitor by the Turkish nationalists in the late 1920s. Members of the Circassian community often complain that Circassians have been depicted in textbooks as a rebellious community, which has undermined their contribution to the nation-building process and to the culture of Turkey. It is also often stated within Circassian circles that it was the Circassians who published the first magazine in Turkey with the Latin alphabet and launched the first sports club in Turkey.

It is commonly known that Circassian militias played a very important role in the War of Independence that led to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. However, the Kemalist government did not trust the Circassians or the other so-called constitutive elements of the nation-state such as the Kurds and the Alevis. The Circassian militia leader Ethem Bey (1886-1948) was accused of treason by the Kemalist elite, and he was sent into exile.¹⁰ Like other ethnic minorities, the Circassians were placed under strong pressure to assimilate into a culturally homogeneous Turkish nation. In the period between 1922 and 1924 all Circassian committees, schools and newspapers were closed down; Circassians were forced to change their surnames; 14 Circassian villages were forcibly relocated from western to eastern Anatolia; 150 persons, 86 of them Circassians, were deprived of citizenship and expatriated as “potential rebels” (Şener, 2001; Bilmez, 2011). The pressure continued

¹⁰ He then founded *Kuvva-i Seyyare* (Mobile Military Forces) which was the only organized military force in Anatolia during 1919-1920, the period between the Armistice of Mudros and the Treaty of Sévres. He coordinated his military operations with Ali Fuat Pasha in Ankara and harassed the invading Greek armies with his fast cavalry. He was instrumental in putting down various rebellions against the authority of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Eventually he turned against the new central government in Ankara, refusing to join the ranks of the newly established regular army derived from *Kuvva-i Milliye* (National Military Forces) established under the command of İsmet Pasha. The newly reconstituted Turkish Army had to put down his rebellion while also fighting the Greeks. His alleged subsequent surrender to and cooperation with the Greek army resulted in his citizenship being revoked on the grounds of treason and his being declared a *persona non grata* by the Turkish Grand National Assembly. He first went to Greece with his 400 gunmen, and then settled in Jordan until his death. In the official Turkish historiography he was then named *Cerkes Ethem* (Circassian Ethem) rather than *Ethem Bey*. His ethnic identity has been used to distance him in the imagery of the Turkish public from the founding national myth (Berzeg, 1990; Şener, 2001; Kutay, 2004; and Bilmez, 2011).

for many years. The names of Circassian villages were changed. Many families were prosecuted for giving their children non-Turkish names and the names were altered. Following the language law of 1932, campaigns were organized with the slogan: "Citizen, speak Turkish!" and notices prohibiting speaking Circassian were displayed in Circassian villages.

Circassians believe that Ethem Bey was mistreated by the Kemalist regime. In the last decade, there have been several campaigns initiated by the Circassians to convince the ruling political elite to return his dignity. An activist woman working in the administration of the Federation of Caucasian Associations based in Ankara refers to the way Ethem Bey has been represented as a traitor in the national curriculum, and how this kind of representation has actually shaped and strengthened her Circassian identity:

"My whole primary and secondary education passed with the repetitions of "I am Turkish, correct and hardworking".¹¹ Furthermore, I was always told until high school years that Circassians were just the most noble branch of the Turks. This kind of Turkish nationalist indoctrination was first damaged when I was exposed to the way Ethem Bey was portrayed as a traitor in the History of the Turkish Revolution course in the high school in a way triggered my Circassianness" (Personal interview, Ankara, 1 February 2012).

The Circassian identity has been imprisoned in the private space of the Circassians. The tension between the repression of Circassian identity and culture in the public space and its celebration in the private space has always been experienced by the members of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. An active member of one of the Circassian websites refers to the fact that his Circassian identity was mainly shaped by this ongoing tension:

"As someone who was exposed to the homogenizing curriculum of the national education reducing everyone to a Turk, and as someone who was raised with the narratives in his family revolving around the Circassian identity, I can say that I have been through a great traumatic experience. The fact that I was exposed to the tension between my imposed Turkishness and my own Circassian identity reveals the misery of the Turkish education" (Personal interview, Istanbul, 3 January 2012).

As Charles Taylor put it very well in a Hegelian form of dialectics, our identities, be they individual, political, communal, ethnic or national, are shaped by the *recognition*, *non-recognition* or *misrecognition* of the 'others' (Taylor, 1994: 25). The genesis of the human mind develops in a dialogical sense. We construct our identities only if we are able to experience others' reactions to our attitudes and behaviour. Unless we are defined by others and/or majorities we cannot represent ourselves. Thus, it is impossible to build an identity without a dialogue with the 'other'. One of the Abkhazian intellectuals defined the Circassians' state of mind in comparison to the other minorities in the following terms:

"We have never been suppressed as much as the Kurds were suppressed in this country. The reason for this is that we surrendered to the leading ideology and culture, or it is because we have so far experienced our identity in our own private space, at home, in the village, or in the cultural associations. We have not made a lot of fuss, trying to make our identity visible in the

¹¹ The Turkish national oath is still being repeated at the primary and secondary school levels, and it is a great example of the constant process of nationalist indoctrination. Since it was written by Resit Galip in 1933, the oath is ingrained in the back of the minds of the Turks with the last sentence, "How happy is the one who calls himself/herself a Turk!" (*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!*). The oath has recently become very problematic for the ethno-cultural and non-Muslim minorities in Turkey as the last sentence seems to have strong ethnic connotations with an assimilationist undertone. Üstel argues that one of the most significant changes in citizenship education took place in the late 1930s, with the primary school program introduced by the single ruling party, Republican People's Party (CHP). Accordingly, primary schools became the production sites for '*milli yurttaş*' (national citizens) leading to the production of a homogenous nation (Üstel, 2004:138).

public space. Whenever we tried to speak a bit loudly, we were called 'traitor Circassians' like Ethem Bey" (24 December 2011).

Circassian identity in Turkey has been constructed by the members of the Circassian diaspora in a constant process of denial by the homogenizing state. A former president of the same association also refers to the impact of the official narrative of "*traitor Circassian Ethem*" on the construction of his peculiar Circassian identity (Personal interview, Ankara, 10 January 2012). The number of campaigns organized by the Circassians regarding Ethem Bey has recently increased. A Circassian-origin journalist, Fuat Uğur, one of the members of the Circassian Rights Initiative (*Cerkes Hakları İnisiyatifi*), expressed their determination to make their claims heard in public by means of engaging the non-Circassian intellectuals in Turkey in their cause. He pointed out that the only way for the Circassians to become equal citizens in Turkey is to politicize the Circassian social and cultural movements (Personal interview, 4 April 2012, Ankara).¹²

4.2 The Transnational Circassian Movement

It is also remarkable to note that the Circassians are becoming politically more active and outspoken along with the rising presence of their European companions of Circassian origin in European space. Similar claims are also now being raised in the European Circassian diaspora through the annual Circassian Days held in the European Parliament with the support of the Social Democrats and the Greens. The last one was held on 30 November 2010 with the participation of scholars, politicians and NGO leaders residing in Turkey and Europe.¹³ Referring to what Benedict Anderson (1998) called "long-distance nationalism", or what Ernest Gellner (1983) called "diaspora nationalism", or what Arjun Appadurai (1996) called "a community of sentiments", one could see the efforts of the Circassian diaspora in Europe to contribute to the development of the homeland in the Caucasus as well as to the democratization of Turkey using modern technologies of communication. A large part of the political work of the Circassian diaspora aims at building awareness of their grievances through information and education. Thereby, the community also hopes to influence the political agendas of the host nations in Europe and elsewhere, and to pressure the respective governments to act on behalf of the Circassian populations residing both in Turkey and in the homeland. This tactic has been particularly employed in the debate over a possible admission of Turkey into the European Union. The potential European Union membership of Turkey is the "key leverage" of lobbying for the Circassian diaspora in Europe, since it represents an issue the Turkish government cannot ignore and where the stakes are very high for Turkey. Every year, the Progress Reports prepared by the European Commission address similar issues.

European Circassians' state of mind is somewhat identical to what W. E. B. Du Bois (cited in Gilroy, 1987) calls 'double consciousness', which refers to individuals' awareness of being simultaneously 'home away from home', or 'here and there'. The feeling of being simultaneously 'home away from home' or 'here and there' reveals a form of 'double consciousness' and 'awareness of multilocality' in the imagery of the transnational subjects. What does it mean to be German, Circassian, Muslim, European, nationalist, female, young, migrant, transnational and working class? How do all these relationalities enter into the political consciousness of the subject? The state of the European Circassians is even more complicated, as they have generated a multiple form of engagement to more than two places. In their case, their allusion is to at least three places: Caucasus (homeland), Turkey, and their locality in Europe. This, in a way, leads to a kind of '*triple consciousness*' or '*multiple*

¹² For the activities of the Circassian Rights Initiative see the website <http://www.cerkeshaklariinisiyatifi.com/> (accessed on 8 April 2012).

¹³ For further information on the celebration of Circassian Day in the European Parliament see <http://euroxase.com/circassian/day/index20111107.php> (entry date 15 October 2011). The next one is planned to take place on 7 November 2011.

consciousness'. They are concerned about impacting not only their homeland societies, but also the Turkish society in which they were born, raised and educated.

David Harvey (2006: 128) proceeds further to inquire how transnational individuals internalize this whole world of relational experience and information boosted by the contemporary global circuitry of communication and transportation. Internalization of images, identities, roles, positions and localities by border-crossing individuals in the age of late modernity is not likely to happen in physical space, which is what Harvey calls *absolute space*. This could only happen in what Harvey (2006: 123) calls *relational space*, which is symbolically constructed through relations, interactions, dialogues, links, fantasies, expectations, transportation and communication among those residing in remote places across physical borders.¹⁴

New forms of media from blogs to satellite television to SMS have multiplied the places where political agendas are set, strategies and tactics developed, and leaders identified. Many transnational political movements like the Circassian movement strategically use segments of their constituencies located in different places to advance a common agenda through different actions. The growing number of blogs, websites, and online events disseminate news all around the world in the blink of an eye. The quality of the Circassian-origin websites is impressive in terms of their intellectual, scientific, cultural and folkloric content. Several of them originate from Turkey, the USA, Canada, Caucasus and Germany. They all have the same mission: to generate a transnational community of sentiment ranging from the homeland to the remote corners of the diaspora.¹⁵ Those in Europe, summoned under the umbrella organization of the Federation of European Circassians, for example, may take advantage of specific opportunities embedded in the European Union framework, such as using the European Parliament as a venue to publicize their claims. In this sense, lobbying activities of the Circassian diaspora in Europe are becoming visible in the European Parliament, where the Social Democrats and Greens have organised an annual "Circassian Day" since 2007.¹⁶

Nosochi2014.com is a remarkable website operating from Turkey and reaching out to millions of Circassians residing all around the world outside the North Caucasus. The site claims to represent all the Circassians, both in diaspora and in the homeland, and describes the Circassian exodus from the North Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire in 1861 as "genocide". The Circassian community is currently undergoing a process of politicization in Turkey as well as in other localities through their resistance to the Russian advocacy of the Sochi Olympics 2014. Circassians, in a way, constitute what Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff (2012) calls "transnational digital diaspora". The *Nosochi2014.com* portal was set up in 2010 by a Circassian Turkey-based diaspora organization, but has supporters and contributors among Circassian organizations in the Middle East, Western Europe and the United States. K., one of the

¹⁴ The notion of space has a variety of interpretations: *absolute space*, *relative space*, and *relational space*. *Absolute space* refers to the physical space developed by classical Newtonian mechanics. In this substantial and absolutist view, space has a quality and characteristic of its own, and it is empirically real. This is the space of private property and other territorial designations such as nation-states and political administrations (Harvey, 2006: 121). The absolutist view tends to reduce social space to territorial/geographical space, and to define it with national space. Thus, it complies with the holistic notion of culture of the age of nationalism of the 19th century. *Relative space* is a critique of absolute space, and it is first associated with the name of Albert Einstein. The relativist approach focuses on space as a set of relations between the locations of socially essential elements that structure human activities and are structured by human activities. This approach presumes that social relations do not take place in a given space, but actually constitute space. Without elements like social practices, intellect, artifacts, symbols and relations, there is no socially relevant space. This is also what Henri Lefebvre (1992: 229-291) calls *abstract space* as opposed to absolute space.

¹⁵ Examples of the Circassian websites are as follows: Federation of European Circassians (<http://euroxase.com/>), Circassian World (<http://www.circassianworld.com>), Caucasian Federation (<http://kafkasfederasyonu.org>), Circassian Studies (<http://www.cerkesarastirmalari.org>), Caucasian Association (<http://www.kafkas.org.tr>), Circassian Center (<http://www.circassiancenter.com>), Circassian Initiative for Democracy (<http://www.cerkesgirisimi.org>), Circassian US (<http://www.circassian.us>), Circassian Diaspora (<http://www.circassiandiaspora.com>), Circassian Portal (<http://circassianportal.com>), and etc.

¹⁶ The Federation of European Circassians is composed of six different Circassian associations based in Berlin, Zwingenberg (Germany), Lyon (France), Basel (Switzerland), Antwerp (Belgium), and Almelo (Holland).

webmasters of the website, states that they have already succeeded in accomplishing what they envisaged. Their target was to make the vulnerability of the Circassians *vis-à-vis* the Russian hegemony throughout history known to the rest of the world (Personal interview, Istanbul, 3 January 2012).¹⁷ The site includes articles about environmental issues and contains a lot of links to other sites critical of the Sochi Olympics. The main language being used is English, but there are a number of links to articles in Russian and Turkish. One of the activists operating *Nosochi2014.com* as well as the Caucasian Forum referred to the importance of such websites in generating a transnational Circassian movement in a way that provides the young generations with opportunities to transcend the power of the hegemonic nationalist discourse of their countries of settlement:

“The transnational Circassian movement is different from traditionally organized social movements, and it is more horizontal and informal. That is why it is hard to control, discipline and manage in comparison to the traditional forms of movements, which are locally defined. This movement is actually a Turkish-origin movement trying to disseminate information about the problems of the Circassians to the rest of the world. And I believe that this movement substantially contributes to the politicization of the Circassian cause in the global world. Through these transnational channels in cyberspace, we can mobilize the Circassian diasporic communities all around the world to organize protests and demonstrations in a simultaneous way, and make the claims of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey more decisive” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 3 January 2012).

Transnational networks provide the members of the Circassian diaspora with a great strength in handling the difficulties of everyday life stemming from the hegemony of the nation-states in which they reside. As Clifford (1994: 310-311) rightfully states, transnational connections with the homeland, other members of diaspora in various geographies, and/or with a world-political force break the binary relation of minority communities with majority societies and also give added weight to claims against an oppressive national hegemony. Another member of the transnational Circassian movement generated in cyberspace also draws attention to the fact that Turkish-Circassians are very active in contributing to the emergence of such transnational networks:

“Although the movement originates from Turkey, it is now widespread all around the world. The movement comes back to Turkey like a boomerang, gaining a global quality in a way that empowers our cause in the eyes of the Turkish Circassians. This boomerang effect has the capacity to strengthen the Circassianhood of the members of the diaspora vis-a-vis the hegemony of the homogenizing Turkish state” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 19 December, 2011).

Transnational connections lead to the construction of new communities of sentiment across national borders away from homeland. These digitalized communities are not bound to remain virtual, they become real:

“Circassians meet in the same blogs, forums, and they communicate about their experiences in Facebook and Twitter. They stay very much up-to-date through such social media. Maybe, most importantly, they are organized by means of such cyber venues and then they protest against what they find inappropriate. Last year, for instance, on 21 May 2011, several protests were organized in front of the Russian embassies all over the world through such digital networks. Previously, such protests used to be organised by Circassian associations. And now Circassian youth who have never been engaged in the activities of those associations

¹⁷ The website *Nosochi2014.com* is administered by the Turkish origin Circassian youth who also operate the website called Caucasian Forum, <http://www.kafkasyaforumu.org>. Circassian organizations from Turkey, Israel, Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands are also affiliated with the site.

are taking their part in these protests. Nosochi2014.com is one of the sites organizing protest in action” (a male member of the Circassian Research Group, 30 January 2012).

Through the agency of these connections, diasporic subjects have the chance to create a home away from the homeland, a home which is surrounded by symbols, causes, rhythms, figures and images of the homeland provided by internet, TV, video cassettes, tapes and radio. Increasing connections, transactions and relations with the homeland also shape the institution of citizenship in a way that makes the claims of dual citizenship possible. Circassians have not yet been granted the right to dual citizenship by either Turkey or the Russian Federation. Circassians often raise such claims. Some of the interlocutors even draw attention to the claims of the Turkish diaspora in European countries towards the right to dual citizenship. One of the activists draws our attention to the fact that there is *de facto* dual citizenship at the moment:

“The right to dual citizenship is one of our priorities. It is actually de facto working now. I don’t think that the Turkish state is indifferent to these claims. Once we raise our claims more loudly, then the Turkish state will have to respond positively. What is essential here is the official Russian response. Russia doesn’t see any problem at the moment in accepting those who already have de facto dual citizenship despite the fact that it is not legal. We don’t know how Russia will react once the number of Circassians claiming dual citizenship increases further” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 24 December 2011).

Most of the websites are being operated from Turkey. Those youngsters who are engaged in these activities are very much aware of the fact that their popularity that crosses national borders is also shaping the ways in which traditional forms of Circassian and Caucasian associations try to mobilize their clientele. These are the youth who challenge the patriarchal power of *thamate*, elderly people who are believed to be respected at all times. They experience the limitless freedom of cyberspace and challenge the patriarchal structure of Circassian society. However, their popular success in terms of disseminating their ideas and the Circassian cause to the rest of the world is somehow appreciated by the *thamate* who are actively involved in the Circassian associations and networks. One of the webmasters of these sites draws attention to this transformation:

“I am not really involved in the activities of the Circassian associations, which I believe are stuck in folkloric facilities in a way that is far from producing political and cultural claims. I am personally involved in a politically engaged platform in cyberspace. I believe that my platform is much more proactive and efficient than the classical forms of associations in generating politics about the North Caucasus and cultural rights of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey” (personal interview, Istanbul, 3 January 2012).

It seems that transnational connections constitute new forms of communities of sentiments, which are mainly shaped by the involvement of the Circassian-origin youths residing in Turkey. Their perception of tolerance in the Turkish context also seems to be decisive for the construction of the debates regarding ethno-cultural diversity. In what follows, Circassians’ changing perceptions of tolerance will be delineated.

5. Debating Tolerance: A Search for Equality

This study scrutinizes the position taken by the Circassians in Turkey with respect to the recent efforts to write a new Constitution, and question if there is an attempt on their part to challenge the historically loaded official discourse of tolerance (*hoşgörü*) and to replace it with a more political discourse of equality, respect and recognition. There is recently quite some anecdotal evidence indicating that the Circassians have started to criticize the official discourse of tolerance of the Ottoman and Turkish states, and they are taking a critical position *vis-à-vis* the notion of tolerance, defining it as a form of governmentality which has been successful on the part of the state to contain Circassians and others, such as non-Sunni and non-Muslim minorities. When the Ottoman Empire gave their great-grandparents

shelter in the second half of the nineteenth century, the action of the state towards the Circassians escaping from the Russian atrocities was officially portrayed as an act of tolerance to those in immediate need. However, one should not forget the fact that the Ottomans were in immediate need of fresh manpower to fight in wars against foreign powers in the nineteenth century, such as the Balkan nationalists, Russians, French and British. The discourse of tolerance was an embedded discourse in the everyday life of the Sublime Port. The same discourse was also visible in the late fifteenth century when the Sephardic Jews were given refuge to save them from the brutal oppression of Catholic Spain. The Moors, Spanish Muslims who faced the same atrocities as the Jews, could not get the support of the Ottomans despite the fact that they had a religious affinity with Istanbul. Apparently, the Ottomans favoured the Jews, who were materially, economically and professionally much more prosperous and advantaged than the poor Moors (Lea, 1968). Masking its main intentions, the Ottoman political elite successfully exploited the discourse of tolerance in both cases.

The field research reveals that those Circassians who were interviewed have a strong perception of what is being tolerated and not tolerated by the majority society in Turkey. The Europeanization process of Turkey has certainly made some changes, such as the rising threshold of tolerance towards ethno-cultural identity claims in the public space raised by various groups in Turkey including the Kurds, Alevis, Circassians, Armenians and Assyrians. However, the Circassians are also very much aware of the fact that some of their acts are being tolerated by the majority more than others. An Abkhazian intellectual made the following statement in referring to the attitudes of the majority society towards the Circassians' claims:

“The fact that Kurds suffered so much in their effort to raise their identity claims has also opened up room for us to make our relevant claims heard in public. This is why, for instance, our claims regarding the right to education and broadcast in the mother tongue are not belittled or untolerated by the state. The most tolerated claim we have so far generated is our strong willingness to generate relations with the homeland Caucasus. I think this is because the political elite expect us to do whatever we want in relation to the homeland, and not to bother them with other claims in Turkey” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 24 December 2011).

Furthermore, it is also perceived by those interviewed that folkloric claims are subject to more tolerance by the majority society. One of the members of the Circassian Research Group based in Istanbul states the following:

“It is often believed by the majority society that Circassians are mostly tolerated. Yes, this is correct as long as they behave like a ‘good citizen’. They are being tolerated as long as they identify themselves a folkloric group. When they raise political and cultural claims they are likely to become subject to a kind of nationalist reflex. In such cases they are treated like ‘separators’: ‘it was the Kurds, and now Circassians trying to divide our country’, ‘Circassian Ethem’ etc.” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 30 January 2012).

It is often stated by the interlocutors that Circassians still perceive themselves as guests living in Turkey. One of the interlocutors addressed the strong state of *ethnophobia* generated by the majority society *vis-à-vis* ethno-cultural minorities residing in Turkey:

“Circassians are being tolerated in Turkey as long as they don’t use an ethnocentric discourse. They are safe if they comply with the assimilationist character of the state. Whenever there is an ethno-cultural solidarity among the Circassians, we are subdued by the state” (personal interview with the former president of one of the umbrella associations of the Circassians in Ankara, Ankara, 10 January 2012).

Those who were interviewed mostly claim that the regime of tolerance to which their ancestors were subjected during the time of exodus in the second half of the nineteenth century has also made them see themselves as permanent guests. One of the TV producers summarized how this kind of tolerance is now hurting them:

“Whenever the Circassian identity represents itself in the public space, it encounters various responses. Roughly speaking, this response is often phrased as, “You, too!” with a tone equating us with the rebellious Kurds. And then follows, “We opened up our doors for you in times of turmoil”, reminding us of our constant state of being guests. This kind of feeling is the main obstacle for us to become more politically engaged in the public space” (Personal interview, Istanbul, 3 January 2012).

There is a growing resentment among the Circassians regarding the traditional regime of tolerance prevailing since their arrival at the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. Most of those interviewed were openly opposed to the benevolence of the regime of tolerance and favoured the notions of pluralism, respect, recognition and the right to be different.

6. Conclusion

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 Turks, 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.

Circassians in Turkey have developed various political participation strategies *vis-à-vis* the legal and political structure and delimitations. While the Turkish Republic was being built up in the 1920s, the republican political elite were highly engaged with a strong ideology of majority nationalism, which promoted the formation of an ethno-culturally homogenous nation. The Circassians, then, preferred to incorporate themselves into the nation-state building project along with the discourse of a homogenous nation defined by the republican elite; they abstained from declaring their ethnic identities in public and considered themselves as one of the constitutive elements of the Turkish Republic. The defining distinctiveness of the early periods of the republic was provided by Turkification policies, which sought the dominance of Turkishness and Sunni Islam as the defining elements in every walk of life – from the language spoken in the public space to citizenship, national education, trade, the personnel regime of public enterprises, industrial life and even settlement laws.

Having an Imperial legacy, many new regulations and laws referred to a set of attempts to homogenize the entire nation without any tolerance with regard to diversity and difference. The underestimation of ethnic diversity among the Muslim population of the republic occurred because of the preceding Ottoman Millet system borrowed by the republican political elite. The *Millet* system of the Ottoman Empire ignored ethnic differences among Muslims. All Muslims regardless of their other differences belonged to one and the same ‘Muslim nation’. Therefore, Circassians were not defined as a separate entity. Hence, Circassians were subject to assimilationist policies in the nation-building process, and they were not tolerated, accepted, and respected by the state until the late 1990s.

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, 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.

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 Circassian social movements impact the ways in which their claims are recently being raised in a manner that challenges the traditional patriarchal structure of the Circassian communities.

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.

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Annex I: List of Interviews

(All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, unless otherwise stated below)

Ten (10) in-depth interviews conducted with the community leaders and executive members of the Circassians:

A.K. Male, 35 years old, single, an activist of the Circassian youth associations, webmaster of various websites, actively involved in transmitting the Circassian claims to the rest of the world, he is from Istanbul, recently residing and working in Ukraine. Interviewed on 19 December 2011.

S.B. Male, 55 years old, single, a left-wing activist, Abkhazian, actively involved in the Circassian associations, one of the founders of the Democratic Circassian Platform in the 1990s, residing and working in Istanbul. Interviewed on 24 December 2011.

K.K. Male, 35 years old, single, an activist of the Circassian youth associations, TV producer, webmaster of various websites, actively involved in transmitting the Circassian claims to the rest of the world, he is from Istanbul. Interviewed on 3 January 2012.

Ş.E. Male, 56 years old, married with two children, academic, actively involved in Circassian associations, formerly executive member of the Circassian associations in the USA, he is living in Istanbul. Interviewed on 9 January 2012.

C.C. Male, 64 years old, married with three children, former president of one of the leading umbrella Circassian associations, residing in Ankara. Interviewed on 10 January 2012.

F.Ö. Male, 65 years old, married with one child, a public servant, following Circassian associations' activities and actively involved in the executive committees of these associations. Residing in Istanbul. Interviewed on 16 January 2012.

Y.T. Male, 55 years old, married with two children, businessman, president of one of the Circassian associations in Ankara, residing in Ankara, one of the founders of the Democratic Circassian Platform in the 1990s. Interviewed on 23 January 2012.

K.A. Male, 32 years old, single, lawyer, working in a university as an administrator, actively involved in the Circassian associations' activities. Residing in Istanbul. Interviewed on 27 January 2012.

M.P. Male, 47 years old, married with one child, researcher, PhD candidate, one of the founders of the Caucasian Research Group, one of the founders of the Democratic Circassian Platform in the 1990s. Residing in Istanbul. Interviewed on 30 January 2012.

B.D. Female, 40 years old, married with one child, lawyer, executive member of one of the leading Circassian associations in Ankara, residing in Ankara. Interview held on 1 February 2012.

F.U. Male, 48 years old, married, journalist, a member of the Circassian Rights Initiative, residing in Istanbul. Interview held in Ankara on 4 April 2012.

H.D. Female, 50 years old, married with one child, a member of KAFFED, residing in Istanbul. Interview held in Istanbul on 6 April 2012.

Active Participant Observation

The researcher was also actively involved in the brain-storming sessions of various Circassian-origin groups working on the new constitution proposals.

Annex II. Interview Guide for Key Informants

Interview Questions

1. Could you please explain how you have been personally treated since your primary school education? Do you think that your education period was based on egalitarian or discriminatory kinds of practices?
2. Do you consider yourself a Turkish citizen who enjoys equality in terms of political rights, civil rights, cultural rights and social rights?
3. Do you think that you are participating enough in the political decision-making process of the country?
4. Do you think that the Circassians have so far been participating enough in the political decision-making processes of Turkey?
5. Could you evaluate your interest in Circassian associations' activities? If you are participating, what kind of activities are you interested in?
6. Would you want to participate formally or voluntarily in any political party's activity?
7. Do you believe that your thoughts and expectations are represented by any political party in Turkey?
8. Do you believe that Circassians are represented enough in Turkish political life?
9. To which political parties do you feel yourself affiliated?
10. Do you think that Circassians should be represented by a particular political party?
11. In your thoughts, has there been a change in the presence of the power of Circassians in Anatolia (economic, social, political, soldierly and cultural) since the Ottoman era?
12. Do you think that the newly-emerging constitution will help solve the problems mentioned above?
13. How do you think the majority of the Turkish society treats the Circassians?
14. According to you, which actions or behaviors of the Circassians are being tolerated, or not tolerated, by the majority of the society?
15. Which kinds of political and cultural claims of the Circassians are not tolerated by the Turkish state?
16. How would you order the following terms with regard to the establishment of a peaceful coexistence in Turkey? a) tolerance, b) respect, c) right to differentness, d) pluralism, e) endurance, f) sufferance, g) understanding.
17. Could you evaluate the effect of the transnational Circassian movement spreading from the diaspora to the Circassians in Turkey?
18. Do you think that the transnational Circassian movement is affecting social, political, cultural and financial life in Turkey?
19. Do you think that the Circassians should generate claims on dual nationality? Do you know the approach of the Turkish Republic?
20. Have you observed any change in your personal affiliation to Turkey and the North Caucasus? Why?

Annex III: Documents consulted

1. “Çerkesler nasıl bir anayasa istiyor?” (What kind of a constitution do the Circassians want?), a document prepared by the Federation of Circassian Associations (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu, KAFFED*), available at the website of the KAFFED (accessed on 15 May 2012, http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2011/KAFFED_ANAYASADAN_TALE_20VE_BEKLENTILER.pdf)
2. “Çerkes Ortak Akıl Toplantıları Metinleri: Bolu (11-12 Aralık 2012) ve Levent, İstanbul (26-27 Mart 2011)” (Texts of the Circassian Common Sense Meetings held in Bolu (11-12 December 2010) and Levent, İstanbul (26-27 March 2011)”, available at the website of the KAFFED, http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2010/110411_OAT.htm, accessed on 16 May 2012.
3. “Çerkes Hakları İnisiyatifi Çalıştay Metni (25-26 Şubat 2012)” (Circassian Rights Initiative Workshop Conclusions, 25-26 February 2012), available at the website <http://www.cerkes.net/cerkes/index.php/ozel/haber/1384-cerkes-caltay-sonuc-bildirgesi-siyasilere-sunuldu.html>, accessed on 10 May 2012.
4. “Çerkes Manifestosu” (Circassian Manifesto), available at the website of the Circassian World, <http://www.circassiandiaspora.com/index.php/circassian/gundem-ozel/item/2734-çerkesya-manifestosu.html>, accessed on 15 April 2012.
5. “Yeni Anayasa Sürecini İzleme Raporu” (Reporting about the Process of New Constitution Making), TESEV, İstanbul, available at [http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/affad164-be8a-4899-9e63-aa6310a49614/12057Anayasaizleme\(1\)19_03_12.pdf](http://www.tesev.org.tr/Upload/Publication/affad164-be8a-4899-9e63-aa6310a49614/12057Anayasaizleme(1)19_03_12.pdf), accessed on 12 April 2012
6. Online Archives of the Circassian *Jineps Newspaper*, available online at <http://www.jinepsgazetesi.com/>

