



# NEW KNOWLEDGE about Turkey

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Turkey. We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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## ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN TURKEY

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. In practice, the right to be different and the right to equal access to education have been two challenging areas. In this regard, Turkey has an intricate history with regard to the culture of tolerance. The Ottoman millet system praised tolerance during the heydays of the Ottoman Empire, while the nationalist rhetoric promoted a homogeneous nation based on Sunni-Muslim-Turkish elements.

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in two very important areas: education and political life:

- We examined the **educational reform** proposed by the Justice and Development ruling party **to include the Alevi-Bektashi belief and practices** in the curricula of the compulsory courses on religious culture and morality in secondary and high schools.
- We studied the **accommodation of head-scarfed female students in higher education institutions** and examined the perspectives of different actors.
- Finally, we investigated tolerance in the context of the more recent **political participation of Circassian diaspora communities**.

### Evaluation of discourses and practices in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
<b>Alevi-Bektashis' Claims on compulsory courses</b>	Tolerance	Intolerance	Intolerance
<b>Headscarfed Women in higher education</b>	Acceptance	Tolerance	Tolerance
<b>Circassians' political and cultural claims</b>	Tolerance towards folkloric stance	Intolerance	Indifference

## EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND THE ALEVI-BEKTASHI COMMUNITY

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposed a set of curriculum revisions to the compulsory courses on religious culture and morality that include references to the Alevi culture. For some Alevi groups, this reform was perceived as an indication that the participation of Alevi children is tolerated and that their religious differences are accepted through their inclusion in the curriculum and textbooks. This initiative, however, falls short of effectively responding to the Alevi claims for greater respect and recognition of the Alevi identity particularly as regards their places of worship (cemeevi) and their alleged legal status within the Directorate of Religious Affairs.

The government's Alevi initiative may be regarded as an attempt to tolerate religious differences of the Alevis in school life but it does not lead to the recognition of Alevi culture as a unique entity. In essence, the reform tries to identify Alevism with Islam in a way that undermines the claims of a great number of Alevi associations.

## THE HEADSCARF AND EDUCATION

Public policy and political initiatives aimed at lifting the ban on headscarf in universities intend to tolerate the self-presentation of headscarfed women in universities and to assure their right to education. They are however, far from resolving the headscarf issue with reference to the freedom of religion.

Students, academics and policy makers interviewed by the ACCEPT Pluralism team regard the public policies proposed for the resolution of the headscarf issue in universities as palliative solutions. A more structural solution was deemed necessary based on the right to freedom of religion in order to resolve this issue with tolerance, respect and recognition. More specifically, there was a desire to constitutionally ensure that the headscarf ban will no longer constitute an obstacle to the right to education. This constitutional reform was perceived as necessary in order to guarantee the right to religious difference while also preventing the further politicization of the headscarf issue.

## CIRCASSIAN DIASPORA COMMUNITIES & POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Ethnocultural and religious minorities such as the Circassians, Kurds, Armenians and Assyrians have expressed a number of claims with regard to broadcasting, the right to education in mother-tongue, addressing stereotypes in school text books, and their political participation at the local and national levels.

Folkloric festivals, concerts, cultural and religious activities and relevant publications by ethnocultural and religious minorities are tolerated by the Turkish state. It is assumed that such cultural and religious-based activities demonstrate the multicultural nature of Anatolia in a way that essentializes the former Ottoman millet system based on religious diversity. However, since the 1980 military coup, there exists a clear distinction between what is cultural and what is political and political claims are treated as threats posed against national security, not as a quest for justice and equality.

The mobilisation of ethno-cultural minorities such as the Circassians in cultural and folkloric organisations and associations is tolerated by the state institutions in Turkey. What is not yet

tolerated is the politicization of minority claims, and in fact the Circassians have been politically isolated since the establishment of the Republic.

Current state policies formulated in response cannot be considered as an act of respect and recognition. On the contrary, the policies of the current government (Justice and Development Party, AKP) spring from a discourse of cultural and religious based toleration towards such groups, who in fact want much more as they seek constitutional citizenship, as well as equality and respect with regard to their ethno-cultural and linguistic differences.

It seems that the state actors as well as the majority society become tolerant vis-à-vis the minorities when the relations between Turkey and the EU prosper. However, tolerance becomes very minimal in times of detachment from the EU as parochial nationalism is embraced by the majority society.

## LAICISM, INFIDELITY OR PIETY?

The most crucial impact of strict laicism in Turkey is that it **polarizes and diffuses the society between laicists**, who comply with the state's principles and interests, and Islamists, who challenge the state and the regime with their social and individual preferences. In fact, the state-centric process of secularization divides the society between first-class citizens and second-class citizens. Since the state discourse of laicism is imposed on individuals, these individuals have internalized the state's control over their religious claims. Top-down simple modernization run by the state has created believers of Laicism on the one hand, and believers of Islam on the other. This dichotomy still lingers today though in a different way, as the Islamists have become the mainstream imposing their power on the so-called Laicists.

Following the French model of *laïcité*, the choice of the early Republicans to integrate the principle of Laicism into the Turkish Constitution in 1937 indicates that the Kemalist elite was not at all preoccupied with the elimination of religion from public space. On the contrary, they affirmed the fact that Turkish society was religious in essence. The main rationale behind the principle of Laicism was not to wage war against Islam, but to provide individuals with the power to challenge the rising authority of the Islamic clergy since the late 18th century. Laicism derives from the French word *lai* (or *laïque*, in contemporary usage, lay people in English, or *inanlar* in Turkish), meaning "of the people" as distinguished from "the clergy". Hence, laicism underscores the distinction between lay members of a church and its clergy. In other words, Laicism in a way rescued Islam from the tutelage of mediating institutions as a matter of 'belief' and 'conscience' by institutionally supporting, financing, and promulgating a different version of Islam and its view of religion's relation with power and social life.

In this sense, rather than antagonizing Islam, laicism aimed at empowering individual believers vis-à-vis the clergy and enabled the Kemalist elite to unify the nation through the institutions of the Ministry of Education and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*). The perception of the AKP elite that Laicism (*Laiklik* in Turkish) was "antireligious secularism" ignores the regime's religious policy, and fails to consider the existence of different versions of political Islam in Turkey, one of which was enshrined in power until the AKP's electoral success.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is a need to further encourage a **meaningful debate on the freedom of religion**. Tolerance vis-à-vis religious diversity is not discussed with reference to the freedom of religion as the ideology of laicism has so far dominated all the relevant discussions about the public and private divide, the practice of religion in everyday life, and the freedom of faith. Generating

a debate on the freedom of religion could also contribute to the resolution of several other problems such as the historically loaded hostilities between Muslims and non-Muslim groups.

There is a need to reform the curriculum of the courses on religion and ethics: Rather, the emphasis should be on **teaching history and sociology of religions**. Such a change could immediately create a cohesive society in which no group would feel threatened by the hegemonic discourse of Sunni-Islam.

**Demystifying Laicism:** The term laicism should not be portrayed as if it is against religion. Binary opposition between the so-called Kemalists and the Islamists could be deconstructed through **a discourse underlining that Laicism actually aims at empowering the faithful citizens against the clergy**. Moreover the terms laicism and secularism which are often interchangeably used should be distinguished. Secularism simply means “of the world” (dünyevi in Turkish), and it differentiates between matters of religiosity and matters of the world.

A Plural society and the right to difference: Homogenizing regimes of nation-state have so far been in denial of ethno-cultural differences. There is **a need for policy makers to openly discuss 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 and recognition of ethno-cultural diversity in public space.

Ethnocultural diversity is richness: Policy makers should not perceive ethnocultural and religious claims as a security challenge against the nation and the state. In this regard, national education should also embrace the components of the Turkish society falling outside the category of Sunni-Islam-Turkish identity. This could be in part pursued through **the revision of history courses to include information recognizing the contribution of all different groups in the making of the modern Turkish society**.

Alternative ways other than toleration: 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**. These dimensions ought to be underlined in order to distinguish from the Ottoman culture of tolerance which was not egalitarian.

## FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings - presented here, see:

### **Comprehensive Report on Turkey: The Myth of Tolerance**

By Ayhan Kaya (Istanbul Bilgi University)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/23260>

Other relevant publications include:

### **2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe**

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

**PROJECT IDENTITY**

<b>Acronym</b>	<b>ACCEPT PLURALISM</b>
<b>Title</b>	<b>Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe</b>
<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>
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<b>Web site</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
<b>Consortium</b>	17 partners (15 countries)
<b>Coordinator</b>	European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
<b>Scientific Coordinator</b>	Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou
<b>EC officer</b>	Ms. Louisa Anastopoulou, Directorate General for Research and Innovation, European Commission