

IS THERE A BALKAN DIASPORA IN TURKEY?

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After its conquests in the Balkans, the Ottoman Empire implemented a settlement policy in order to change the demographic characteristics of the region and to ensure that those who could rebel against the administration within their own lands became minorities in different geographies of the empire. In this context, Muslim communities who were sent to the Balkans from Anatolian lands - to Turkify/Islamize the Balkan geography - started to migrate after the 1877-78 Ottoman-Russian War. Not only those of Turkish origin migrated from the Balkans to Turkey. People of other nationalities such as Bosnians and Albanians, who have been converted to Islam under the Ottoman rule, also immigrated.

The mass migrations from the Balkans to Turkey can be categorized into three different periods. The first one was in 1877-78 that took place due to the Ottoman-Russian War. The second one took place in 1912-13, during the Balkan Wars, which brought an end to the Ottoman rule

in the Balkans. The last one happened after the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

The exact number of Balkan people who migrated to Turkey cannot be determined. However, Kemal H. Karpat (2012) stated that Ottoman official statistics, which do not include a large number of people who managed to cross the Ottoman and Turkish borders illegally, reported that a total of 1.5 million people left the Balkans between 1878-1918.¹ On the other hand, McCharty (2014) claimed that according to the data obtained from different sources, 1,253,500 people became refugees during the Ottoman-Russian War alone.²

The problems emerging in the different periods of post-Ottoman states in the Balkans also influenced the nature of migration to Turkey. When the 1923-2007 Balkans to Turkey migration rate is analyzed, it is seen that more than half of the immigrants came to Turkey



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before WWII. The main reason for the high immigration number in this period was the population exchange agreement between Turkey and Greece in 1923. Another reason for the high immigration rate was the migration of the Muslim minorities who had to live in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia and who believed that it would be safer to migrate to Turkey.

The “Free Migration Treaty” between Yugoslavia and Turkey in 1953 gave the right to those who were adopting Turkey ethnically or culturally or to those able to be supported by relatives or families in Turkey to obtain a “free-immigrant” visa.³ As a result, around 180 thousand people in 1950-1969 emigrated from Yugoslavia to Turkey. Henceforth, as well as Turks, a large number of Albanians and Bosnians who spoke Turkish also migrated to Turkey.

Those who failed to migrate to Turkey to unite with their families were forced to wait for the “Close Relatives Migration” deal between Bulgaria and Turkey in 1968. The agreement opened the way for Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin - who have familiar and kinship ties with Bulgarian citizens who had migrated to Turkey until 1952 - to move to Turkey. The last mass immigration from the Balkans to Turkey took place in 1989. This migration only took place when the Bulgarian forced assimilation policy - in which the state changed the names of Turks in Bulgaria between 1985-89 - was met with resistance.⁴ Source: Ahmet İcduygu et. al., *Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Göç Politikaları, 1923-2023: Ulus-Devlet Oluşumundan Ulus-Ötesi Dönüşümlere*, İstanbul, Koç Üniversitesi Araştırmaları Merkezi, MiReKoc Araştırma Raporları 1/2014, s. 140-141.

	Bulgaria	Yugoslavia	Greece	Romania	Others	Total	Percentage
1923-1949	220.085	117.212	394.753	121.339	10.109	863.498	52,2
1950-1959	154.473	138.585	14.787	5	4.222	312.072	18,9
1960-1969	2.582	42.512	2.081	259	1.047	48.481	2,9
1970-1979	113.562	2.940	-----	147	139	116.788	7,1
1980-1989	225.892	2.550	4	686	4.457	233.589	14,1
1990-1999	74.564	2.159	-----	126	773	77.622	4,7
2000-2007	138	1.548	-----	2	49	1.737	0,1
Total	791.296	307.506	411.625	122.564	20.796	1.653.787	100
Percentage	47,8	18,6	24,9	7,4	1,3	100	

Source: Ahmet İcduygu et. al., *Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Göç Politikaları, 1923-2023: Ulus-Devlet Oluşumundan Ulus-Ötesi Dönüşümlere*, İstanbul, Koç Üniversitesi Araştırmaları Merkezi, MiReKoc Araştırma Raporları 1/2014, s. 140-141.

With the change of the Bulgarian government in 1950-51, around 150 thousand people had to emigrate to Turkey. However, after the Bulgarian government decided to stop these migrations towards the end of 1951, tens of thousands of people were separated from their families. In the period when the Bulgarian government prohibited immigration, it started to apply Bulgarianization policies on the Turks who remained

After 1923, 48% of immigrants who have immigrated to Turkey were from Bulgaria, 24.8% from Greece and 18.6% from Yugoslavia. After the 1970s in particular, the migration to Turkey from the Balkan countries - except Bulgaria - were severely reduced. The main reason for this is security concerns in migration before the 70's, while economic reasons have affected the migration phenomenon even more

after the 70's. That's why immigration from the Balkans to Turkey decreased, while immigration from these countries to the European countries increased during the same period.

As a result of migration from the region to Turkey since the 19th century until today, it's estimated that 20% of Turkey's population is of 'Balkan origin'. This means that close to 20 million people in Turkey are of Balkan origin.⁵

But based on country of origin, it is impossible to determine the number of Bosnians, or Albanians in Turkey. In this context Mrduljaš Saša (2018) in his study calculated the number of Bosnian origin in Turkey in 2017, based on the 151,504 Bosnians who had migrated to Turkey up to 1921. Saša calculated the population growth in Bosnia-Herzegovina and in Turkey in 1921-1991 and in 1991-2017. Based on the population growth in Bosnia-Herzegovina, he claimed that in 2017, at least 768,259 Bosnians lived in Turkey, and based on the population growth in Turkey, 932,253 Bosnians lived in Turkey.⁶ Since this estimate only takes into account the Bosnians who migrated until 1921, it is safe to say that the real number would be much higher. Indeed, different studies in this field calculate that around six million Bosnians live in Turkey, which is more than the number of Bosnians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandzak put together.⁷

On the other hand in a report prepared by the Republic of Albania's Institute of Statistics on the number of Albanians in Turkey shows that more Albanians have migrated to Turkey compared to other countries and that around 1.5 million Albanians were settled in cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, Bursa, and Ankara as well as in 300 villages of Anatolia. Also, it has been claimed that if the natural increase of Albanians in Turkey is calculated the number should have reached 6.2 million.⁸

It appears that the Balkan origin immigrants and their descendants have deeply assimilated into Turkish society. Balkan immigrants, who have strong relations with the Turks in terms of their shared religion and culture, have become Turks themselves over the years. The use of

Bosnian, Albanian, or other native languages has decreased considerably. Perhaps this served as a wake-up call for the Balkan immigrants not to completely erase their history, since they have started to demand the availability of lessons that teach these languages in Turkey. Nowadays, when online education is becoming widespread, such language education could be given as an elective course. These steps, if taken by the Ministry of National Education, would be highly welcomed by the Balkan origins.

Even though the Balkan immigrants have accepted the Turkish identity, they have also established various associations, foundations and federations in order to maintain the bond with those of the same ethnic identity - like Bosnian or Albanian. Civil organizations related to the Balkans started to emerge since the second half of 1940s. In 2008, it's well known that in close to Turkey's 40 provinces, over 2,200 associations related to the Balkans operate. In addition, there are 12 federations where these associations have established in different cities. Furthermore, there are also associations named as the "Rumeli Businessmen" and "Balkan Businessmen" founded by businessmen of Balkan origin in big cities such as Istanbul, Bursa and Izmir.⁹

Even if Balkan immigrants don't have any political party, they hold critical positions in Turkey's politics. Recently elected president of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey Mustafa Şentop is a member of a Balkan immigrants family. Sabri Demiri, who was recently appointed as Chief Advisor to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is also a Yugoslav immigrant.

Lately, there are allegations that since the start of the 2000s some Albanian people supporting a discourse that they are not Turkish in nationality but they are the people of Turkey. Despite these allegations, the Balkan immigrants are the ones who tend to fulfill their civic duties fully and completely to the Turkish State, and they do not 'create problems' against their current home and nation; on the contrary, they are a group of people that acts with responsibility. There are

many Balkan immigrants that show patriotism and sensitivity to Turkey's issues, they don't see themselves as parasites in Turkey, in fact, they see themselves as the real owners and essential elements of the country.¹⁰

Balkan immigrants in Turkey which are a substantial part of the population and which have a significant influence in business and politics are not trying to achieve the goals of their descendants' country of origin, rather they are trying to contribute to the interests of Turkey in the Balkans.

Question. Does the presence of Balkan immigrants in Turkey prove the existence of a Balkan diaspora?

First, regardless of which ethnic groups they belong to, the Balkan immigrants have put aside their ethnic identity and have accepted the

Turkish upper identity. So it is difficult to say that there is a Balkan diaspora in Turkey.

Yet, in spite of this acceptance, the presence of non-governmental organizations that form the core of their sub-ethnic identity such as Albanian and Bosnian indicates that there is a Balkan diaspora in Turkey. Another reason to believe that there is such diaspora is due to their reaction when there is an attack on their sub-ethnic identities and values.

Finally, the issue of a Balkan diaspora is not an easy one to discuss because the Balkan immigrants don't try to influence the politics of Turkey in line with the objectives of their native countries. On the contrary, they have to serve Turkey's objectives in the Balkans. For this reason, it would be more correct to say that there is a Balkan origin Turkish diaspora within the country.

Endnotes

¹ Kemal H. Karpat, *Balkanlar'da Osmanlı Mirası ve Milliyetçilik*, çev. Recep Boztemur, İstanbul, Timaş Yayınları, 2012, s. 248.

² Justin McCarthy, *Ölüm ve Sürgün Osmanlı Müslümanlarının Etnik Kıyımı: 1821 -1922*, çev. Fatma Sarıkaya, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2014, s. 106-107.

³ Taner Zorbay, *1950'ler Türk Dış Politikasında Göç Meselesi Yugoslavyadan Türkiye'ye Serbest Göç ve Köprülü/Titoveles İlçesi Örneği*, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi, Cilt 7, Sayı 1, Yıl 2017, s. 324.

⁴ Hüsamettin İnanç ve Betül Yazıcı, *Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Göçler, Bulgaristan Diasporası ve Uluslaşma*, Balkan ve Yakın Doğu Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi, Cilt 4, Sayı 4, Yıl 2018, s. 78, 86-87.

⁵ Kader Özlem, "Balkan Göçmenleri ve Türkiye'deki Siyasi Seçimler" 14 Nisan 2011, https://www.21yyte.org/tr/merkezler/bolgesel-arastirma-merkezleri/balkanlar-ve-kibris-arastirmalari-merkezi/balkan-gocmenleri-ve-turkiyedeki-siyasi-secimler#_ftn5 (Erişim Tarihi: 24.09.2020).

⁶ Saša Mrduljaš, *Broj Bošnjaka iz Bosne i Hercegovine u Turskoj, Mostariensia : časopis za društvene i humanističke znanosti*, Vol. 22 No. 2, 2018, s. 157-160.

⁷ Robert Rigney, *Bošnjaci u Turskoj imaju dvije želje: obaviti hadž i posjetiti Bosnu* <https://www.preporod.info/bs/article/14379/bosnjaci-u-turskoj-imaju-dvije-zelje-obaviti-hadz-i-posjetiti-bosnu>, çev. Aida Čičak (Erişim Tarihi: 13.10.2020).

⁸ INSTAT, *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra*, <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/6547/diaspora-2019.pdf> (Erişim Tarihi: 02.09.2020), s.10.

⁹ Özcan Pehlivanoglu, *Rumeli - Balkan - Trakya Sivil Toplum Örgütleri*, 25 Nis 2008, https://tasam.org/tr-TR/Icerik/3750/rumeli_-_balkan_-_trakya_sivil_toplum_orgutleri (Erişim Tarihi: 20.09.2020).

¹⁰ Kader Özlem, "Balkan Göçmenleri ve Türkiye'deki Siyasi Seçimler" 14 Nisan 2011, https://www.21yyte.org/tr/merkezler/bolgesel-arastirma-merkezleri/balkanlar-ve-kibris-arastirmalari-merkezi/balkan-gocmenleri-ve-turkiyedeki-siyasi-secimler#_ftn5 (Erişim Tarihi: 24.09.2020).