

THE NORTH CAUCASIAN DIASPORA IN TURKEY

Mokhmad Akhiyadov



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The migration from the North Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, which began in the mid 19th century and continued until the early 20th century, is undoubtedly one of the vital factors determining the social structure of the Turkish Republic today. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire and Turkey's social structure has left a significant mark on the North Caucasian diaspora. Therefore, there is a mutual interaction between the two phenomena in question.

Most of the North Caucasian diaspora, which continues its presence in many countries, is located in Turkey. However, it is difficult to determine the exact number of North Caucasians in Turkey; various sources suggest the numbers vary between one and seven million. The most accepted number is 3-4 million.

North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey began to emerge in the second half of the 19th century when the region suffered occupation by the

Russian Empire, who launched a mass forced migration of Caucasians to the Ottoman Empire. The migration of the peoples of the North Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire can be divided into three periods. The first and largest wave of immigration corresponds to the immigration of the Adyghe-Abkhazian ethnic groups living in the western North Caucasus between 1859 and 1866 when the Caucasian War ended. This wave of migration was called the "Great Deportation". The second wave, different from the first, is the migration experienced within the Ottoman Empire after the Russo-Turkish War in 1877–1878. When the Ottomans lost their lands in the Balkans in the 1870s, they moved the North Caucasians, which had previously settled in this region, to various regions of the empire, especially Palestine, Syria, and Anatolia. The last mass migration took place in 1919-1928 when the Soviet rule was established in the Caucasus.¹

It is almost impossible to determine exactly how many people came to the Ottoman Empire borders when the Caucasian migrations started in the 1850s, gained momentum during the Crimean War, and reached its peak in 1864. The most important reason for this is that there are no sources showing the number of immigrants who can be verified.² Although there are no exact numbers on this subject, the number of North Caucasians who had to leave their homeland as a result of Russian expansion and immigrated to Ottoman lands in the period from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century is approximately 1.5 million.³

The migration, which continued for various reasons from the 1850s to the 1950s, resulted in the settlement of millions of immigrants to various parts of the Ottoman Empire. The population of Rumelia - along the Black Sea coast - mostly exiled by ships to Anatolian lands known as the “Circassian line”, where a large Caucasian population lives today. This line starts from Sinop-Samsun and extends to Çorum, Tokat, Sivas, Kayseri (especially Uzunyayla region), Maraş, Adana, and Hatay respectively. Today, there are many villages of various Caucasian peoples in South and East Marmara.⁴ However, Caucasian peoples did not only settle in Anatolia but also in other parts of the Ottoman Empire such as the Balkans, Syria, Jordan and Egypt.

It should be noted that the Ottoman State subjected its immigrants from the Caucasus to a planned settlement policy and that this policy cannot be read separately from the empire’s domestic policy and geopolitical struggle that continued on its lands. In this context, a significant number of Caucasians were settled in Ottoman provinces adjacent to or not far from the Balkan and Caucasian regions, where the borders between the Ottoman and Russian empires crossed. Thus, the Ottoman administration tried to keep the Caucasus peoples, who had a solid experience of war and also a sense of historical revenge against Russia, from a possible war with it.⁵ This was a matter of concern to the Ottoman foreign policy. Apart from that, another factor affecting

the settlement policy of the Ottomans towards the Caucasian peoples is directly related to the social structure of the country. The Caucasians were subjected to a planned settlement policy with the idea that ethnic groups and religious minorities within the Ottoman State might rebel.⁶ And by the 1880s, the settlement geography of the Caucasians in the Ottoman Empire began to take its final shape and concentrated mainly in four regions of the country: Western Anatolia (particularly Northwest Anatolia), Central Anatolia (Circassian line), Eastern Anatolia, and Arab provinces (Syria, Palestine, and Jordan).

The dispersal of the Caucasian diaspora in various nation-states left great marks on them. However, the diaspora has been exposed to different developments depending on the country in which it is located. For example, while the North Caucasian peoples living in Jordan have various privileges as the founding people of the state, the diaspora in Turkey has been assimilated as a result of the Turkification policy in the early years of the republic.

The institutionalization of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey is equivalent to that in the first quarter of the 20th century. This situation undoubtedly depends directly on the developments in the Ottoman Empire. As a result of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 when a constitutional monarchy emerged as an alternative to absolute monarchy and the formation of some democratic political institutions in the Ottoman, the position of the North Caucasus diaspora began to strengthen. As a matter of fact, the years of the Committee of Union and Progress (1908-1918) are described as the “golden age of Caucasians in the Ottoman Empire”⁷ by the North Caucasian diaspora.

Behind the emergence of such a positive environment for the North Caucasus diaspora, lies the socio-political change in the Ottoman Empire at that time, as well as the developments in the country’s foreign policy. This is directly related to the Pan-Turkism doctrine, which was followed by the Young Turk administration and aimed to unite all Turkic peoples under the

leadership of Istanbul, all of which had suffered the occupation of the Russian Empire. Knowing that it was not possible to unite Anatolian and Central Asian Turks without including the Caucasus, the Ottoman administration was also aware of the importance of the North Caucasus diaspora in terms of its foreign policy.⁸

In 1908, when a positive socio-political environment emerged for the North Caucasus diaspora, the Society for Circassian Unity and Mutual Aid was established, which united the leading representatives of the Caucasian diaspora think tanks. Although the association had no official political aims, it set an important example for the various political institutions to be established by the North Caucasus diaspora in the future. However, with the 1923 Lausanne Treaty, all the societies established by the Caucasian diaspora were closed because the definition of “minority” was established on the basis of religion, and Muslim groups were not counted as minorities.⁹

Refugees from the North Caucasus who moved to Turkey in the 1920s had some differences in terms of identity protection and political activity from their compatriots who immigrated in earlier periods. The most important difference between them was that when immigrants who settled in the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century became part of the Turkish society, the immigrants of the 20th century perceived Turkey as a temporary refuge. Because most of the 1920 immigrants were politically active people who fought against the Soviet regime and were continuing their struggle abroad with the desire to return to their homeland - the North Caucasus - after the collapse of the communist regime. Because of this approach, they made great efforts not to lose their ethnic identity and not to be assimilated into Turkish society.¹⁰ However, it should be noted that the USSR victory in the Second World War greatly disappointed North Caucasus immigration. After this date, their struggle to protect their identity began to fade and their process of integration into the Turkish society began.

Although between 1923-1945 the authorities of the Turkish Republic continued to actively use the Caucasian factor in its foreign policy, the Caucasian diaspora viewed this period as a “period of silence”. On the other hand, Turkey’s democratization process after WW II and during the 1950s has affected the Caucasian diaspora in a positive way. It should also be noted that, along with Turkey’s domestic policy, positive shifts in the country’s foreign policy during this period were also important for the Caucasian diaspora. As a result of this policy, the North Caucasians and Azerbaijanis established the Society of the Hand of Friendship in 1946, which had an important place in Turkey’s history.

With the second wave of Soviet immigrants after WW II, the representatives of the North Caucasus, who preferred Turkey as a refuge, began to give preference to countries in Western Europe and the United States. On the other hand, in the 1960s and 1970s, North Caucasian emigrants in Turkey began to withdraw from the political scene for many years. Meanwhile, the young generation of North Caucasian immigrants began to participate in the debate between the left and the right that erupted in Turkey; over time, they became more concerned with Turkey’s internal problems than the North Caucasus.

Since the mid 20th century, the migration from the countryside to the cities in Turkey has played an important role in the development of diaspora consciousness among the North Caucasian diaspora. In this process, the associations established by the diaspora in big cities are of primary importance. Although after the coup on September 12, 1980, the activities of Caucasian diaspora associations were stopped like every other association in the country. Henceforth, by the end of the 1980s, the North Caucasians in Turkey took the final form of the diaspora and literally ceased to be an immigrant.

With the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, Turkey had a chance to leave the Moscow-based policy and develop a direct relationship with newly emerged states. During this period, the

North Caucasian diaspora began to take an active part in Turkey's regional policy. Moreover, the developments in the North Caucasus region, especially the Georgian-Abkhaz and Chechen-Russian wars in the early 1990s have played a unifying role for the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey. Since this period, there was a rapid increase in the NGOs established by the diaspora.

Although today the diasporization of the North Caucasians in Turkey has been completed, it is very difficult to say that they acted in the alliance. Some North Caucasian diaspora established NGOs clearly reflect the views that stand as a major obstacle to acting in unity. In this context, the main cause of the greatest separation is the two approaches that developed in the diaspora regarding "ethnic identity identification". The first approach tries to gather all ethnic groups within the North Caucasian diaspora under one identity (Caucasian). The second approach views that there is no single Caucasian identity and therefore they are separated by each national identity such as Chechen, Circassian, Ossetian etc. There were heated debates between these two approaches, and as a result, two concepts with a negative connotation emerged: "macron" (macro nationalist) and "micron" (micro nationalist).¹¹

It should also be noted that although this micro-macro distinction is relatively new, it has a long history. In fact, this separation is slightly associated with the left-right debate in Turkey and even with the millet system of the Ottoman Empire. In this context, for a long time in the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently in the Turkish Republic, the identification of all ethnic groups of the North Caucasus under the common ethnic name "Circassians" was and is the dominant trend. Some members of the North Caucasian diaspora, who were against this approach, joined Turkey's leftist movement because they saw it as the only way out to preserve their ethnic identity. Due to their leftist views, this part of the Caucasian diaspora saw the Soviet Caucasus as "paradise" and always dreamed of returning there. Hence, this group has come to be defined as "Returners". Those affected by the Turkish

"right" from the North Caucasus diaspora were generally referred to as "Unifiers" because the idea of the United Caucasus was dominant. As a result, when it came to the beginning of the 2000s, the concepts of "macron" in return of "Unifiers" and "micron" in return for "Returners" began to be used by the North Caucasian diaspora.

It also appears that this distinction is clearly reflected in the NGOs established by the North Caucasian diaspora. Although most of the NGOs claim to represent all ethnic groups in the Caucasus diaspora in Turkey it is not so in practice. For example, the Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED), which was established in 2003, is known as an NGO dominated by Circassians (Adyghe), although it gathered more than 50 associations under one roof. In contrast, the Federation of United Caucasus Associations established in 2004 and the Federation of Circassian Associations that emerged in 2013 are known for defending the idea of unity of all the peoples of the North Caucasus. With the establishment of the Federation of Abkhazian Associations in 2010, the Abkhaz-Circassian rupture occurred within the North Caucasus diaspora. Thus, "micro nationalism", which is common in some segments of the diaspora, prevents it from acting in unity.

Recently, there has been a process of liberalization in policy towards ethnic minorities in Turkey. This has opened up certain opportunities to stop the assimilation of the Caucasian diaspora in the country. As a matter of fact, the diaspora should be aware that there has been a significant increase in the efforts to protect their languages and cultures. These changes in Turkey affected not only the cultural sphere in the diaspora but also began to give positive results in the political space. The Pluralist Democracy Party, founded in 2014, is a good example. However, despite the positive developments in Turkey's socio-political life, the North Caucasus diaspora has difficulty in eliminating segregation. And apparently, this problem will continue to be seen in the coming years.

Endnotes

- ¹ Arsen Avagyan, Türk Dış Siyasetinde Kuzey Kafkasya Siyasi Muhacereti (1920-1971), Belge Yayınları, 2013, s. 8-9.
- ² Ferhat Berber, “19. Yüzyılda Kafkasyadan Anadolu’ya Yapılan Göçler” (Migrations from Caucasia to Anatolia in the 19th Century), Karadeniz Araştırmaları Dergisi, Güz 2011, S.31, s.33.
- ³ S.İ. Akkiyeva, K.F. Dzamihov, Naslediye Muhacirov Kak Politiceskiy Aktiv, http://svop.ru/%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B5%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%8B/nauchno-prosvetitel'skiy_p_r_o_y_e_k_t/_%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D1%83%D1%85%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%BA-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8/
- ⁴ Bahar Ayça Okçuoğlu, “Türkiye’de Çerkes Diasporası: Kimlik İnşası ve Referansları” (Circassian Diaspora in Turkey, Identity Construction an its References), Sosyoloji Araştırmaları Dergisi, S.22, s. 126.
- ⁵ Georgiy Çoçiyev, Severokavkazskaya Diaspora v Turtsii (The North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey), <http://www.gazavat.ru/history3.php?rub=17&art=308>
- ⁶ Okçuoğlu, op. cit., p. 127.
- ⁷ Avagyan, op. cit., p. 24.
- ⁸ Çoçiyev, op. cit.
- ⁹ Okçuoğlu, op. cit., p. 132.
- ¹⁰ Avagyan, op. cit., p. 11.
- ¹¹ Veronika Tsibenko, “Micro And Macronational Identity Of The Circassian (Caucasian) Diaspora in Turkey”, Vestnik Nauki, V. 12, 2017, p. 197.