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The Cultural and Political Claims of the Caucasian Minorities in Turkey

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Abstract More than in the previous years, in 2019 the organisations and the social media groups of the Turkish citizens who are fully or partly descendants of Caucasian refugees looked active not only around 21 May, their "genocide commemoration" day, but also around 2 May, remembering the 2 May 1923, when the Kemalist government deported Eastwards many Circassian villages located in Western Anatolia. In sum, we are witnessing that now the "Circassians of Turkey" (a term which generally includes North-Eastern Caucasians like Chechens and South-Eastern Caucasians like Abkhazians) are struggling not only for a worldwide recognition of the "Circassian genocide", but also for an open debate on what has meant and means being "Circassian" in the Republic. This paper tries to draw an updated picture of what is up within Circassian *intelligencija* and what Caucasians of Turkish nationality are aiming at.

Keywords Circassians. Turkey. Political Debate. Identity. Abkhazians.

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1 The Background

This contribution is an ideal sequel of my book about the Circassian ordeal (Grassi 2014, 2017, 2018).[1] The 21st of May is the day when the Circassians of Turkish nationality, who are the greatest Circassian community in the World and form the 'golden share' of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey, mobilize and publicly commemorate the extermination and expulsion their ancestors suffered in 1862-4 due to the expansionist policy of the Tsarist Empire. And generally the other Caucasian-origined communities join them. But recently I have noticed a secondary mobilization around the 2nd of May. On 2 May 1923, eight months after the successful military conclusion of the Independence War, the Kemalist government deported Eastwards many Circassian villages located in Western Anatolia. The communities of these villages were accused to have collaborated with the Greek occupants, because they had been in contact with the most famous and ill-famed guerrilla leader of the war, Ethem the Circassian.[2] Merging Islam and bolshevism, this brave and skilled chieftain wanted the resistance of the Muslim communities of Western Anatolia against Greeks and Allies to evolve in a socialist revolution. In Ankara he had realized that the leading pashas had far different ideas, so at the end he rebelled against Mustafa Kemal's superior authority and escaped to the Greek-occupied area, living in exile the rest of his life (Grassi 2020, 197, 206, 211, 214). Hence, he is the only famous personality of contemporary Turkey whose nickname is directly associated to a non-Turkish community and at the same time the villain *par excellence* in the official history of Contemporary Turkey. Naturally, the Circassians of Turkey are very sensitive about this issue. They try to contrast this deprecative association in two ways. The first one is to recall the many Circassian-born Turkish military and civilian personalities who well served the Turkish state and the Turkish nation;

1 Grassi 2014, 2017 (shortened Turkish translation), 2018 (shortened English translation). Here I refer to the English version. To tackle once and for all an annoying yet unavoidable question and go ahead with the topic of this paper, my personal opinion is as follows: the war of extermination led by the Tsarist Empire against the native populations of the North-Western Caucasus and the expulsion of nearly all the survivors are one of most terrible misdeeds of 19th century; the ferocious elimination of the Armenians from Anatolia in 1915 was one of the most terrible misdeeds of 20th century; however, let them be labelled or not 'genocide', it is wrong to match them with the *shoah* and more in general with mass murders having a decisive ideological root.

2 See for example Yelbaşı 2018. *Çerkes* Ethem obviously was Circassian, but in this case *Çerkes* had an onomastic function, to distinguish him from other Ethems in a society where regular Western-type family names were absent (Republican Turkey adopted them in 1934-5). In some documents and works he can be mentioned as *Çerkez* Ethem. Actually, even today the Turkish word for 'Circassian' swings between the forms *Çerkes* (prevailing) and *Çerkez*. To be unquestionably Circassian are the *Adige*s (sometimes transcribed as *Adıge*). They accept and use the word *Çerkes* but prefer to be known as *Adige*.

the second one is to challenge the official history in order to partially excuse Ethem's shocking choice. This latter is a risky way, because Atatürk's assertions against Ethem, especially the assertions included in the 36-hours speech he delivered in six days in 1927, are the cornerstone of the official history. It means that it is hard to belie official history without belying the Great Leader himself. Moreover, the apology of Ethem has been for long time a matter of far-left intellectuals, a quite embarassing aspect for conservative Circassians. The situation has changed in the last two decades, when a wider range of intellectuals, including some religious and conservative ones, have begun to openly challenge the official history. The crucial issue in this quarrel is the battle (more exactly the battles) of Gediz, in Western Anatolia (24 October-12 November 1920). In the abovementioned megaspeech Atatürk shortly and plainly stated that the Turkish forces, including Ethem's warriors and units of the regular army under the command of Ali Fuat Cebesoy, had been defeated by the Greeks, whereas a growing number of authors argue that around Gediz the Turkish forces scored a victory.[3]

I have already recently observed that Atatürk imposed silence not only on the Armenian question but on almost everything that had happened before 1923 and that Kemalist regime was concrete poured over an exploded volcano (Grassi 2018, 132). Like the other non-Turkish Muslim communities, along the single-party era the Circassians and the other Caucasus-origined communities experienced a complete denial of their identity – with the unpleasant exception of the public deprecative memory of a Circassian who officially had committed betrayal – and could start their struggle for positive visibility and their quest for self-consciousness in the multiparty era, with a strong acceleration in the AKP-era. At the same time, a formerly concealed debate came to the surface: which ones, among the Caucasian population who suffered Russian conquest, are to be considered Circassian, which ones are not? A never-ending debate, I am inclined to argue.

Another misfortune of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey is that in the last twenty years the fight for the acknowledgement of the Armenian genocide has become an identity flag of the Turkish democratic *intelligencija*. The historians and the intellectuals forming this cultural-political *milieu* does not like the policies of massacre and expulsion suffered by Muslim communities such as the Caucasians and

3 See for example Armağan 2018, 74-9. The meaningful title of the chapter is "Tarih açılımı Refet Paşa ve Çerkez Ethem'i de kapsayacak?" (Will the Revisionist Wave in Turkish Historiography Include Refet Pasha and Ethem the Circassian?). Refet pasha was one of the first companions of Mustafa Kemal in the adventure of the war of independence. Like the others, he was quickly dropped out in favour of more acquiescent executors like İsmet İnönü.

the Balkan Muslims to be recalled, because they are afraid that the nationalists use these events as an excuse for the decision taken by the Unionist government to eradicate the Armenians from Anatolia. Indeed, too many times the cold-blooded goal to understand what happened before 1915, during 1915 and after 1915, and why – i.e. what must be the single goal of a historian – has been sacrificed to the tactical needs of a (surely well-meaning) political-cultural fight. Thus Turkish revisionist historiography, just like the Western, looks as much ideologically biased as the Turkish official nationalist historiography, with – as far as I know – one bright exception: Fikret Adanır (Grassi 2019, 157-67).

2 Jıneps

Circassian and, broadly speaking, Caucasian organizations and social media in Turkey and in the other countries where a more or less relevant diaspora is present (websites, social media etc.) are a very complex archipelago.[4] All the organizations and organs of this kind in the world, from the organizations of the native Americans to the Szekely communities of Romania, run the risk to be very narrow-sighted, to remain confined in dealing with the life of the community and in cherishing the memory of the (generally tragic) turning point of their own history. They are generally stuffed with news of conferences, marriages, obituaries, calls to action in occasion of the key-dates, and show widespread deference to general and local political powers. An additional feature of the Caucasian diaspora are the above-mentioned taxonomical discussions: who is Adıge? Who is Circassian but not Adıge? Who is not Circassian? But some years ago a share of the Caucasian diaspora in Turkey realized that the particular identities in Turkey are a great national matter of democracy, that the preservation of the Caucasian identities, the opening of university chairs of Circassian language and culture, the opening of TV and radio broadcasts in Circassian, a wider knowledge of the Circassian genocide must go beyond the fences of the communitarian claims to become a way for a general democratization of Turkey and decided to issue a politically-oriented monthly magazine. Its name is *Jıneps* ('resin drop' in Circassian). It was founded in December 2005, when Turkey was experiencing a positive wave of democratization. This monthly magazine is *also* a tipically bilingual 'bulletin of the community' (the pages in *adige* are written in Cyrillic characters); it is *also* a house organ, but its cover pages are the ones of a militant leftist democratic

4 A brave, uncommon, useful attempt to draw a map of Circassian/Caucasian associationism in Turkey, Germany, Jordan and USA is Mattei 2019.

magazine. Above the name of the magazine one can read the following slogan words: "Bağımsızlık demokrasi özgürlük ve birlik" (Independence, Democracy, Freedom and Unity). Under the name one can read "Çerkeslerin özgür sesi" (The Free voice of the Circassians). As a prominent and combative Circassian intellectual, Yalçın Karadaş, personally confirmed to me, intellectuals, militants and journalists who founded *Jıneps* consciously followed an admirable model, that of *Agos* ('furrow' in Armenian).[5] *Agos* is the bilingual weekly newspaper of the Armenian community of Turkey. Its founder, the great intellectual and journalist Hrant Dink, wanted it to be an authoritative voice of the whole of democratic Turkey. After Hrant Dink's shameful murdering (19 January 2007) *Agos* has remained faithful to Dink's ideals. For example, it regularly hosts the articles of a well-known great Turkish democratic intellectuals as Baskın Oran, who is not an Armenian-origined Turkish citizen like Dink but a 'standard Turk' (I refrain from writing 'ethnically Turk', being the word 'ethnically' pure nonsense in the giant melting pot that is Turkey). Shortly, *Agos* is still a common ground of common fights for all those Turkish citizens who challenge the 'official ideology' and discriminatory policies. *Jıneps* looks as *Agos*' younger brother. Here, however, we must add that the core of the Armenian community in Turkey prefers low profile, just like the Jew... and the Circassian. Indeed, *Jıneps* is the most important and interesting voice of this community, but it is all but universally beloved inside the community itself.

Let's take as example of the inspiration of *Jıneps* three recent issues, starting from March 2019. Nearly the whole of the cover page is dedicated not to a whatsoever Circassian/Caucasian internal issue but to the Women's Day, which is not addressed in a rhetorical and innocuous way. On the contrary, the full-page title is on the brave resistance of the democratic women of Istanbul who had organized a 'feminist night stroll' against the ferocious assaults of the police who had tried to stop them, as their demonstration had been forbidden. Such a title makes us understand that *Jıneps*, just like *Agos*, has remained bravely faithful to its original mission even in these last years, when the level of freedom and democracy in Turkey has dramatically dropped.

The cover of April 2019 issue (clearly 'closed' before 31 March) is far more multifaceted. On the top two titles: the first one, on the left, is about how had been celebrated the Newroz, the great celebration of the Spring equinox: "Newroz'da binler buluştu" (For the Newroz

5 Yalçın Karadaş, while enquiring the complex identity of his community, has been calling for a common democratic struggle of all the ethnical and religious communities of Turkey against the structural 'monist' and repressive attitude of all the regimes who have taken place the Republican age (Karadaş 2009).

thousands of people gathered). As the readers know, the celebration of the Spring equinox is particularly important and historically has taken a mass and solemn form first of all among the Iranian peoples, being later adopted by several neighbouring peoples. It was for a long time forbidden and repressed in Turkey, insofar it was a symbol of Kurdish identity. The 'W' character was long time forbidden as well, because it was not part of the alphabet adopted in 1928. This title is in itself a sign of solidarity towards the Kurds and a sign of dislike of the 'official ideology' which has dominated Turkey since the foundation of the Republic. The second title, on the right, is a "let's start the engine" for the coming anniversary of the *tsitsekun*, the word Circassians adopted as equivalent of the Armenian *metz yeghérn*.[6] Indeed, under the word *tsitsekun* lies in smaller characters the Turkish translation: "Çerkes soykırımı" (Circassian Genocide). The main title this time is about the local elections that were about to be held. Again, no routine: "Daha fazla demokrasi Daha az nefret dili" (More Democracy. Less Hate Speech).

This time, however, the main title does not stretch from edge to edge of the page, as it leaves two columns to the mass shootings of Muslims committed on 15 March 2019 in New Zealand by a 'white supremacist'. But what the title, the photo and the subsequent article emphasize is the strong solidarity towards the Muslim community expressed by New Zealand's Prime Minister. Less important news is given space towards the bottom of the page. A piece of news refers to the "Çoğulcu Demokrasi Partisi" (Pluralist Democracy Party), a recently-funded party born inside the Circassian community. As its name shows, this party claims to be an enlightened and liberal organization, but many liberal and leftist Circassians are quite sceptical about it, arguing that a new little party can only cause a dangerous fragmentation of the democratic forces. This concern was particularly high about the aforementioned local elections. The decision of this party to present its own candidates in Ankara and Istanbul, where a head-to-head race between the candidate of the government and the candidate of the opposition was expected, encountered harsh criticism and arose suspects of being a calculated service in favour of the AKP regime.[7]

6 It is interesting that the word *tsitsekun* does not belong to the alive *adige* language, the language spoken by the better part of those who feel themselves Circassian, but to *ubıh* language, a dead language we know mainly thanks to the researches of great scholars like Georges Dumézil and Hans Vogt and thanks to Tevfik Esenç, the last *ubıh* speaking human being, dead in 1992, who accepted to be recorded (*Jıneps*, May 2019, 1; Grassi 2018, 22-3). Thus, a dead word of a dead language has been willingly chosen to symbolize the demographic and cultural destruction committed by the Tsarist policies.

7 Indeed, in the local elections held on 31 March, 2019, a head-to-head race occurred in Istanbul, where the common candidate of the main opposition parties, Ekrem

Let's come to the number of May 2019. Obviously, the first and many of the following pages are full with the commemoration of the *tsitsekun*. The first page, in particular, contains the translation of Russian sources (dispatches and souvenirs) proving the genocidal policy of the Tsarist state. But this first page is not monopolized by the Genocide Day: two 'windows' are devoted to other issues: the first one to the Workers' Day (1st of May); the second one to the three far-left militants hanged on 6 May 1972, in the frame of the turn of the screw imposed by the Army with the 'coup d'état by communiqué' of 12 March 1971. Especially the leader of the group, Deniz Gezmiş, is the sorrowful icon of Turkish left. Other sides of this first page are devoted to the visit to Turkey of the President of the Russian Republic of Adygeia (23-26 April) and to the results of the local elections. This number includes (page 17) a short article on the *metz yeghérn*, that Armenians commemorate on 24 April. The article records the demonstration held in Istanbul to commemorate the Armenian genocide day. The beautiful title is "Birlikte yaşama kültürüne hançer" (A Stab to the Coexistence Culture). Just before delivering the final version of this paper I can record with pleasure that the number of May 2020 devotes larger space, more exactly the better part of page 23, to the Armenian genocide with a long article titled "Ermeni soykırımı'nın 105. yılı – 'Artık yüzleşin'" (105th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide – 'Face It, Time Has Come').

I have personally and/or publicly asked to some Circassians – all people fiercely claiming what the Tsarist Empire committed was a genocide – if they acknowledged the *metz yeghérn* as a genocide, and all of them replied they did. The ground for a sincere reciprocal and even common recognition and remembrance is ready. Yet, once again the situation of the Circassians is ambiguous. Like the Kurds, they were part of the winning side, the Muslims of Anatolia who during the Armageddon of 1914-22 wiped out almost all the Christians; then Caucasian identity was repressed or – for the Circassians – unpleasantly quoted in reference to Ethem. However the Caucasian-born communities had more than the Kurds a debt of gratitude towards Turks, they did not rebel, they were not subject to terrible repressions like the Kurds, in a higher rate compared to Kurds they were accepted as 'brothers' of the Turks and individually admitted in the cadres of the state. In sum, Circassians are different from the Armenians and the Kurds. For them, putting at the centre of their identity the cult of the genocide means shadowing their being part of the winning Muslim

İmamoğlu, defeated the candidate of the government, the former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, for a handful of votes. The losing side obtained, with specious reasons, the repetition of the elections. In this second round (23 June) İmamoğlu won again, this time with a consistent gap.

side. For the defeated and wiped-out Armenians there is no alternative. For the Circassians there is. Consequently, even a broad-minded magazine like *Jıneps* refrains from openly tackling the Armenian file. As for the psychological relations with the Kurds, they were much more victimized than the Circassians but later, in the years of the democratization process, were given a TV channel and other opportunities of free expression in their native languages. In spite of the recent developments, they still enjoy what they obtained about ten years ago. As a consequence, Circassians are inclined to think Kurds as the community who has obtained what they have not obtained yet. This feeling can be a drawback on the road of harmony and solidarity among Turkey's 'minorities'. Indeed, the last time I went to Istanbul I was invited to attend an event in the frame of the International Day of the Native Languages. I listened to the speeches of representatives of Circassians, Hemshins, Zazas, Abazas, Lazes and Pomaks (all of them frequently switched from their native language to Turkish) and enjoyed their songs. And these representatives more or less openly expressed the desire to see their native language gaining the same position as the Kurdish language. The Kurds were absent.

Jıneps is a monthly 24-page magazine printed in 900 copies. All the people who work for *Jıneps* are voluntary. True, it is read along one month in many circles by more than 900 people. Moreover, it reaches a broader audience with its digital edition. Its likeness is not the one of an amateur bulletin; on the contrary, its graphic is accurate, professional and elegant. But it does not regularly host contributions of prominent opinion makers. *Jıneps* is a first step, and if you do not take the first step you cannot arrive anywhere. But it is still far from having reached the importance of the weekly *Agos*. The Armenian model is all but a popular review. It is a niche organ just like *Jıneps*. However, *Agos* has got a firm place in relevant intellectual circles and an authoritative voice in Turkish political debate. The positions of these two publications symbolize the huge gap still existing between the Armenians of Turkey and the far more numerous Caucasians of Turkey on the way of becoming permanent subjects and participants of the public discourse (let's add that at the moment this gap is even greater if the two out-of-Turkey diasporas are compared). In the Republican era the surviving Armenians of Turkey struggled on as a *de facto* discriminated, half-tolerated, half-bullied *millet*. Caucasians were denied public recognition and remembrance of their sufferings, however they could feel part and were actually allowed to be part of the dominant community, on the condition to dismiss whatsoever public extra-Turkish identity. A man like Hrant Dink knew what to do once the slightest chance to raise publicly the question of 'the 1915' would rise in Turkey, being aware of how dangerous such a task was. Moreover, Dink was in contact – not always in full harmony – with a powerful diaspora, who had raised awareness about the Armenian

tragedy among historians, men of culture, parliaments. Instead, on the one hand no Circassian fighting for the acknowledgement of the Circassian genocide runs the risk to be murdered for this reason; on the other hand, the voice of the Circassians abroad is very feeble and until now unable to influence the international public opinion. This ambiguous position is one of the reasons – maybe the most important – of a persistent incertitude and weakness in the 'political-cultural platform' of the organized Caucasian diaspora.

3 The Abkhazians

In the Caucasian diaspora archipelago the Abkhazians occupy a special place for several reasons. Firstly, despite having ties with the Circassians, they lived in the Southern side of the Caucasus, much closer to the Russian-Ottoman boundary. Secondly, their forced migration, occurred mostly in 1865-7, was a classic migration by land which produced a far lesser rate of casualties than the extermination/expulsion of the *stricto sensu* Circassians. Thirdly, a self-proclaimed independent Abkhaz state, backed by Russian Federation but not recognized by the 'international community' (just like the self-proclaimed South-Ossetian state), has seceded from Georgia. Therefore the consistent Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey does not share the generally anti-Russian mood of the Caucasian diaspora. On the contrary, it must cope with the pro-Georgia stance of the Turkish state.

Turkey records important relations with Georgia, which is a crucial partner in the distribution of Azerbaijani oil and gas. Consequently, the official position of Ankara is quite clear:

> Turkey strongly supports territorial integrity of Georgia and does not recognize the so-called independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Turkey hopes that these conflicts will be resolved within Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty through peaceful means. Turkey also supports Georgia's efforts for integration with Euro-Atlantic organizations.[8]

Under the surface, however, the situation is not that simple. Together with the Mesketian Turks, Abkhazians are a thorny issue in Turkish-Georgian relations. The pure descendants of the Abkhaz refugees in Turkey are some 100,000. They are the core of a much wider 'Abkhaz-participated familiar area'. This core has got direct family

8 Republic of Turkey. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011). "Political Relations between Turkey and Georgia". http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-georgia.en.mfa.

links with the Abkhazians living in Abkhazia and forms a powerful lobby. While Ankara should abide by the rule of economic embargo to the self-proclaimed independent Abkhazia, in practice an intense direct trade is run between Turkey and Abkhazia, tolerated by Turkish authorities. Moreover, many Turkish citizens go to Abkhazia passing through Russia (Göksel 2013, 4-5).[9] Naturally Abkhaz authorities

> view the diaspora as an important political ally, as well as an economic and demographic resource, and have encouraged Turkish Abkhaz to resettle in Abkhazia [...]. As residence in Abkhazia is not a requirement for Abkhaz citizenship (which is open to all ethnic Abkhaz worldwide), the number of diaspora representatives holding Abkhaz passports is much larger. (Weiss, Zabanova 2016, 2)

In sum, Circassians and Chechens want the Republic of Turkey to put in its political agenda the defence of their rights in the international arena and the recognition of 1862-4 facts as a genocide. They know that if Turkey opened these two files serious consequences in Turkish-Russian relations would occur, but they desire it and are covertly disappointed when Moscow-Ankara relations look good. On the contrary, the Abkhazians are sad when Moscow-Ankara relations are tense and are happy when they are – or look – good:

> The Federation of Abkhaz Associations (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu*, or Abhazfed), which is the leading diaspora organisation, established in 2010, has been known for its generally pro-Russian stance. In the wake of the rift between Russia and Turkey, Abhazfed publicly stated its loyalty to the Turkish government, yet refrained from criticising Russia directly. Shortly after Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet on the Syrian border, Abhazfed representatives visited the Russian Ambassador in Ankara to discuss future relations and promote dialogue. In April 2016, diaspora activists and Turkish think-tank analysts took part in a round table in Sukhum(i) with the participation of Abkhaz officials, as well as Russian MPs, businesspeople, and pro-government experts, to discuss options for improving Russian-Turkish relations. It is likely

9 'Militant' Abkhazians affirm that the descendants of the Abkhaz refugees are some 500,000, i.e. much more than the some 125,000 Abkhazians living in the self-proclaimed independent Republic of Abkhazia. As modern Turkey is a giant melting pot, it is absolutely realistic to esteem up to 500,000 the number of Turkish citizens who have *also* Abkhaz ascendants, but this does not mean that the main identity of all of them is Abkhaz (they may have got either a plain Turkish identity or the identity of another particular group). Therefore it looks realistic that the correct figure of people feeling themselves mainly Abkhazian is 300,000 ca., of which no more than 25,000 are native or fluent Abkhazian-speakers.

> that the Abkhaz diaspora's conciliatory stance towards Russia protected it from harsher repercussions. (Weiss, Zabanova 2016, 4-5)

Correspondently, Circassians love Georgia, until now the only state officially recognizing *tsitsekun* as a genocide, and look grimly at the 'opportunistic' choice of the Abkhazians. We can notice that backing the secessions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia Vladimir Putin has succeeded not only in punishing Georgia and in reaffirming Russian presence, if not hegemony, in 'Transcaucasia', but also in dividing the Caucasian diaspora.

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