

THE ROLE OF NORTH CAUCASUS DIASPORA GROUPS IN TURKEY–RUSSIA RELATIONS

Chechen, Abkhazian, and Circassian peoples, including those who had to immigrate to the Ottoman Empire, still remember the difficult and painful times faced in the Northern Caucasus under Czarist Russian rule. In particular, those communities that immigrated to Ottoman lands have impacted Russia-Turkey relations following the Cold War. The 2014 Sochi Olympic Games in Russia was an opportunity for these historical events to be brought to the attention of the world. This article provides an overview of the history of the Northern Caucasian peoples' resistance against Russian rulers, and analyzes the role of Circassian, Chechen, Abkhazian, and Georgian diaspora groups in Turkey's foreign policy decision-making toward Russia. The author argues that the role of the Circassian diaspora in contemporary Turkish foreign policy has been diminishing as Turkey's relations with Georgia and Russia have strengthened.

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Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Czarist Russia was involved in a struggle with the Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty in Iran over different regions, including the Caucasus. Beginning in the 1800s, Czarist Russia gained sovereignty over local political communities (Khanates and Seigniories) in the southern Caucasus. Borders were eventually legitimated by two treaties with Qajar Iran –Turkmenchay (signed on 21 February 1828) and Gulistan (signed on 12 October 1813)– that redistributed land between the two powers. The northwestern Caucasus was particularly important for Czarist Russia’s effort to access warm waters. Czarist Russia was attempting to sequester the northwestern Caucasus region and the entire coastal area of the Black Sea.

After successful campaigns against the Ottomans and the French, as well as victory over the Qajar dynasty in the Southern Caucasus, Czarist Russia faced unexpected resistance from local communities in the North Caucasus region. This was a two-pronged resistance. Circassian nations showed resistance from the first center, a region stretching from the Azov Sea to Ossetia in the North Caucasus. The second center, comprised mostly of Chechens and Dagestani nations, successfully managed to integrate under the “Muridizm” movement and foster religious and political legitimacy.¹

Before discussing the historical events of this region, it is necessary to refer to several points that are important from an interpretive perspective. Soviet historians largely analyzed the history of the North Caucasus and the resistance of Caucasian nations from an ethnological perspective.² For instance, by interpreting the North Caucasus resistance as a Dagestani and Chechen ethnic struggle, they exclude other nations. Such a historical narrative has ideological reasons.

The first reason was to distort the reasons for the emigration of Circassian nations during the wars. Soviet historians did not deny that between the years of 1864 and 1877, 1.5 million Circassian people were deported or massacred by Czarist Russia.³ However, unlike the Soviet interpretation, the North Caucasus resistance in the 19th century had no ethnic basis; it integrated different ethnicities under religious identity and was a struggle against invasion.

The second reason involves speculation that the Ottomans incited the nations of the region to rebel against Russia. Even if the Ottomans had any influence in the

1 Cahit Aslan, “Bir Soykırımın Adı: 1864 Büyük Çerkes Sürgünü,” [The Name of a Genocide: Circassian Mass Expulsion of 1864], *Uluslararası Suçlar ve Tarih* (2006), p. 103, <http://www.avim.org.tr/uploads/dergiler/UST-sayi-1-pdf.pdf>

2 Vasilii Potto, *Кавказская Война от Древнейших Времен до Ермелова* [Caucasus War from Old Ages Until to Yermolov] (Moscow: 2007), p.105.

3 Antero Leitzinger, “The Circassian Genocide,” *Sochifacts.org*, <http://sochifacts.org/1864/item/1094-the-circassian-genocide>

rebellions, such an interpretation by Russian historians should be subjected to a critical approach. While the resistances took shape over a long period and covered the whole Caucasus region, Russian history accounts generally explained all resistances in the Caucasus during Czarist Russia era in connection with Ottomans, thus declaring them illegitimate.

“What is referred to as ‘Circassians’ in Turkey bundles together all the people who came from the North Caucasus.”

Although interpretive approaches shifted to framing the resistance of the North Caucasus nations as a struggle against colonization and colonialism during the early years of the Soviet era, this still did not reflect reality completely. The leadership and struggles led by Sheikh Mansur and Sheikh Shamil were presented as a sample narrative of the struggle against colonialism.⁴ The massacres Circassian nations were subjected to during the deportations were concealed because such a narrative could help realize the legitimate demands of Circassian nations.⁵ A similar Czarist Russia and USSR historiography style continued during the Russian Federation era.

The Struggle Against the Russians and the Deportation

The North Caucasian nations’ struggle against the Russian invasion (1764-1859) resulted in the formation of an administrative system of local nations. Nakshiband-Khalidiya,⁶ a branch of Sufi Islam that spread from the Ottoman Empire to the North Caucasus nations, provided the basis for a new form of political organization in the region.⁷ The “Muridizm” movement was headed first by Sheikh Mansur, and earned legitimacy in society through the support of leader Sheikh Shamil. Within this structure, the North Caucasus nations integrated under a common administration for the first time.⁸

After establishing control over the Southern Caucasus as discussed above, Czarist Russia headed for the North Caucasus, a region that had long stood firm against invasion. While North Caucasus nations actively resisted the Russians from 1817

4 Vladimir V. Lapin, “История Кавказской войны. Пособие к лекционному курсу. – СПб.: Издательство Санкт-Петербургского института истории РАН «Нестор-История»,” [Caucasus War History, Lecture Course], 2003, p. 87.

5 Lapin (2003), p. 82.

6 Moshe Gammer, “The Beginnings of the Naqshbandiyya in Daghestan and the Russian Conquest of the Caucasus”, *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 34, No: 2 (November, 1994), pp. 204-217.

7 Ahmet Akmaz, “Kafkasya Müridizm Hareketinin Önderi İmam Mansur,” [Imam Mansur, Leader of Muridizm Movement of Caucasus] *Yeni Türkiye*, Vol: 3, No: 6, 1972.

8 Akmaz (1972).

to 1859, when Sheikh Shamil's forces finally succumbed to the Russians. There are several reasons for Sheikh Shamil's defeat. First, he was only able to rally the central and eastern regions of the North Caucasus around his cause. Circassians living in the western part of the North Caucasus were worn out after their own long struggles against Russia. Furthermore, Circassians did not view the political regime of Imamate applied by Chechen and Dagestani nations as legitimate.

After its triumph over Sheikh Shamil, Czarist Russia headed for the Circassian regions. Beginning from 1862, Circassians were subjected to regular attacks. Succeeding in the conquest of the western part of the North Caucasus, Czarist Russia defeated ongoing resistance, and forced Adyghe and other nations to immigrate to the Ottoman Empire. Beginning in 1864, nearly 800,000 Circassians were forced to emigrate.⁹ Many died on the way. Circassians sent by ships were settled in regions along the Samsun-Hatay line, which includes Tokat, Amasya, Çorum, Kayseri, Adana, and Kahramanmaraş. The second round of deportations took place following the Russo-Ottoman War (1877-78), when Chechen, Dagestani, Ossetian, and Kabardine ethnic groups were deported *via* the Batumi route.¹⁰ During this period of deportation, Circassians were settled in the central and western parts of the Black Sea Region, as well as western and central Anatolia, where Armenian and Turkish populations lived. Some Circassians settled in areas such as Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, which were under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire at the time. Despite difficult living conditions, the Circassians that were deported to the Ottoman Empire managed to adapt to Ottoman society.

What is referred to as "Circassians" in Turkey bundles together all the people who came from the North Caucasus. In other words, during the Ottoman era, "Circassian" was constructed as a common identity integrating Adige, Ubykh, Abkhaz, Ossetian, and other ethnic groups. It must be underlined, however, that Chechens and Georgians did not define themselves with this identity in the Ottoman period. Circassian, Chechen, and Georgian nations formed close relations with society and the palace during the Ottoman era.¹¹ Figures from these nations played influential roles in the formation of late Ottoman foreign policy.

9 William Armstrong, "The Circassian Genocide," *Hurriyet Daily News*,

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-circassian-genocide.aspx?pageID=238&nID=62673>

10 Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) p. 65.

11 For influential Circassian figures during the Ottoman period, see: Sefer E. Berzeg, *Çerkes – Vubihlar Sochinin İnsanları* [Circassian-Ubykhs: People of Sochi] (Kafkas Vakfı Yayınları:Ankara, 2013). These figures include: (Gogen) Rahime Hanim Valide Sultan (1832-1906), Shahsuvar Hanim (1881-1945), wife of Abdul Hamid, Hayrunnisa Hanim (1876-1936) wife of Sultan Abdulmecid, Shapli Ahmet Pasha, Bekir Sitki Pasha (1843-1918), Hacı Nazim Pasha, Major General Mehmet Rushtu Sakarya (1877- 1951) are well-known figures from the Ottoman palace. Other powerful representatives of Circassians included Berzeg Mehmet Zeki Pasha (1831-1929), the founder of the Circassian branch of *İttihad ve Terakki* (Committee of Union and Progress) and organizations as the Circassian *İttihadi and Teavun Cemiyyeti*, and renowned political figures as Tuga Fuat Pasha, Therkhed Ahmed Cavid Pasha, Dığ Shamsaddin Tletseruk Pasha, Sharpli Osman Ferid Pasha, and Peukh Nazmi Pasha.

After the collapse of Czarist Russia, the local North Caucasus nations which had remained in their homeland again attempted to struggle for their independence. These nations, consisting of different ethnic groups, declared their independence based on mutual alliance, and with the support of the Ottomans, founded the Mountainous North Caucasus Republic in 1917. The fact that every local nation was represented at the governmental level was an important feature of this new entity. However, after just a short period of independence, the Republic was incorporated into the Soviet Union by force, and a significant percentage of North Caucasian academics and political elites immigrated to Turkey.

“By the end of single-party rule in Turkey in 1946, Circassian diaspora was beginning to participate even more actively in political and public spheres.”

During the Soviet era, the borders of the North Caucasus occasionally shifted, and now encompass seven autonomous republics and two regions. In 1921, the Soviet Union began defining borders of republics and autonomous regions in the North Caucasus under the sovereignty of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic: Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Northern Ossetia, and Adyghe were founded as autonomous regions. Stalin’s policy aimed at the deportation of Chechens and Ingushes to Siberia in 1944 resulted in the joining of the Chechen-Ingush territory to the Northern Ossetia autonomous region. In 1957, however, Chechens and Ingushes were allowed to return to their lands and the Chechen-Ingush autonomous region was re-established. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Ingush nation seceded from Chechnya and founded its own independent Republic in 1992.

The Republic of Turkey and the Caucasus Diaspora

Keisuke Wakizaka, who researched the Caucasian diaspora and the organizational activities of the North Caucasus nations in Turkey, criticized the use of the term “diaspora” to describe the entirety of those North Caucasians who immigrated to Turkey. Instead, he stated that only a small portion of them should be referred to as diaspora nations.¹² He clarifies that diaspora, a term with Greek roots, should not be used to describe the dispersion of any people from their original homeland.

¹² Keisuke Wakizaka, *Türkiye’de Gürcü ve Çerkez Diasporasının Gözüyle Abkhazya Meselesi* [Abkhazia issue from the viewpoint of Georgian and Circassian diaspora in Turkey] (Yıldız Teknik University Press: İstanbul, 2012).

According to him, these people should be foreigners in their host state, and must have the desire to return to their homeland. Although in academia the term “diaspora” is classically used in reference to deportation, nowadays it is often used simply to identify any group of people that immigrated in order to seek political or economic shelter.

“*The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia resulted in a schism between Circassian and Georgian diasporas in Turkey.*”

Wakizaka’s distinction is important. For example, today most Circassian and Chechen people in Turkey do not wish to return to their homeland, as they consider themselves to be Turkish nationals of Circassian or Caucasian origin.

Circassians actively took part in the foundation of the Turkish Republic and suffered many losses during the War of Independence.¹³ The fact that the first Prime Minister –Rauf Orbay (12 July 1922–4 August 1923)– and two other ministers serving in first years of the Turkish Republic were of Circassian origin is a point in case.¹⁴ By the end of single-party rule in Turkey in 1946, Circassian diaspora was beginning to participate even more actively in political and public spheres.¹⁵ Among them were several well-known diplomats, businessmen, artists, and poets. Kemal Karpat, an important historian and sociologist in Turkey, stated that the number of Caucasus-originated artists, poets, and writers is 282.¹⁶

There is conflicting data on the number of people with Circassian origins in Turkey. Informal data collected by those in the Circassian diaspora puts the figure at five million. In *The Ethnic Structure of Turkey*, Ali Tayyar Önder states that the

13 Muhittin Ünal, *Kurtuluş Savaşında Çerkeslerin Rolü* [The role of Circassians in the War of Independence] (Kafkas Demeği Yayınları: Ankara, 2000).

14 Minister of Foreign Affairs Bekir Sami Kunduh (3 May 1920 - 8 May 1921) and Minister of Internal Affairs Hakkı Behiç (17 July 1920 – 7 September 1920). Sefer E. Berzeg, *Kafkasya ve Diaspora Yayın Hayatından* [From Caucasias and Diaspora Publications] (Ankara, 2008) p. 55

15 For notable names of Circassian origins in Turkish politics see: Sefer E. Berzeg (2013). These names include: İhsan Sabri Çağlayın, serving as Foreign Minister, Parliamentary Chairman, and Deputy President; and Ekrem Alican, Chairman of the New Turkey Party (13 February 1961 - 17 October 1966), Finance Minister (30 May 1960 - 26 December 1960) and Deputy Prime Minister (25 January 1962 - 25 December 1963) are some examples of political figures with Circassian origins that held prominent positions. Also, Mahmut Cevat Kanpolat, Salah Yargı, and Hamza Osman Erkan, were of Circassian origin. Hikmet Aslanoglu, counselor of Alparslan founder and leader of Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Husrev Yurur, Shukru Yurur, Onder Sav (Şaplı), Minister of 15th government (Ecevit period), Member of Parliament in 16-20-21-22-23th cycles, who was close with Deniz Baykal leader of Republicans, also was known as second body in party between 2000-12 years.

16 Kemal H. Karpat; *The Politicization of Islam; Reconstruction and Identity, State Faith, and Community in the Ottoman State*; (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001).

number of Circassians that immigrated to the Ottoman Empire was 400,000.¹⁷ If we estimate the current number of Circassians living in Turkey according to the number of Circassians that reportedly immigrated to the Ottoman Empire, the number claimed by the Circassian diaspora holds. In “Who Are We”, a report prepared by the Konda Research Company in 2006, 0.19 percent of the 49,000 respondents, polled Turkish citizens, referred themselves as Circassian.¹⁸ If we estimate a voter base of five million Circassians, it will be nearly five percent of the country. Such a voter base is very important for every party in Turkey.

“Since 2011, the Abkhazian issue is no longer a decisive factor affecting Turkey-Georgia bilateral relations.”

The Caucasus Diaspora in Turkey and its Influence

The Organization of the North Caucasus (*Kuzey Kafkasya Derneği*) was founded in Istanbul in 1961.¹⁹ Thereafter, foundations such as the Cultural Organization of North Caucasus (*Kuzey Kafkasya Kültür Derneği*), Caucasus Organization (*Kafkas Derneği*), North Caucasus Organization (*Kuzey Kafkasya Derneği*), Caucasus House (*Kafkas Evi*), Caucasus Forum (*Kafkasya Forumu*), and the Circassian Initiative for Democracy (*Demokrasi için Çerkes Girişimi*) were also formed. Some Georgian organizations, such as the Georgian Cultural Center (*Gürcü Kültür Merkezi*), Georgia Friendship Organization (*Gürcistan Dostluk Derneği*), Georgian House of Culture (*Gürcü Kültür Evi*), Cultural Organization of Batumi Caucasus (*Batum Kafkas Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği*), Artvin-Batum Cultural Solidarity Organization (*Batum ve Artvinliler Kültür Dayanışma Derneği*), and the Georgian Cultural Organizations in Istanbul (*İstanbul Gürcü Kültür Dernekleri*) were also formed. Two significant diaspora journals were also founded: *Chveneburi*²⁰ and *Pirosmani*.²¹

Following the Cold War, North Caucasian Circassians, Chechens, and Georgians of Turkish citizenship began to organize more actively. There were several reasons for this increased activity. First of all, post-Soviet Republics gained independence and

17 Ali Tayyar Onder, *Ethnic Structure of Turkey* (Fark Press: Ankara, 2007) p. 293.

18 “Türkiye Toplumsal Yapı Raporu,” [Turkey’s Social Structure Report] *Konda Research Center* (2006), http://www.konda.com.tr/tr/raporlar/2006_09_KONDA_Toplumsal_Yapi.pdf

19 Ergün Özgür, “Türkiye’deki Kuzey Kafkas Diaspora Kurumları ve Lobi Faaliyetleri,” [Northern Caucasus diaspora organizations in Turkey and lobbying activities] in International Conference: Kafkas Göçü: Savaş ve Sürgün [Caucasia Migration: War and Expulsion], Istanbul, 6-7 December 2010.

20 Gürcü Kültür Evi [Georgian Culture House], <http://www.chveneburi.net/tr/>

21 Pirosmani Journal, <http://www.pirosmani.com.tr/>

borders were challenged, generating conflicts in Georgia with Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in Russia with Chechnya. During these conflicts, Circassian organizations in Turkey, such as the Caucasus Abkhazia Solidarity Committee (CADC – *Kafkas Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi*) and the Federation of the Caucasian Associations (KAFFED – *Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu*), began to operate more actively and became more visible in the press and media. At the same time, however, the first breakup within the North Caucasus diaspora groups in Turkey also occurred. The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia resulted in a schism between Circassian and Georgian diasporas in Turkey. In this conflict, the Circassian diaspora was in line with Sukhumi and South Ossetia, whereas the Georgian diaspora supported Tbilisi.

In 1992, the Circassian diaspora promoted meetings in the Turkish Parliament relating to the events in Abkhazia. The fact that the Circassian diaspora had a larger population and had good relations with politicians gave them an edge in comparison to the Georgian diaspora. Turkish politicians of Circassian origin in Turkey played an important role in this process. Between 1993-96 during the premiership of Tansu Çiller –whose mother was known to be of Circassian origin– the Circassian diaspora lobbied for the independence of Abkhazia. Doğan Güreş, who served as the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces between 1990-94, –whose mother was said to be Chechen and wife of Circassian origin – was seen to be sympathizing with the Chechen population in the Chechen-Russian War (1994-96).²² In 1993, during the Georgia-Abkhazia War some Turkish nationals of Caucasian origin went to Sukhumi to participate in the struggle against Tbilisi. Caucasian organizations reported that five Turkish citizens died in the war.²³

The 2008 Georgia-Russia War and the Circassian Diaspora

During the Georgia-Russia War of August 2008, the Circassian diaspora in Turkey largely stood against the military operations of Tbilisi. The specific concern of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey was related to the spreading of the Georgia-Russia War from South Ossetia to Abkhazia. KAFFED, CADC, and the Caucasian Forum organized demonstrations in Turkey in order to draw the attention of the Turkish and international public opinion.²⁴ These groups mostly appreciated Russian support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia regarding their independence, and they called for Turkey and the rest of the world to support the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

22 Erik Cornell, *Türkiye Avrupa'nın Eşiğinde* [Turkey at the doorstep of Europe] (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1998).

23 “Türkiyeli Abhazya Şehitleri,” [Abhazia Martyrs from Turkey] *Cerkes.net*, <http://www.cerkes.net/biyografi-ve-soylesi/turkiyeli-abhazya-sehitleri-t2283.html>

24 “Çerkesler Gürcistan'ı Protesto Etti,” [Circassians Protested Georgia] *AjansKafkas*, 14 August 2008, http://ajanskafkas.com/haber_19896.cerkesler_gurcistani_proteto_etti.htm

On 22 June 2009, Cihan Candemir, the leader of Federation of the Caucasian Associations and Abkhazian *de facto* President Sergey Bagapsh met with Deputy Chairman of CHP (Republican People's Party), Onur Öymen, asking him to relate the demands of the Circassian diaspora in the Turkish Parliament.²⁵ Öymen presented a motion to Parliament regarding the lack of sea transport between Turkey's Black Sea coast and Abkhazia.²⁶ The diaspora representatives met with Turkish President Abdullah Gül on 30 September 2008 and 5 January 2009 to request direct flights from Turkey to Abkhazia.²⁷ Another success of the Circassian diaspora was the organization of a meeting in Abkhazia between Murat Burhan, Turkey's ambassador to Georgia at the time, *de facto* Abkhazian Prime Minister Sergey Shamba, and *de facto* Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia.²⁸

“Coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the Circassian Genocide, the hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi deeply saddened the entire Circassian community.”

Following the Georgia-Russia War of August 2008, the increased attention of Turkish society to the affairs of the North Caucasus was largely due to the reinvigorated activities of the Circassian diaspora. But it didn't last long.

Georgia's Role in Curbing the Circassian Diaspora's Influence in Turkey

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey-Georgia relations evolved constructively. Alongside the improvement of relations, then-Turkish President Süleyman Demirel attempted to play the role of intermediary between Georgia and Abkhazia *via* the Georgian diaspora. These mediation attempts by Ankara raised concerns among the Georgian community both in Turkey and Georgia. The main goal of the Georgian diaspora in Turkey was to develop relations with Turkey without being hostage to the Abkhazian issue.

25 “Annual activity report 2008-09,” *KAFFED*,

http://www.kaffed.org/docs/2008_2009_Faaliyet_Raporu_A.pdf

26 “Onur Öymen'den soru önergesi,” [Parliamentary Question from Onur Öymen] *Çerkes.net*, 16 October 2008, <http://www.cerkes.net/turkiye/onur-oymen-den-soru-onergesi-t10066.html>

27 Muharrem Sarıkaya, “Trabzon-Sohum Seferi Başlayacak,” [Trabzon-Sukhumi flights are set to begin] *Sabah*, 17 February 2009.

28 “Tiflis Büyükelçimizin Abhazya Bölgesini Ziyareti Hk.,” [Regarding the Visit Turkish Ambassador in Tbilisi to the Abkhazia region] Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no: 86, 20 March 2010,

http://www.mfa.gov.tr/no-86_-20-nisan-2010-tiflis-buyukelcimizin-abhazyabolgesini-ziyareti-hk_tr.mfa

Saakashvili's victory in the 2004 Georgian presidential elections spurred further development of Turkish-Georgian relations. Another important driver of improved bilateral relations was the AK Party's coming to power in Turkey in 2002, given some of the important names of the Party have Georgian roots.

In time, Tbilisi was able to transform the Abkhazian factor to its favor in their relations with Turkey. In fact, since 2011, the Abkhazian issue is no longer a decisive factor affecting Turkey-Georgia bilateral relations. It is worth considering that the geopolitical triangle of Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan and its resultant structural effects led Abkhazia to be a lesser agenda item in the foreign policy Ankara pursues with Tbilisi.

Following the deterioration of Georgia's relations with Russia after the Georgia-Russia War of August 2008, President Saakashvili successfully attained recognition of the Circassian Genocide committed by Czarist Russia in 1864 by the Georgian Parliament on 21 May 2011. This move created schisms within the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and led a faction to rally around Saakashvili. With the support of the U.S.-based Jamestown Foundation, Georgia was successful in promoting the Circassian Genocide worldwide.²⁹

The Diminishing Role of the Caucasus Diaspora Groups in Turkey-Russia Relations

The fact that the 2014 Winter Olympic Games were held in Sochi was a sensitive issue for the Circassian diaspora living in Turkey. Kizil Chayir (Krasnaya Polyana), the location at which the Winter Olympic Games were held in Sochi, is the main area where an alleged 625,000 Circassian people were killed.³⁰ Coinciding with the 150th anniversary of the Circassian Genocide, the hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi deeply saddened the entire Circassian community, both in Turkey and in the rest of the world. The Circassian community in Turkey, benefiting from the increased international attention focused on Sochi, was able to present these tragic events of the Circassian nation to the world.

In 2007, a Turkey-based diaspora organization, Caucasian Forum, conducted a campaign called the Olympic Genocide, collecting and delivering 10,000 signatures to the International Olympic Committee.³¹ However, the Olympic Committee

29 "Константин Тасиц «Черкесский вопрос» в контексте северокавказской политики Грузии, Российский институт стратегических исследований (РИСИ)," ["Circassian question" in the context of the North Caucasus Policy of Georgia, Russian Institute for Strategic Studies] *Caucasus House*.

30 Joshua Keating, "Did the Age of Genocide Begin in Sochi?," *The Slate*, http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_world/2014/02/05/the_circassians_and_the_olympics_did_the_age_of_genocide_begin_in_sochi.html

31 Anukka Zeynep Ardıç, "Çerkesler Olimpiyatları Neden Boykot Ediyor?," [Why are the Circassians Boycotting the Olympics?] *Institute for Social, Political and Economic Studies*, <http://zanenstitui.org/cerkesler-olimpiyatları-neden-boykot-ediyor-ansukka-zeynep-ardic/>

simply acknowledged their concerns, and Sochi was still selected for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

Following Sochi's selection, the Olympics Genocide Campaign turned into the "No Sochi 2014"³² campaign and continued to voice objections. In 2012, contests for an anti-mascot for the Olympics were held by the Circassian diaspora, like showing documentaries in different regions of Turkey, creating alternative emblems. For example, some had "no Sochi" written on them, while others depicted bears with symbols of the Circassian genocide. Finally, on 15 February 2014, a group from among the Circassian diaspora again held protests in front of the Russian Consulate General in Istanbul, emphasizing that genocide cannot be covered up by the hosting of Olympic Games.³³

"Groups that are in power in the North Caucasus, like the Kadirovs in Chechnya, would like to see Russian-Turkish relations improved and the role of Ankara strengthened in this region."

The Federation of Circassian Associations general director, Dr. Nusret Baş, requested that Turkey not send any sportsmen to the Winter Olympics due to the Circassian Genocide.³⁴ However, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, neglecting the fact that countries such as the U.S., Germany, and the Netherlands had already cancelled their participation, decided to let Turkey take part in the Olympics against all objections of the Circassian community. KAFFED criticized Erdoğan's decision.³⁵

There were a number of reasons behind Erdoğan's decision to participate in the Sochi Winter Olympics. Russian-Turkish relations hold great economic and strategic importance, as the two countries share common concerns over energy and security issues. Due to these reasons, Turkey would not allow the various Caucasian diaspora groups to derail its bilateral relations with Russia.

Another issue weakening the influence of the Circassian diaspora on Turkish policymaking towards the region is that their position regarding Russia embodies a duality. While many have supported Russian-Turkish cooperation when it comes

32 Ardiç, *Institute for Social, Political and Economic Studies*.

33 "Rusya, Çerkez aktivistleri gözaltına almaya devam ediyor!" [Russia continues to detain the Circassian activists], *Ajans Haber*, 17 February 2014,

<http://ajanshaber.com/rusya-cherkez-aktivistleri-gozaltina-almaya-devam-ediyor-haberi/37029>

34 Ahmet Açıkay and Rahmi Yolcu, "Erdoğan'ı Kalpten Kınıyoruz," [We heartily condemn Erdoğan] *Milli Gazete*, 10 February 2014, http://www.milligazete.com.tr/haber/Erdogani_Kalpten_Kiniyoruz/308686#.U14v2IV_srU

35 Açıkay and Yolcu (2014).

to Abkhazia, others focus on the historical wrongdoings Moscow has committed against their nations.

After the Georgia-Russia War of August 2008, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and Ossetia as independent countries was welcomed by communities with Abkhazian background – the Caucasian Circassian Community, the Abkhazia Working Group, and the Caucasian Cultural Fund. These organizations expected the Turkish government to also be positive about this issue.

In evaluating Ankara and Moscow relations in the context of diasporas, we need to consider the Russian point of view. Lobbies that want Russia-Turkey bilateral relations to be positive are comprised of politicians and businessmen of Turkish and Caucasian backgrounds. Groups that are in power in the North Caucasus, like the Kadirovs in Chechnya, would like to see Russian-Turkish relations improved and the role of Ankara strengthened in this region. In fact, Ankara-Moscow relations are very important for North Caucasians, because they see Turkey as being religiously and culturally close to them. Additionally, they hope that the form of Islam in Turkey could weaken the radical Islam that is carried by a majority in this region. Dagestan and Chechnya's local authorities share a common approach on this issue. Tatars from Kazan are also carefully in assessing Russia's relations with Turkey. They have formed lobbies that serve to develop these bilateral relations.

In sum, North Caucasian diaspora groups in Turkey play both positive and negative roles in Turkey-Russia relations. By and large though, as Turkey-Russia relations have developed in the past 10 years, the influence of the diasporas on Turkish foreign policies have diminished.