

Race Against Time for Circassian in Turkey

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Can the North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey grasp an opportunity to revive their historic languages?

New legislation in Turkey is opening the way for a possible renaissance of the Circassian and Abkhaz languages, spoken by the descendants of exiles from the North Caucasus. But leading members of the diaspora community fear that it may be too late to revive widespread use of their mother tongues.

As Turkey pursues membership of the European Union, new regulations came into force last November allowing for long neglected minority languages, such as Kurdish, Circassian, Abkhaz and Laz, to be taught in private institutions. Teaching of all of them had been banned since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

In fact, many associations of Circassians and Abkhaz (in Turkey they are all generally called “Cerkez” – Cherkess or Circassian) had already been running language courses without official permission and were tolerated by the authorities.

The problem was these courses were of poor quality and usually taken by untrained teacher. This reflects, says Arslan Toughuj, a young Circassian student, a wider lack of commitment to these languages, “Despite the restrictions in the law, we were not really subject to the level of linguistic oppression that the Kurds were. We already had these language courses. But within a few weeks of one of them opening only a handful of pupils could be bothered to turn up!

“These classes spectacularly failed to capture the interest of the ordinary people. We ourselves have been indifferent to our language. I do not understand all the fuss created around the change in the law.”

Another innovation permits the broadcast of programmes in minority languages on television and radio, so long as Turkish translation or subtitles were provided. This was approved in December by the Radio and Television High Commission, the independent state body that regulates broadcasting on radio and television.

But large sections of public opinion greeted the reforms with suspicion. The liberal daily newspaper, Vatan, ran the headline “Circassian language and cultural demands”, with a large exclamation mark next to it. However, the same week, the paper published a number of interviews with leading Turkish cinema actors and actresses of Circassian origin, such as Turkan Soray, Esref Kolcak and Ediz Hun, none of whom had previously identified themselves in public as being Circassian.

Turkey has a large North Caucasian diaspora that stems from the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus in 1864. An estimated one million Circassians, 150 thousand Abkhazians and smaller numbers of Ossetians, Chechens, Karachais, Balkars and Dagestanis were forced to leave their homeland and settled in various parts of the then Ottoman Empire, founding nearly a thousand ethnic enclaves in the heartland of Turkey.

Some diaspora organisations claim there are between five and seven million people of North Caucasian descent living in Turkey, but a much more realistic figure is around two to two and a half million.

The Cherkess always had a reputation for being a highly influential diaspora group, loyal to the Turkish state and holding high office in the civil service, army and security services.

However, mass migration from the countryside to the cities in the 1960s and 70s also deprived a new generation of knowledge of their historical languages.

Intellectuals and linguists are now sounding alarm bells and saying that, if no effort is made, knowledge of these languages could be extinct in 50 years' time. Well-known Turkish liberal journalist and political analyst, Cengiz Candar, commented that "[the Cherkess'] attempts to revive their culture and languages are acts of rightful resistance to the historical injustices meted out on them".

However, nationalist commentators on both Left and Right see the campaign of cultural liberalisation as a threat to Turkish statehood. Emin Colasan, a columnist in the mass circulation daily paper *Hurriyet*, said that the Cherkess were loyal citizens but their aspirations were being exploited by "proponents of the EU" and "agent provocateurs".

The Circassians and Abkhaz have more practical issues to worry about, given that actual usage of their languages has declined precipitately. A pressing problem is what script a written form of these languages should be written in. In their homelands, both languages have been written in the Cyrillic script since the late 1930s and almost no one in the diaspora, bar a few thousand educated activists, understands it.

Many foreign scholars of Caucasian languages like George Hewitt, professor of Caucasian languages at the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, question the wisdom of using the Cyrillic alphabet at all, saying the Latin script is better suited both to the complex sound systems of the languages, and compatible with most modern computer keyboards.

However, there is virtually no published literature in the Latin script in Circassian and Abkhaz and almost no teachers familiar with it. Professor Muhadin Kumakhov, a well-known Moscow-based Circassian linguist, has voiced fears that adoption of the Latin script would drive the North Caucasian and diaspora communities even further apart.

Very few Turkish Circassians have gone back permanently to their historic homeland. One who has is Ibrahim Chetaw, a Circassian from Turkey who settled in the North Caucasian republic of Adygeia. He warns that this may be a last chance to pass on the historical language to the next generation.

"If we cannot organise proper language courses with trained teachers and modern teaching materials this time too, we will give our children the impression that our languages cannot really be taught," Ibrahim said. "By doing so we will have wasted yet another historical opportunity for the survival of our language and culture in the Diaspora."

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