

# report

Minority  
Rights  
Group

## Unveiling Discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye

Elçin Aktoprak





Cover Image: An Alevi Cem ceremony held in Kızılcahöyük village, Adıyaman, for those who lost their lives in the earthquake. 23 March 2023.

Credit: Eren Aytug/NarPhotos.



### Acknowledgements

This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of Minority Rights Group Europe and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

### About the author

**Dr. Elçin Aktoprak** has been an independent scholar since she was dismissed from the Faculty of Political Science at Ankara University in 2017 for signing a peace petition. Recently, she works as the coordinator of the School of Human Rights Association. Her research interests include theories of nationalism, minority issues in Europe and Turkey, conflict resolution, and peace studies. She continues to study, teach and write on these topics.

### About the organization

#### Minority Rights Group

Minority Rights Group (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities. Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide partner network of organizations, which represent minority and indigenous peoples.

MRG works with over 300 organizations in 60 countries. Our governing Council, which meets twice a year, has members from 10 different countries. MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and observer status with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). MRG is registered as a charity and a company limited by guarantee under English law: registered charity no. 282305, limited company no. 1544957.

© Minority Rights Group (MRG). All rights reserved.

Material from this publication may be reproduced for teaching or for other non-commercial purposes. No part of it may be reproduced in any form for commercial purposes without the prior expressed permission of the copyright holders. For further information please contact MRG. **ISBN** Online: 978-615-6516-24-4. **Published** April 2024.

**Unveiling Discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye** is published by MRG as a contribution to public understanding of the issue which forms its subject. The text and views of the authors do not necessarily represent in every detail and all its aspects, the collective view of MRG.

# Unveiling Discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye

## Contents

Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
I Legal Framework	6
II Discrimination: A Common Truth	12
III Language: A Must for Cultural Survival	16
Conclusion	20
Recommendations	21
Notes	22

# Executive Summary

This report, titled ‘Unveiling Discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye’ aims to portray the ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities in Türkiye by analyzing the problems and challenges they face in the country. The focus of the report is the discrimination embedded in state policies towards minorities, which has persisted over time and continues to this day, and is an obstacle to the further development of minority rights. The nationalism underpinning the relations between the state and minorities in Türkiye can be understood as the basis for this persistent discrimination. However, it should be noted that discrimination is cascaded, contextualized and intersected with various dynamics, such as religion, class and gender inequality, and that it occurs not only in the context of state-minority relations, but also in relations between dominant groups and minorities, between minorities and within minority communities. Although this report primarily provides a comprehensive analysis of state-minority relations in Türkiye by highlighting the expression of Turkish nationalism in discriminatory practices, various other dimensions of discrimination are highlighted in the context of the cases discussed.

Within this framework, the report begins with a brief description of the background to discrimination in relations between the state and minorities. Against this background, the report is divided into three main sections in order to

provide an up-to-date and comprehensive portrait of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in Türkiye. The first chapter sets out the legal background of discrimination and minority rights in Türkiye to better appreciate the challenges and violations faced by minorities in the country and to provide a resource for people interested in further examination. The second chapter explores discrimination as a pervasive and fundamental problem affecting all minority communities in different spheres of social life, also taking into account the impact of the recent earthquakes. Using real-life examples of rights violations, this chapter explains the struggle of various minorities for their survival and identity, placing these violations within the legal framework described in the previous chapter. The final chapter focuses on linguistic rights, especially the right to one’s mother tongue, which is a pressing issue for many minorities in Türkiye and essential for their cultural survival. Although linguistic rights have a more solid legal basis in Türkiye compared with other minority rights, they are an arena of ongoing struggles that highlight the practical challenges arising from discrimination. The final chapter serves as a case study that illustrates the nature of discrimination against minorities in Türkiye through the lens of linguistic rights and highlights the challenges that minorities seek to overcome in the name of their cultural existence.

## Key findings

- **Persistent and broad scope of discrimination:** In the context of state-minority relations in Türkiye, minorities experience discrimination that is rooted in Turkish nationalism and affects their rights and equal treatment. The challenges faced by minorities are exacerbated by intersectional discrimination, as many can face marginalization on account of not only their ethnicity, religion or language but also on factors such as gender, sexual orientation, disabilities and migration status. Furthermore, such biases affect the dynamics between the state and minorities and contribute to multi-layered discrimination by dominant groups and within and among minority communities.
- **Limited legal protection and the gap between legislation and enforcement:** While Türkiye has some legal provisions to protect the rights of minorities, these often do not provide comprehensive protection and ensure equality. There is a notable gap between the legal framework for the prevention of discrimination and protection of minority rights and their practical implementation.
- **Ineffective institutional mechanisms:** Despite the establishment of institutions such as the Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye (TİHEK) and the Ombudsman Institution (KDK), their effectiveness in combating discrimination against minorities remains limited due to their reluctance to address problems directly.
- **Challenges to the freedom of religion or belief:** Negative perceptions, bureaucratic obstacles and security concerns persist for non-Muslim communities and Alevis in Türkiye.
- **Challenges in political participation and representation:** Discrimination against minorities can be observed in various areas, including legal procedures such as property restitution, participation in parliamentary elections and appointments to public office. Repression against Kurdish participation and representation includes the imprisonment of political leaders, the dismissal of elected officials and the crackdown on Kurdish media outlets.
- **The impact of the earthquakes on minority communities:** Minorities faced discriminatory attitudes and practices during the disaster that exacerbated their vulnerability and victimization in a time of greatest need. They experienced incomplete and inadequate services, and loss of sacred spaces and cultural continuity. The marginalization was especially severe for Roma communities and LGBTQI+ persons.
- **Linguistic discrimination:** Despite the legal guarantees for own-language use in fields from education to the press contained in the Treaty of Lausanne, linguistic minorities continue to face violations of their rights, exclusion and discrimination. The criminalization of language remains a pressing issue for Kurdish activists and poses a threat to all other minority language rights activists.
- **Challenges in language education:** The right to education in minority languages faces challenges. Inequalities in implementation, lack of teachers, inadequate materials and bureaucratic obstacles hinder effective instruction. In addition, the relevant legislation does not cover all minority languages and does not use the term 'mother tongue' for these languages.
- **Preservation of languages:** Despite limited progress in legislation, practical implementation by the government remains inadequate. Minorities face the dynamics of urban migration, the dominance of Turkish in the media and social media, and educational deficits – all of which contribute to the decline of minority languages and lead to rapid Turkification.

# Introduction

The elimination of discrimination is a necessary step towards the realization of the universal principle of equality: equality and non-discrimination form one of the key pillars of minority rights. However, stating that all people are equal before the law and recognizing the rights of minorities does not mean that discrimination disappears in the context of relations between the state and minorities. Discrimination exists in various areas of social life due to deep-rooted injustices fueled by nationalism, religion, gender inequalities as well as other factors, not only in state policies, but between dominant groups and minorities, as well as between minority groups themselves and within minority communities.

This report on minority rights in Türkiye focuses primarily on discrimination in the context of state-minority relations, as this remains a major obstacle to the promotion of minority rights and the protection of minorities in the country. While some minority rights were recognized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and positive steps were taken in the early 2000s as part of the European Union (EU) harmonization process, today's Türkiye is deficient in implementing measures to protect the rights of minorities, many of which are not officially recognized as such. Despite some progress in the past, there are still big challenges today, showing the need for more efforts to fight discrimination and ensure the protection of minority rights in Türkiye.

In this report, a minority is defined as a group within a state which is characterized by a common ethnicity, religion or language, or a combination thereof, and which sees itself as a distinct group in this respect. Minorities do not have a dominant position within the state, nor do they require official recognition in order to be recognized as minorities. Therefore, the heading 'Minorities in Türkiye' in this report includes not only the officially recognized ones, but all ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in the country. As part of an intersectional approach, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity are also considered in relevant cases of discrimination in this report.

Although only non-Muslims are officially recognized as minorities in Türkiye according to the Treaty of Lausanne, the country's diversity, rooted in its Ottoman heritage and geographical location, encompasses many minorities. In this context, Abkhazians, Albanians, Arabs, Bosnians, Chechens, Circassians, Dagestanis, Georgians,

Kurds, Lazs, Ossets, Pomaks and Roma (Roms, Doms, Abdals, Loms) can be defined as ethnic minorities, while their linguistic and religious diversity is taken into account. The common feature of these minorities is that a significant proportion of their populations are Muslim. Alevi, Arab Orthodox, Armenians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Greeks, Jews, Nusayris, Protestants and Yezidis have long been defined as religious minorities, but their linguistic and ethnic diversity and overlapping identities in many instances as ethnic minorities should be emphasized. Although there are no official statistics concerning minorities in Türkiye, the two largest minorities demographically are Kurds and Alevi, where there are ethnic and religious overlaps. The smallest minority group is non-Muslims, who make up almost 0.4 percent of Türkiye's population.<sup>1</sup>

The minority policy of a state and the minority rights that it upholds provide insights into the governance mechanisms of that state. How a state treats its minorities is a decisive indicator of its democratic structure. In states where minorities are confronted with ignorance, oppression and discrimination and where the perpetrators of crimes against minorities are not held accountable, one can hardly speak of a democratic order. In this context, one of the most important factors determining a state's minority policy is the power of nationalism at the state and societal levels and its impact on democratic institutions. Turkish nationalism, which is deeply rooted in the founding ideology of the Republic of Türkiye, has remained a dominant force throughout the country's history. Regardless of which political factions are in power, nationalism remains pervasive, whether the governments are secular or conservative. This persistence of Turkish nationalism across the various political spectrums is the dynamic that underpins the structural discrimination that has been embedded in Türkiye's minority policies for a century and affects various minorities in the country.

At this point, it is important to mention that minorities were discriminated against on two levels during the Turkish nation-building process. Firstly, there were two main groups in terms of state policies: those who were considered assimilable and those who were not. Non-Muslims were constantly discriminated against because the promoters of Turkish nationalism considered them incapable of becoming Turks due to their religious

identities. Conversely, Muslim minorities, who were considered potentially assimilable within the framework of Sunni Islam, were still discriminated against when they expressed their own ethnic identities. Turkish nationalist ideology, in both its secular and conservative expressions, has continuously maintained this distinction and accepted Sunni Islam as one of the main identifiers of national identity. Therefore, discrimination against religious minorities by the state has always been part of the nationalist framework.

Secondly, this distinction has also historically led to discrimination among minorities due to the perceived superiority of Islam, which is rooted in the Ottoman past and the *millet* system. Until the nineteenth century, religion was the most important identity-forming factor in the Ottoman state. Social organization followed Islamic law through the *millet* system, which was introduced from the middle of the 15th century. This system classified people into Muslims and non-Muslims, with *millet* referring to specific religious communities such as Armenian Orthodox Christians, Greek Orthodox Christians (Rums) and Jews. Under this system, non-Muslims were granted extensive autonomy in matters of faith, worship and education. However, there were also notable restrictions for non-Muslims in the social and political spheres. While all Muslim groups in the Ottoman territories could become part of the ruling class, non-Muslims did not enjoy this status. As a stark illustration of this disparity, non-Muslims were subjected to restrictions such as limitations on the size of their houses and could not carry weapons - highlighting the unequal treatment they faced. Although the *millet* system officially ended in 1839, it had a profound impact and shaped Turkish nationalism, as described above, and influenced relations between Sunni Islamic minorities and non-Muslims and other religious groups.<sup>2</sup> This detailed examination reveals the complex patterns of discrimination within and between minorities, as well as between dominant groups and minorities in the context of Turkish nation-building, which continue to influence the dynamics of minorities in Türkiye.

The longstanding discrimination and marginalization of minorities in Türkiye has continued during the 22 years that the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has

governed the country. Once the AKP gained power, nationalism was expressed alongside support for the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the resurrection of Ottoman history has revitalized the historical perception of non-Muslims as if the *millet* system persists; on the other hand, the increasing authoritarianism of the government, especially since 2011 and the beginning of its third term,<sup>4</sup> has also proved to be a major problem for minorities, especially Kurds, who want to define themselves by their ethnic rather than religious identity. Relations between the state and minorities have continued to be shaped not by fundamental rights and the principle of equality, but by the state's nationalist discourse, which prioritizes security. The unease among minorities has increased under these conditions. It is noteworthy that emigration abroad is particularly high among non-Muslims<sup>5</sup> and the fear of being 'marked by the state' is omnipresent among all groups as the rule of law is increasingly undermined. Moreover, these minorities have always been targeted in times of crisis, especially when nationalism is invoked as the country's supposed savior. This pattern of discrimination is not limited to specific minorities such as Alevis, Kurds or non-Muslims, but also extends to refugees, women and LGBTQI+ persons, and is often overlapping as those affected may be discriminated against on multiple grounds, such as being a minority, being a woman or because of their sexual orientation. This hostile atmosphere is perpetuated by a culture of impunity,<sup>6</sup> which has been fueled by nationalist rhetoric and polarization in recent years. As a result, there is a disturbingly high incidence of rights violations, including discrimination and hate speech, in Türkiye today, reflecting the complex interplay between political dynamics and the experiences of minorities.

The methodology of this report included an extensive desk review, active participation in project network meetings to discuss related issues with minority representatives, as well as conducting five semi-structured in-depth interviews and a focus group study with representatives of different minorities who are actively engaged in their communities as activists, researchers, association / foundation executives and network leaders to gain a real insight into the challenges facing their respective communities.

# I Legal Framework

Although legislation in Türkiye does not explicitly guarantee the protection and promotion of minority rights or the equality of minorities with dominant groups, it serves as a basis for the implementation of minority policy and the monitoring of rights violations. The following table offers a thorough examination of Türkiye's laws relating to non-discrimination and minority rights and illustrates the strong influence of Turkish nationalism on the legal system.

According to Article 90/5 of the Turkish Constitution, international law takes precedence in the event of

contradictions between international law and national law. International human rights conventions that directly address non-discrimination and the related rights of minorities, which Türkiye has ratified,<sup>7</sup> could also be interpreted as part of national legislation. However, during the ratification process, Türkiye repeatedly makes reservations to the minority-related provisions of these conventions and affirms that only the Treaty of Lausanne and the Constitution are binding in this respect. Non-Muslims are recognized as official minorities under the

Treaty of Lausanne; with this reservation, Türkiye declares that it will not recognize any other group as a minority on the basis of these conventions. Consequently, while the non-discrimination provisions of these conventions can be interpreted within the framework of Article 90/5, the minority-related provisions apply exclusively to non-Muslims in Türkiye.

In the following table, only the Treaty of Lausanne is included in the context of national legislation, firstly because it is the founding treaty of the Republic of

Türkiye and Article 37 states that Türkiye undertakes to recognize the provisions contained in Articles 38 to 44 as fundamental laws and that no law, regulation or official action shall conflict or interfere with these stipulations, nor shall any law, regulation or official action prevail over them. Secondly, although it recognizes only non-Muslims as official minorities, it also contains provisions that are directly relevant to other minorities and all citizens in Türkiye, as can be seen in the table below:

Table 1

	The Constitution	The Penal Code	Other Laws	The Treaty of Lausanne
<b>Prevention of Discrimination</b>	<b>Article 10:</b> 'Everyone is equal before the law without distinction as to language, race, color, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion and sect, or any such grounds. (Paragraph added on May 7, 2004; Act No. 5170) Men and women have equal rights. The State has the obligation to ensure that this equality exists in practice. (Sentence added on September 12, 2010; Act No. 5982) Measures taken for this purpose shall not be interpreted as contrary to the principle of equality. (Paragraph added on September 12, 2010; Act No. 5982) Measures to be taken for children, the elderly, disabled people, widows, and orphans of martyrs as well as for the invalid and veterans shall not be considered as violation of the principle of equality. No privilege shall be granted to any individual, family, group, or class. State organs and administrative authorities are obliged to act in compliance with the principle of equality before the law in all their proceedings.'	<b>Article 3/2:</b> 'Neither discrimination can be made between the persons in respect of races, language, religion, sects, nationality, color, sex, political tendencies etc. nor a person can be subject to special and different treatment before the laws and courts.'  <b>Article 115/1:</b> 'Any person who forces another person by using violence or treat to disclose or change his religious, political, philosophical beliefs, conceptions and convictions, or prevents disclosure and publication of the same, is punished with imprisonment from one year to three years.'  <b>Article 122:</b> 'Any person who makes discrimination between individuals because of their racial, lingual, religious, sexual, political, philosophical belief or opinion, or for being supporters of different sects and therefore: a) Prevents sale, transfer of movable or immovable property, or performance of a service, or benefiting from a service, or bounds employment or unemployment of a person to above listed reasons, b) Refuses to deliver nutriments or to render a public service, c) Prevents a person to perform an ordinary economic activity is sentenced to imprisonment from six months to one year or imposed punitive fine.'	<b>Law on the Execution of Sentences and Security measures (No. 5275) Article 3/1:</b> 'The rules concerning the execution of penalties and security measures shall be implemented without discrimination between convicts as regards race, language, religion, denomination, nationality, color, gender, birth, philosophical belief, ethnic or social origin, political or other opinion, economic power or other social status, and without making any privilege to anyone.'  <b>Labor Law (No. 4857) Article 5:</b> 'No discrimination based on language, race, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion and sex or similar reasons is permissible in the employment relationship.'  <b>Law on Civil Servants (No. 657) Article 7:</b> 'Civil servants may not be a member of a political party; they may not engage in any behavior targeting the benefit or harm of any political party, person or group; they may not discriminate on the basis of language, race, gender, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion or sect in the performance of their duties; they may not make statements or take actions with political and ideological purposes and may not participate in such actions.'  <b>Law on Political Parties (No. 2820) Article 12, 78 and 83:</b> The law prohibits political parties from pursuing objectives or engaging in activities that contradict the principle of equality before the law, irrespective of language, race, color, sex, political opinion, philosophical belief, religion, sect or similar reasons. Additionally, party statutes are barred from including discriminatory provisions against membership applicants based on various factors including language, race, gender, religion, sect, family, caste, class or profession. Furthermore, political parties are explicitly prohibited from engaging in discrimination based on language, race, color, religion and sect according to the law.	<b>Article 39:</b> 'All the inhabitants of Türkiye, without distinction of religion, shall be equal before the law. Differences of religion, creed or confession shall not prejudice any Turkish national in matters relating to the enjoyment of civil or political rights, as, for instance, admission to public employment, functions and honors, or the exarchate of professions and industries.'
<b>Right to Education</b>	<b>Article 42/1:</b> 'No one shall be deprived of the right of education.'		<b>Basic Law of National Education (No. 1739):</b> <b>Article 4:</b> 'Educational institutions are open to all without distinction as to language, race, sex, disability, or religion. No person, family, group or class shall be privileged in education.'  <b>Article 5:</b> 'National education service is organized according to the wishes and abilities of Turkish citizens and the needs of Turkish society.'  <b>Article 8:</b> 'Equality of opportunity and opportunity shall be provided to all men and women in education.'  <b>Law on Private Education Institutions (No. 5580)</b> <b>Article 2(e):</b> 'Minority schools: Refers to pre-primary, primary and secondary private schools established by Greek, Armenian and Jewish minorities, guaranteed by the Treaty of Lausanne and attended by students of the Republic of Türkiye belonging to their own minority.'  <b>Article 5(c):</b> 'Specific aspects of schools related to Articles 40 and 41 of the Treaty under Law No. 340	<b>Article 40:</b> 'Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.'  <b>Article 41:</b> 'As regards public instruction, the Turkish Government will grant in those towns and districts, where a considerable proportion of non-Muslim nationals are resident, adequate facilities for



Table1 (continued...)

	The Constitution	The Penal Code	Other Laws	The Treaty of Lausanne
Linguistic Rights	<p><b>Article 3/1:</b> 'The State of Türkiye, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.'</p> <p><b>Article 42/9:</b> 'No language other than Turkish shall be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens at any institution of education. Foreign languages to be taught in institutions of education and the rules to be followed by schools conducting education in a foreign language shall be determined by law. The provisions of international treaties are reserved.'</p>		<p>dated 23/8/1923 shall be determined by a regulation. This regulation shall be prepared by considering the reciprocal legislation and practices of the relevant countries in these matters. In matters not specified in the regulation, the legislation on public schools shall apply. Only children of citizens of the Republic of Türkiye belonging to their own minority may study in these schools.'</p> <p><b>Basic Law of National Education (No. 1739) Article 10:</b> 'Turkish language as one of the fundamental elements of national unity and integrity, at all levels of education, its characteristics teaching without distortion and excesses; endeavoring to enrich it as the language of modern education and science and for this purpose, the Ministry of National Education, in cooperation with the Atatürk Culture, Language and History measures are taken.'</p> <p><b>Foreign Language Education and Teaching and Law on Learning Different Languages and Dialects of Turkish Citizens (No. 2923) Article 2(a):</b> 'No language other than Turkish may be taught to Turkish citizens as their mother tongue in education and training institutions. However, private courses may be opened for the learning of different languages and dialects traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their daily lives, subject to the provisions of the Law on Private Education Institutions; language courses may be established for the same purpose in these courses and other language courses. In these courses and lessons, teaching contrary to the fundamental qualities of the Republic set forth in the Constitution and the indivisible integrity of the State with its country and nation shall not be allowed. ...'</p> <p><b>Law No. 4709 Amendments to Constitution, 2001:</b> Removed the sentence 'Broadcasting in any prohibited language by law' from the Constitution Article 26 and 28.</p> <p><b>Law No. 4771 Amendments to the Law on the Establishment and Broadcasting of Radio and Television, Article 4:</b> 'Broadcasts may be made in different languages and dialects traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their daily lives. These broadcasts shall be made in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Republic as laid down in the Constitution. The indivisible integrity of the State with its country and nation cannot be contrary.'</p> <p><b>Foreign Language Education and Teaching and Law on the Learning of Different Languages and Dialects of Turkish Citizens (No. 2923) Article 2 (a):</b> 'The different languages and dialects traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their daily lives are subject to the provisions of the Law on Private Education Institutions. Special courses may be opened for the learning of dialects, and language courses for the same purpose may be offered in these and other language courses.'</p> <p><b>National Ministry of Education Circular 12668 on Elective Courses No. 2012/37: <i>Living Languages and Dialects</i></b> course began to be taught as an elective course beginning from the 5th Grade in all public and private secondary schools.</p>	<p>ensuring that in the primary schools the instruction shall be given to the children of such Turkish nationals through the medium of their own language. This provision will not prevent the Turkish Government from making the teaching of the Turkish language obligatory in the said schools.</p> <p>In towns and districts where there is a considerable proportion of Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities, these minorities shall be assured an equitable share in the enjoyment and application of the sums which may be provided out of public funds under the State, municipal or other budgets for educational, religious, or charitable purposes. The sums in question shall be paid to the qualified representatives of the establishments and institutions concerned.'</p> <p><b>Article 39:</b> 'No restrictions shall be imposed on the free use by any Turkish national of any language in private intercourse, in commerce, religion, in the press, or in publications of any kind or at public meetings.</p> <p>Notwithstanding the existence of the official language, adequate facilities shall be given to Turkish nationals of non-Turkish speech for the oral use of their own language before the Courts.'</p>
Freedom of Religion and Belief	<p><b>Article 24:</b> 'Everyone has the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction. Acts of worship, religious rites and ceremonies shall be conducted freely, as long as they do not violate the provisions of Article 14. No one shall be compelled to worship, or to participate in religious rites and ceremonies, or to reveal religious beliefs and convictions, or be blamed or accused because of his religious beliefs and convictions. Religious and moral education and instruction shall be conducted under state supervision and control. Instruction in religious culture and morals shall be one of the compulsory lessons in the curricula of primary</p>	<p><b>Article 115:</b> '(1) Any person who uses force against, or threatens, another person in order to compel him to alter or declare, or in order to prevent him from declaring or disseminating, his religious, political, social, or philosophical beliefs, thoughts or convictions shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of one to three years. (2) (Amended on 2 March 2014 – By Article 14 of the Law no. 6529) Where communal religious worship or ceremony is prevented by the use of force, threats or by any other unlawful act a penalty in accordance with paragraph 1 shall be imposed. (3) (Added on 2 March 2014 – By Article 14 of the Law no. 6529) Where lifestyles originating from beliefs,</p>	<p><b>Basic Law of National Education (No. 1739) Article 12:</b> 'Laicism is fundamental in Turkish national education. The teaching of religious culture and ethics is among the compulsory subjects in elementary schools, high schools, and equivalent institutions.'</p> <p><b>Law on Public Improvement (No. 3194) Article 47-48, Additional Article 2:</b> 'In the preparation of zoning plans, the necessary places of worship are allocated by taking into account the conditions and future needs of the planned town and region. Places of worship may be built in provinces, districts, and towns, provided that the permission of the local administrative authority is obtained and in accordance with the zoning legislation. Places of worship cannot be allocated for other purposes in violation of the zoning legislation.'</p>	<p><b>Article 40:</b> 'Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.'</p> <p><b>Article 43:</b> 'Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall not be compelled to perform</p>

Table1 (continued...)

	The Constitution	The Penal Code	Other Laws	The Treaty of Lausanne
	and secondary schools. Other religious education and instruction shall be subject to the individual's own desire, and in the case of minors, to the request of their legal representatives. No one shall be allowed to exploit or abuse religion or religious feelings, or things held sacred by religion, in any manner whatsoever, for the purpose of personal or political interest or influence, or for even partially basing the fundamental, social, economic, political, and legal order of the State on religious tenets.'	thoughts or convictions are interfered with or altered involuntarily by using force, threats or by any other unlawful act, a penalty in accordance with paragraph 1 shall be imposed.'  <b>Article 153:</b> '(1) Any person who damages the buildings, associated buildings (or structures upon such) of a place of worship or the removable property therein, or a structure with the purpose of protecting a cemetery by destroying, damaging, or breaking such, shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of one to four years. (2) Any person who soils the places or structures listed in the first paragraph shall be sentenced to a penalty of imprisonment for a term of three months to one year, or a judicial fine. (3) Where the offences in paragraphs one and two are committed with the aim of defaming a related religious group then the penalty shall be increased by one third.'		any act which constitutes a violation of their faith or religious observances and shall not be placed under any disability by reason of their refusal to attend Courts of Law or to perform any legal business on their weekly day of rest. This provision, however, shall not exempt such Turkish nationals from such obligations as shall be imposed upon all other Turkish nationals for the preservation of public order.'
<b>Freedom of Association and The Right to Political Participation and Representation</b>	<b>Article 33:</b> 'Everyone has the right to form associations, or become a member of an association, or withdraw from membership without prior permission. No one shall be compelled to become or remain a member of an association. Freedom of association may be restricted only by law on the grounds of national security, public order, prevention of commission of crime, public morals, public health and protecting the freedoms of other individuals.'		<b>Law on Political Parties Article 82:</b> 'Political parties shall not pursue the aim of regionalism or racism in the country, which is an indivisible whole, and they may not engage in purposeful activities.'  <b>Law No. 4771 Amendments to Constitution:</b> Established the right of foundations belonging to religious minority communities to possess and freely manage real property in order to fulfil their religious, charitable, social, educational, health and cultural objectives.	<b>Article 40:</b> 'Turkish nationals belonging to non-Muslim minorities shall enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Turkish nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to establish, manage and control at their own expense, any charitable, religious and social institutions, any schools and other establishments for instruction and education, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their own religion freely therein.'

As the table shows, many laws in Türkiye contain articles to prevent discrimination. Nevertheless, there are still issues with implementation, which is why the second part of the report is dedicated to these problem areas and violations. The rhetoric of the legal texts reflects the nationalism embedded in state policies, as mentioned in the Introduction, and provides an indication of the challenges in implementation. Notably, when examining articles related to education and language—foundational components of nation-building processes—it becomes evident that terms such as ‘Turkish society’, rooted in the dominant ethnic group, and ‘Turkish language’, depicted as a fundamental element of national unity and integrity, are prominently highlighted.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, explicit legislation on the protection of minority rights can only be found in the Treaty of Lausanne, and indirect measures on the use of the mother tongue have been taken in the EU harmonization process but without explicit reference to the terms ‘mother tongue’ or ‘minority’. The third chapter summarizes the problems and violations in this area in detail.

Türkiye has also institutionalized the prevention of discrimination with the establishment of two national mechanisms. One is the Turkish Human Rights Institution, founded in 2012 and renamed Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye (TİHEK) in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

The second is the Ombudsman Institution (KDK), also founded in 2012.<sup>10</sup> TİHEK’s mission is to protect and promote human rights, ensure equal treatment of individuals, and combat torture and ill-treatment. Moreover, the institution’s founding law explicitly includes combating discrimination in its mandate. Similarly, the law on the KDK outlines the institution’s responsibility for investigating complaints about the administration’s compliance with the law and equity, based on an understanding of justice rooted in human rights. Both institutions are authorized to handle discrimination complaints concerning minorities in accordance with their mandates. Although there is no specific reference to ‘minority’ as an identifying term, they can indirectly address discrimination against any group based on gender, race, language, religion, and ethnicity, as stated in the Law on TİHEK.<sup>11</sup> TİHEK could also monitor and report on rights violations against these groups as part of its mandate. However, it has not yet taken proactive measures in this regard. Despite the competence of both institutions, the number of applications relating to minorities remains low, mainly due to the apparent reluctance of these institutions to address the issue. Between 2018 and 2022, TİHEK issued a single decision out of a total of 43, concerning ethnic

discrimination. However, this decision did not pertain to minorities residing in Türkiye but rather to a refugee. Similarly, the KDK also issued one decision in 2016 related to non-Muslim students’ participation in a nationwide exam containing religious questions. However, this decision did not directly address religious discrimination but rather focused on the scoring system.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, despite the presence of two national human rights mechanisms in Türkiye that can address discrimination and challenge administrative decisions, and

despite the legal background to prevent discrimination, their mere existence is no guarantee that discrimination against minorities will be prevented and that minorities will trust this system. A statistic from a recent Freedom of Belief Initiative report illustrates this situation: despite numerous articles in the legislation aimed at combating discrimination, nine out of 10 people refrain from reporting cases of discrimination or hate crimes based on their religious identity. Many believe it is useless, too difficult to report or have no confidence in the police.<sup>13</sup>

## II Discrimination: A Common Truth

States have a primary responsibility to prevent discrimination based on language, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age and disability. This obligation goes beyond national law or treaties on human and minority rights, which they may or may not have ratified. It is rooted in the protection of human dignity as expressed in the Preamble of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. However, despite the existence of laws designed to prevent discrimination, Türkiye often deviates from this principle. Turkish nationalism often serves as a dominant narrative to rationalize discriminatory policies and measures against minorities in the country. Minorities are often labelled as ‘internal enemies’ and directly accused or threatened of undermining the nation and being disloyal due to alleged foreign influences.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, minorities with larger populations or deep-rooted historical struggles, such as Kurds and Alevis, persistently advocate for recognition and rights. While their efforts offer valuable insights for other minorities in Türkiye, the challenges they face also drive smaller minorities to adopt strategies of concealment that jeopardize their cultural survival. To summarize, the historical and current expression of Turkish nationalism, as reflected in the rhetoric and policies of the state in relation to the country’s minorities, instills fear in minority communities of being branded as disloyal to the state, and this environment hinders progress on minority rights and limits the ability of official institutions and civil society to address these issues. Discrimination in this context is a common truth shared by all minorities.

This chapter focuses on three key areas: the freedom of religion or belief, freedom of association and the right to political participation and representation, and discrimination against minorities in the context of the 6 February 2023 earthquakes. Specific cases are used to illustrate the discriminatory atmosphere faced by different minorities in these areas.

### The freedom of religion or belief

The protection of minorities requires respect, protection and promotion of their identities. In the case of religious minorities, this includes protection of their

religious and cultural heritage, which is essential to their group identities. This includes the right to practice, learn and propagate one’s religion or belief, the right to learn the language traditionally used in religious practice, the right to elect and appoint religious officials, and the protection of sacred sites and cemeteries.

Within this context, the closing of the Greek Orthodox seminary in Heybeliada in 1971 is a notable and enduring example of discrimination in Türkiye. This continued closure was justified by the assertion that religious education should solely be provided by the state, despite the provisions of Article 40 of the Treaty of Lausanne. Similarly, Protestants face obstacles in providing religious education to train clergy due to their lack of legal status. Although they make efforts to provide education through their churches, they face difficulties in documenting this and appointing staff.<sup>15</sup> Another facet of this struggle is the protracted process of electing a new head of the Armenian Patriarchate, which took 11 years after Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan fell ill and withdrew from his duties in 2008. Internal disputes, compounded by interference from the Ministry of the Interior, delayed the election process. Finally, in 2019, the Constitutional Court intervened and ruled that religious freedom had been violated, leading to the election of a new patriarch.<sup>16</sup>

According to the latest 2019 official data, there are 398 churches and 41 synagogues in Türkiye.<sup>17</sup> New religious institutions may be established, albeit through lengthy and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. The Protestant community, often associated in political and social spheres with missionary work, faces significant challenges due to these negative perceptions surrounding missionaries. According to a recent report by the Protestant Church Association, the deportations and denial of entry of foreign church leaders is a significant problem, along with the hate crimes, and verbal and physical attacks that they report every year. Fears of deportation create anxiety for some individuals and families about participating in church gatherings and other activities, the report states.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, some churches and synagogues have been or are being renovated by the state, such as the Edirne Synagogue and the Mor Efrem Syriac Church (the first church built in the Republican period).<sup>19</sup> The problem, however, is that the congregations of these churches and synagogues have practically disappeared. These renovations

and openings seem more to be symbolic gestures than genuine efforts to confront past injustices or protect minorities, as evidenced by the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020.<sup>20</sup> And it is officially announced that the Church of the Holy Savior in Chora, called Kariye in Turkish, will be converted back into a church and opened in 2024. The conversion of churches into mosques, a historical practice seen in various places in Anatolia, continues in Istanbul, Türkiye's largest city and home to a significant non-Muslim population. To non-Muslims, this is a gesture intended to remind them who is superior and who is inferior in the social hierarchy by recalling the *millet* system and violating the principle of equality.

Besides the discrimination faced by non-Muslims in Türkiye, it is important to recall that Alevi's places of worship, Cemevis, are still not granted any official recognition. Furthermore, sufficient measures have not been taken to prevent or deter attacks on Alevi sites as well as on the churches and cemeteries of non-Muslims.<sup>21</sup> Most recently, on Sunday, 28 January 2024, one person lost their life in an armed attack on the Latin Catholic Church of Santa Maria in Sarıyer, Istanbul, which ISIS claimed responsibility for. Many religious minorities lack confidence in the state's security measures and resort to their own private security arrangements around their places of worship and schools (Jewish lawyer, İstanbul; Jewish student, İzmir). Following Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent conflict and large-scale displacement of Palestinians in Gaza, the Jewish community in Türkiye has reported feeling under heightened threat,<sup>22</sup> prompting the Ministry of National Education to permit the private Jewish High School to switch to distance learning if needed.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude this section, Yetvart Danzikyan, the editor of *Agos*, the Armenian bilingual weekly newspaper published in Istanbul, summarizes very clearly the issues raised by the January 2024 attack in Istanbul.

*'The attack has once again plunged the minority communities in Türkiye into a climate of unrest and fear. The brief arrest of the suspects was not enough to dispel this climate of uneasiness and fear. Although the authorities made statements after the attack such as "they will not be able to disturb our peace", two questions remain: 1. Why was there no guard at the door of the church? 2. What kind of "peace" is it when services in churches and synagogues can only take place with police officers at the door?'*<sup>24</sup>

## The freedom of association and the right to political participation and representation

The freedom of association and the right to participation of minorities in public affairs is crucial for preserving their identities and combating social exclusion. Mechanisms should ensure that minorities are represented in the national parliament, civil service, police and judiciary, and are consulted on decisions affecting them. The right to meaningful participation seeks to address minority underrepresentation and ensure that their concerns are addressed. States must ensure that minority representatives can have a significant impact on decisions that affect their communities, while also having a say in initiatives to promote shared decision-making.

Unfortunately, recent instances in Türkiye depict a discouraging trend in terms of implementing these minority rights principles, as outlined by the UN.<sup>25</sup>

The first example is the restitution of property belonging to non-Muslim foundations,<sup>26</sup> which has been initiated as part of Türkiye's EU harmonization process.<sup>27</sup> Non-Muslim communities continue to face challenges when seeking restitution, despite the fact that this has been framed as a solution to an ongoing violation, particularly in the country's relations with the EU. All aspects of the lengthy restitution procedures fall on the foundations, from the evacuation of current residents to the heavy financial burdens associated with it. This puts them in both a financial and moral dilemma when they reclaim property that was taken from them at no cost. There are still problems in the allocation of properties belonging to the endowed foundations. (Jewish Lawyer, İstanbul; Armenian Foundation Executive, İstanbul; Rum Foundation Executive, İstanbul).<sup>28</sup> In sum, the whole process is presented as a 'gift' that they have to 'pay' to reclaim. In addition, it should be noted that the regulation on the elections of non-Muslim foundations, which was repealed in 2013 and reissued in 2022 after nine years, still leaves uncertainty about the timing of elections for foundations with hospitals in March 2024, including the Balıklı Greek Hospital, which has not held elections since 1991 (Rum Foundation Executive, İstanbul).<sup>29</sup>

Participation and representation in the parliament, municipalities and civil service remain critical challenges for minorities in Türkiye. Kurds, as the largest ethnic minority, have historically endured discrimination in this regard. However, after the failure of the peace process in 2015 and under the conditions of the state of emergency following the attempted coup in 2016, the Kurdish political movement has been confronted with increased repression and security measures across the country. Leaders and former deputies of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP), including Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen

Yüksekdağ, have been imprisoned despite decisions by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The prominent former co-mayor of Diyarbakir Gülten Kışanak remains detained despite the fact that she has been held for the maximum time permitted by law without a conviction upheld by an appeals court.<sup>30</sup> Currently, 18 other elected former party officials and mayors from the HDP and an affiliated party, the Democratic Regions Party (DRP), are also in prison.<sup>31</sup> Thousands of party members have faced similar situations, and Kurdish media outlets continue to experience repression, with numerous journalists having been detained and/or imprisoned.<sup>32</sup>

The implementation of Decree Law No. 674 after the declaration of the state of emergency in 2016 resulted in the appointment of 95 trustees in various municipalities that had been won by pro-Kurdish parties in the 2014 local elections, replacing democratically elected mayors with public officers. Additionally, around 15,000 Kurdish workers, public officers and nearly 300 mukhtars (elected village or neighborhood leaders) were summarily dismissed from their positions, exacerbating the marginalization of Kurds. The situation escalated further with the detention and imprisonment of 93 co-mayors in the same year, alongside hundreds of municipal and provincial council members, highlighting a systematic crackdown on Kurdish political representation. Although 65 HDP candidates were elected as mayors in the 2019 local elections, government interference led to six mayors being denied election certificates, and most elected mayors in 48 municipalities were replaced by trustees again. Currently, only five municipalities have elected mayors in office. These developments underscore a severe undermining of democratic processes, particularly regarding the exercise of political rights and representation of Kurds in the run up to the local elections on 31 March 2024.<sup>33</sup> The government's crackdown on opposition parties, especially pro-Kurdish parties, is damaging the political rights and electoral chances of minorities who participate in and/or support these parties.

## Discrimination in connection with the recent earthquakes

According to official reports, the earthquakes that struck 11 cities in Türkiye on 6 February 2023 resulted in considerable damage: 50,783 lives were lost, 115,352 individuals were injured and 37,984 buildings collapsed.<sup>34</sup> Immediately after the earthquakes and even a year later, numerous reports have been published pointing out the many shortcomings in the state's disaster management.<sup>35</sup> An important outcome of the earthquakes for all affected minorities was that they were once again confronted with discriminatory attitudes and practices during the

aftermath of the disaster, just when they needed help and support the most. This unfortunate reality has underscored the challenges faced by minority communities in times of crisis in Türkiye and the need for inclusive and equitable disaster relief and recovery efforts.

The region where the earthquakes occurred is known for its diverse population with intersecting identities, notably in Hatay due to its multicultural demographic structure. Minorities such as Alevis, Arab Orthodox, Assyrians, Jews, Nusayris, Kurds and Roma (Dom, Rom, Lom, Abdal) embodying different ethnic and religious identities in the region, faced incomplete and inadequate services across multiple areas following the earthquakes. Marginalized groups within these minorities, including women, elderly, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ persons, reported increased vulnerabilities. Gaps were experienced with regard to search and rescue operations, as well as access to shelter, healthcare, education, and even basic services such as electricity, food and hygiene items.<sup>36</sup> The earthquakes exacerbated the vulnerability of these groups by exposing them to heightened levels of discrimination and increasing their victimization at a time of utmost need.

All the places of worship of the affected Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox and Protestant communities were demolished, which not only resulted in the loss of sacred spaces, but also restricted the already limited opportunities for these minorities to gather and thus disrupted cultural continuity.<sup>37</sup> With subsequent migration and displacement, the already small populations of these groups dwindled to be almost non-existent. For the Samandağ and Defne districts of Hatay densely populated by Nusayris, essential measures were provided but only belatedly.<sup>38</sup>

*There is a constant migration. Perhaps one of the first reasons is currently economic, but the deeper reason is the discrimination in Türkiye, the discrimination against Christian communities. That triggered the migration and now, of course, after the earthquake it has accelerated. There are almost no churches left in İskenderun, Antakya, Samandağ. When we talk about Antakya in particular, the areas where the community lived were the neighborhoods around the church and the greatest destruction in Antakya took place in these areas. A 2,000-year-old community is almost non-existent in Antakya today... When there are no more churches, the social memory of the community is automatically damaged, or rather lost. The longer it takes to build the churches, to designate areas where the community can be accommodated again, the more the social memory will disappear. (Arab Orthodox Teacher, İskenderun)*

The discrimination against Roma in the disaster region is extremely worrying. Although they rank last among minorities in Türkiye in terms of social indicators, they receive the least support in the areas of health, employment, housing and education. Moreover, they face discrimination from other minority groups, compounding their challenges.<sup>39</sup> Already marginalized and subjected to profound prejudice and social exclusion, Roma communities encountered significant obstacles in coping with the aftermath of the earthquake due to the existing marginalization and discrimination that they face. Accessing help from official institutions and NGOs proved challenging for almost all Roma groups after the earthquakes. They struggled to get information about health centers, food distribution points and other forms of assistance. They were also unfairly labeled as ‘looters’ and ‘thieves’ by other groups.<sup>40</sup> With unstable incomes and limited access to social security, integrating into the labor market became even more difficult for Roma communities. Legal aid for Roma communities was virtually absent, and children had limited access to essential food and tents, which arrived too late.<sup>41</sup> Even one year after the earthquakes, the provision of containers for Roma communities remains a major challenge (Dom Activist, Hatay).<sup>42</sup>

The intersectional marginalization of LGBTQI+ persons belonging to minorities in the region requires immediate attention. As minorities within minorities, often originating from ethnic and religious minority

backgrounds, they confront compounding challenges that necessitate comprehensive solutions. Following the earthquakes, many found themselves among the most marginalized groups, encountering significant barriers in accessing humanitarian aid services. As happened to the Roma community, LGBTQI+ persons were discriminated against not only by official and non-governmental organizations, but also by other survivors of the earthquakes. Many felt compelled to hide their identities or refrained from seeking help altogether to avoid discrimination. Some preferred to stay in their damaged homes for this reason, while those who returned to their families’ homes were again faced with the threat of domestic violence. Before and after the disaster, LGBTQI+ persons faced difficulties in accessing sexual health services, HIV medication, hormone treatment and psychological support. Their needs were often overlooked, exacerbating their vulnerability in an already difficult situation.<sup>43</sup>

In summary, the 6 February earthquakes highlighted the lack of inclusive preparations by decision makers and their failure to address the needs and deficits of various minority communities during the disaster period. A significant number of minority groups either did not have access to protection and prevention measures or encountered considerable difficulties in accessing these measures. These problems persist one year after the earthquakes and underscore the continuing inadequacies in addressing the needs of marginalized communities in times of crisis.

# III Language: A Must for Cultural Survival

Language serves as a primary means of cultural identity, not only through the innate significance of the mother tongue but also as a means of passing on a community's learning and heritage. The widespread use of languages such as English or Chinese at the regional or global level signify dominant cultural influences shaped by historical socio-political relations between different communities. When discussing linguistic minorities, their languages — more precisely, their mother tongues — gain significance as the primary indicators and determinants of their cultural identities. The preservation of language becomes a necessity as a means of community survival, as language is a key means of conveying thought and configures entire cultures, as stated in the Girona Manifesto. This is why every effort needs to be taken to preserve all languages.<sup>44</sup>

However, language also embodies a locus of power precisely due to its central role in expression in the midst of diversity. As a further example of Turkish nationalistic expression, language is constructed as a cultural symbol of the nation and an indicator of its continuity; when a language, in this case Turkish, is accepted as the only official language of the state, it becomes the means of communication of the entire public sphere. Furthermore, when this language is instrumentalized for the assimilation of linguistic minorities as part of nation building, as is the case in Türkiye, minority languages have less and less chance of surviving. Among the many instances in the country's history, the 'Citizen speak Turkish!' campaigns that were widespread in the early Republican period<sup>45</sup> are one of the clearest examples in this regard. With the establishment of the Republic in 1923, which was based on the principle of one state – one nation, schools for various minorities such as Arabs, Assyrians and Circassians were closed so that they no longer received mother tongue language instruction. The widespread punishment of children who spoke a language other than Turkish at school constituted direct discrimination. The exclusion of people who spoke Turkish with other accents in public also constituted discrimination. These measures hindered the transmission of languages between generations, as the older generations tried to protect the younger ones from discrimination.

*'Citizen speak Turkish!' campaigns are the generation that corresponds to my fathers. Those who grew up being beaten up at school for speaking Circassian and who preferred not to teach their own children the language so that our child would not get into trouble. (Circassian Lawyer, Ankara)*

Conversely, minority languages have emerged as sites of resistance to the state's repressive language policies, and Kurdish in particular has gained prominence in the struggle for linguistic rights due to its widespread demographic presence in the region and the influence of various Kurdish political movements. Nevertheless, the status of Kurds remains a central political issue in Türkiye. The state's security policy often stigmatizes every facet of the Kurdish life, with terms such as 'separatism' and/or 'terrorism', so that the linguistic rights movement is also criminalized. Consequently, there is a threat that the advocacy of linguistic rights, not only for Kurds but also for other minorities, will be marginalized under such labels.

Given these circumstances, it is sadly not surprising that UNESCO considers 18 languages spoken in Türkiye to be endangered: Ladino, Syriac, Suret, Western Armenian, Pontic Greek, Hértevin, Romani, Gagauz, Abaza, Abkhaz, Adyghe, Circassian, Hemshin, Laz and Zaza, and the now extinct Mlahsó, Ubykh and Cappadocian Greek.<sup>46</sup>

## Minority languages in education

The right to education in one's mother tongue is a priority and a cross-cutting issue for nearly all minorities in Türkiye. A look at the legal framework table shows that the right to education in their own language is granted to non-Muslims in Article 40 of the Treaty of Lausanne, which explicitly refers to 'all non-Muslims'. In practice, however, reference is consistently made to Armenians, Greeks and Jews, while Assyrians had to wait until 2013 following a court ruling to exercise this right, despite its prior existence.<sup>47</sup>

During the EU harmonization process, the right to use minority languages was expanded to a certain extent, although the term 'mother tongue' was not employed. Instead, a definition such as 'different languages and dialects traditionally used by Turkish citizens in their daily

lives' was adopted, aligning with Article 28 of the Constitution, which stipulates that only Turkish can be taught as a mother tongue. This extension occurred in three significant areas. Firstly, despite encountering bureaucratic obstacles, the study of these languages has been facilitated by online courses and initiatives led by civil society organizations, especially during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Secondly, the teaching of these languages in private schools was authorized, although this has yet to be implemented. Finally, in 2012, *Living Languages and Dialects* was introduced as an optional course in all secondary school curricula, including solely in Adyghe (Cyrillic alphabet), Adyghe (Latin alphabet), Abkhazian, Albanian, Bosnian, Georgian, Kurmançî, Laz and Zazakî.

When looking at what is available among private language courses, it is evident that Kurdish remains subjected to severe state repression. From 2016 onwards, the increasing pressure on the Kurdish political movement directly targeted these courses and the associations that were offering them, leading to their closure. Despite the availability of both face to face and online education facilitated by new associations like the Mesopotamian Language and Culture Research Association (MED-DER), established in 2017, these institutions operate under constant state surveillance. Attendees of these courses face the risk of being labeled without having the opportunity to anticipate such profiling. A Kurdish language teacher from MED-DER in Diyarbakır succinctly describes the situation as follows:

*'When we organize an activity, we are under great pressure. They fill the halls with cameras. They take pictures of the participants' faces at the entrance to the hall, one by one. For example, we wanted to organize a festival together with various cultural organizations. They filmed everyone who came and went, one by one. The same goes for other activities. For example, we get together with children in a neighborhood, tanks and police officers behind us...'*

On the other hand, it is noteworthy to mention that since the 2000s, languages later incorporated into the *Living Languages and Dialects* course have been offered at universities. For instance, Kurdish language and literature programs exist at Mardin Artuklu, Muş Alparslan and Bingöl Universities. Zaza language and literature courses are taught at Tunceli University, while Georgian language and literature programs are available at Kafkas, Rize, Ardahan and Düzce Universities. Trakya University offers Bosnian and Albanian language and literature programs, and Kayseri University provides Circassian language and culture studies, with Düzce University offering Circassian

language and literature. Additionally, many universities have long-established Armenian language and literature departments, although it should be noted that these departments primarily focus on teaching Eastern Armenian spoken in Armenia, rather than Western Armenian spoken in Türkiye which is listed by UNESCO as endangered languages.

*As there is no pedagogical possibility of teaching Western Armenian, the Armenian community is left to its own devices in the schools. And it usually works like this: experienced teachers teach young teachers how to teach Armenian, and with a letter to the Ministry of National Education you get a teacher. But I think this is no longer sustainable because the scientific aspect of this work is gradually being interrupted.*

(Armenian Foundation Executive, İstanbul)

While presented as a positive step by the state, the *Living Languages and Dialects* course, integrated into the curriculum since 2012, remains largely symbolic and falls short of offering constructive interventions for the preservation of endangered languages. Upon examining available documentation alongside the interviews conducted for this report, the following key problems emerge:<sup>48</sup>

- **Teacher shortage:** Despite the establishment of departments in universities and the number of graduates produced by these departments, the required appointments for teachers on these courses have been largely overlooked for almost every language. Consequently, teachers proficient in these languages have been and continue to teach these courses as 'additional courses' alongside their primary responsibilities.
- **Inadequacy of educational materials:** The state only generated teaching materials for Albanian, Bosnian, Kurmançî and Zazaki languages. All content development and financial support for other languages were delegated to civil society organizations. For languages like Abkhaz and Adyghe, for instance, the Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED) has taken charge of the entire process. In this context, it is also important to highlight the Ministry of National Education's failure to provide course materials to students and teachers promptly.
- **Prevention of course selection by the Ministry of National Education and other authorities:** To initiate these language classes, they must be listed as elective courses, with a requirement of at least 10 students choosing them. In practice, however, many school



principals hinder the learning of these languages. They omit them from the list, warn of possible labeling by stoking existing fears of parents, claim that the languages are unnecessary for the children’s future, and sometimes reject or do not process applications. Expressions such as ‘After the Kurds, you too?’<sup>49</sup> perpetuate the discriminatory notion of disloyalty to the state and the nation by targeting Kurds in particular and in a discriminatory manner. In 2024, the Ministry of National Education categorized this course among groups of elective courses such as mathematics, applied science and robotic coding. These subjects are more likely to attract student interest due to their perceived relevance for both present and future pursuits. Consequently, this categorization indirectly reduces the likelihood of language courses being selected.

Using the example of the Circassian language, despite numerous petitions, the Ministry of National Education’s decision not to include it in the curriculum as Circassian but rather as two separate Adyghe courses based on different alphabets renders Circassian effectively invisible within the education system.<sup>50</sup>

*For example, the school administration says that if your child chooses Circassian, they will be labeled. It might prevent him from becoming a civil servant one day; or they say what good will it do him, let him choose math instead, let him choose English, let him choose the life of the prophet. We have two departments, but the graduates cannot find jobs in the national education system. If you say I want to choose this course for my child, the school says there are no teachers.*

*Are families obliged to display such heroism at all costs in order to teach their mother tongue?*  
(Circassian Association Executive, Ankara)

- **Indifference of parents and students:** In the case of languages with low population density and/or languages that are not considered advantageous for future aspirations because they are not the official languages of other states, such as the Laz language, parents and students may be reluctant to choose these languages because they are worried about their prospects. Fear of being labeled as such due to historical and existing discrimination against minorities in Türkiye also discourages parents and students from choosing these courses.

In sum, the *Living Languages and Dialects* course, which has been presented as a positive step for minority languages since 2012, can barely survive without the efforts of civil society organizations and activists of different minority groups, despite the state’s obligation to support minority languages.

*We painted and whitewashed a place like a warehouse in the basement of the school in Düzce and we provided the classroom.*  
(Circassian Association Executive, Ankara)

Apart from Kurmancî and Zazakî, these courses are not effectively offered in practice due to the challenges outlined above. For instance, Circassian classes, covering Adyghe and Abkhaz languages, have been consistently conducted only in Kayseri since 2012, largely due to the dedication of civil society efforts and the concentration of Circassian populations in certain neighborhoods.<sup>51</sup>

*Laz language course is pretty much gone now. It has faded into obscurity.*  
(Laz Activist, Rize)

## Minority languages in the public sphere

Article 39 of the Treaty of Lausanne explicitly guarantees the unrestricted use of any language by the citizens of Türkiye in private interactions, commerce, religious practices, the press, publications and public gatherings. Nevertheless, the historical violations of these linguistic rights against all minority languages are deeply rooted in the experiences of minority communities in Türkiye. However, in the late 1990s, as Türkiye sought to join the EU, a relatively relaxed political climate encouraged activism by minority groups campaigning for linguistic rights. During this time, newspapers, magazines and associations dedicated to minority languages were founded. There was a kind of ‘springtime’ for the cultural renewal of minority cultures under state control. In the early 2000s, the EU harmonization process led to legislative changes that facilitated the use of minority languages in the public sphere, albeit only to a limited extent. For example, the Kurdish language was used on street signs and other signage in many municipalities. The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) introduced channels broadcasting in various minority languages, and private radio and television stations specializing in minority languages flourished. However,

since 2016, the once promising trajectory has stagnated, giving way to a concerning regression. Kurdish signage, particularly in municipalities where Kurds make up the majority and are under trusteeship, has been consistently removed. Activities such as singing or performing plays in Kurdish have once again become problematic. For example, the Kurdish theatre play *Qral û Travis* was banned without any justification in 2024, hours before it was to be staged in Istanbul.<sup>52</sup>

Despite some advancements, the absence of translation services for non-Turkish speakers in the public sphere, particularly in essential sectors like health and social services, remains a significant challenge. Moreover, despite the legal framework in place, translation services are not provided in courts. It was not until 2009 that prisoners and detainees were permitted to speak Kurdish over the telephone. Additionally, the prohibition against using languages other than Turkish in place names persists, and since 1928, children have been barred from being named with letters such as ‘X, W, Q, Î, Û, Ê’ on identity cards. Consequently, many non-Muslims in various professional spheres or in public settings continue to conceal their names as part of their daily lives.

*It is not easy for a Jew to live anywhere in Anatolia. I feel uncomfortable calling my son by his name in the subway in Istanbul.*  
(Jewish Lawyer, İstanbul)

*I have two names; I don't use the name ..... officially. For example, the village where I work is a conservative village, they don't know that I am a Christian. My fellow teachers know of course, but the children or parents don't know. In the first school I worked at in Istanbul, the teachers knew. Then the parents heard about it, and there was a bit of a fuss about there being a non-Muslim teacher. Then I moved from there to an Armenian school.*  
(Arab Orthodox Teacher, İskenderun)

In the current context, speakers of all the endangered languages mentioned above are fighting to maintain them

in Türkiye. Not only state policy, but also the increasing migration for economic reasons from the villages and towns to the cities, where Turkish predominates, contribute to the weakening of these languages.<sup>53</sup> The dominance of Turkish in the media and on social platforms, coupled with a prohibitive and discriminatory mentality and policy, is even causing the use of Kurdish, the most widely spoken minority language in Türkiye, to decline. According to a recent report published by the Kurdish Studies Center, more than half of the children of Kurdish-speaking parents do not speak Kurdish well.<sup>54</sup>

*I mean, in a place like Diyarbakır, the use of Kurdish has decreased very, very much. Children don't speak Kurdish; young people don't speak Kurdish.*  
(Kurdish Language Teacher, Diyarbakır)

*In addition, the decline in the number of young people speaking and using their mother tongue is causing many non-Muslims to include Turkish in religious ceremonies and community gatherings.*  
(Armenian Foundation Executive, İstanbul; Arab Orthodox Teacher, İskenderun)

Furthermore, the lack of a widespread written culture for languages such as Circassian, Ladino and Laz, together with educational deficits, exacerbates the decline in linguistic diversity.

*Both migration and the mass media are leading to very rapid Turkification. My grandmother officially came into contact with Turkish at school, but her own children did not. Her own children also learned Turkish at home. They already had a radio and a television at home. That's where the zeitgeist went. For smaller ethnic groups like us, who have low linguistic capital, the transition to languages with higher linguistic capital, where citizenship is also established, was naturally rapid.*  
(Laz Activist, Rize).

# Conclusion

The issue of minority rights in Türkiye has long been a source of dispute and conflict. As outlined in the report, despite the declared equality of all citizens, the rigid boundaries expressed by Turkish nationalism confine minorities to a seemingly equal status but only on paper. They are labeled as second-class citizens, especially when they challenge the limitations on their identities imposed on them by the state. The persistent discrimination and violations of the rights of minorities and the impunity

with which they are perpetrated underscore the deep-seated structural problems that persist to this day. Moreover, during the recent decades of AKP rule, the constant threat of profiling hovers over any demand for fundamental rights, exacerbating the challenges faced by minorities. In light of these problems, this report proposes recommendations on how to address these issues in the short term in order to achieve the necessary structural changes in the future.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations to the government and the parliament:

- 1 Enact legislative reforms aimed at directly safeguarding the rights of minorities in Türkiye and ensuring their equal treatment under the law.
- 2 Bridge the gap between legislation and implementation by implementing policies that enhance the awareness of all public officials and public opinion regarding minority rights.
- 3 Sign and ratify the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.
- 5 Apply the rights granted to non-Muslims in the Treaty of Lausanne not only to the Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities, but to all non-Muslim groups as stated in the Treaty. Realize the rights granted by the Treaty of Lausanne to speakers of languages other than Turkish for all linguistic minority groups whose mother tongue is not Turkish.
- 6 Foster constructive dialogue and engagement with minority communities to address their concerns and grievances effectively. This should include respect for democratic principles, including the right to political participation and representation, as enshrined in international conventions and the Constitution.
- 7 Conduct thorough investigations into allegations of discrimination and human rights abuses against minorities. Hold perpetrators accountable and ensure access to justice for victims.
- 8 Urgently eliminate discrimination against different minority groups in earthquake affected areas and develop more inclusive disaster preparedness and response strategies that take into account the diverse needs and circumstances of minorities. Consider the needs of minorities in projects related to the reconstruction of the earthquake area and ensure that they are involved in the process so that they can express these needs.
- 9 Amend national legislation to ensure the protection and promotion of linguistic diversity in Türkiye. Introduce the concept of ‘mother tongue’ instead of ‘living languages and dialects,’ relocate the *Living Languages and Dialects* course to a more preferable

group of elective courses in secondary education, remove obstacles to its selection, increase the number of languages available, and assume the financial obligations related to these courses.

- 10 Ensure equitable access to public services, including healthcare, education and legal assistance, for speakers of minority languages. Provide interpretation and translation services to facilitate communication and access to information for linguistic minority communities.

## Recommendations for international organizations:

- 1 Advocate for the rights of minorities in Türkiye and closely monitor their situations to ensure compliance with international human rights and minority rights standards.
- 2 Provide support and resources to local NGOs and civil society organizations that advocate for the rights of minorities in Türkiye, when they lack sufficient human and financial resources.
- 3 Engage in diplomatic dialogue with the government to address concerns regarding discrimination and other violations of minority rights. Utilize diplomatic channels to underscore the importance of upholding human rights obligations.

## Recommendations for civil society:

- 1 Conduct awareness campaigns and educational programs to inform the public about minority rights issues and combat stereotypes and prejudices. This should include awareness raising of the issues facing marginalized groups within minorities, such as women, the elderly, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ persons.
- 2 Establish and foster relations between different minority communities to increase awareness and understanding among them.
- 3 Develop more inclusive disaster preparedness and response strategies that take into account the diverse needs and circumstances of minorities.

# Notes

- 1 There are no official statistics on the population of minorities in Türkiye, and one should bear in mind that people belonging to minorities do not always clearly state their identity. Therefore, whole numbers are estimated, but the population of non-Muslims is given as 180,854 in 2023 in an article by the official state news agency Anadolu Ajansı, 26.08.2023, <<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/yasam/farkliliklari-zenginlik-olarak-goren-turkiyede-gayrimuslimler-ibadethane-sikintisi-yasam-iyor/2976644>>
- 2 Aktoprak, Elçin, 'Non-Muslims in Turkey as the 'Founding Other', *A Companion to Modern Turkey's Centennial: Political, Sociological, Economic and Institutional Transformations since 1923*, ed. Alpaslan Özerdem, Ahmet erdi Öztürk, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 215-228.
- 3 For further reading please see: White, Jenny, *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*, Princeton University Press, 2014.
- 4 Aktoprak, Elçin, 'Between Authoritarianism and Peace: The Kurdish Opening in Turkey (2013-2015),' *Democratic Representation in Plurinational States*, ed. Ephraim Nimni, Elçin Aktoprak, London, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 137-158; *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance and the AKP*, ed. Bahar Başer, Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, London, I.B. Tauris, 2017.
- 5 'Being a Young Jew in Turkey: "Istanbul is my home but it's over now"', +90, 12.06.2020, <https://youtu.be/9qJeiWlsxtA?si=ZPsfzlcaQAtHuhLf>; Erol, Muzaffer A., 'Beyin Göçünün İsrail Tarafı,' *Avlaremoz*, 28.12.2022, <https://www.avlaremoz.com/2022/12/28/beyin-gocunun-israil-tarafi/>; Erdinç, İshan, 'Türkiyeli Ermeniler ve Ermenistan: Pasaport ile aidiyet arasında,' *Agos*, 29.08.2021, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/26096/turkiyeli-ermeniler-ve-ermenistan-pasaport-ile-aidiyet-arasinda>, Karatabanoğlu, Seda, 'Ermeniler Neden Türkiye'yi Terk Ediyor?', *Euronews*, 08.04.2019, <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/04/08/ermeniler-neden-turkiyeyi-terk-ediyor-turkiye-de-ne-kadar-ermeni-kaldi>
- 6 The Freedom of Belief Initiative's Report on Hate Crimes Based on Religion, Belief or Non-Belief in Turkey 2022 underscores the need for special sensitivity in addressing hate crimes. It reveals a concerning trend: in many instances of hate crimes or incidents, there is a lack of effective legal processes that properly consider the hate crime dimension. These incidents, prevalent across various regions of Turkey, typically involve threats or threatening behavior, property damage, vandalism of places of worship or cemeteries, defamation, violent assaults, and harassment of individuals. *Türkiye'de Din, İnanç veya İnançsızlık Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu*, İnanç Özgürlüğü Girişimi, 2022, p. 21, <https://inancozgurlugugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/iog-nefret-sucu-raporu-2023-web.pdf>; Please also see the latest developments on the Hrant Dink case which has turned out to be a symbol of impunity: Hacıoğlu, Hilmi, Sahinkaya, Ezel and Umur Colak, "'Impunity Persists' in Case of Slain Turkish-Armenian Journalist", *Voice of America*, 22.01.2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/impunity-persists-in-case-of-slain-turkish-armenian-journalist/6407891.html>; 'Turkey: IPI reiterates call for justice on 17th anniversary of Hrant Dink's assassination', IPI, 19.01.2024, <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/turkey-ipi-reiterates-call-for-justice-on-17th-anniversary-of-hrant-dinks-assassination/>
- 7 The European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.
- 8 For further reading please see: Bayır, Derya, *Minorities and Nationalism in Turkish Law*, Taylor & Francis, 2016.
- 9 <https://www.tihk.gov.tr>
- 10 <https://www.ombudsman.gov.tr>
- 11 <https://www.tihk.gov.tr/en/pages/Law-on-the-Human-Rights-and-Equality-Institution-of-Turkiye>
- 12 For details please see: Karan U., Sever, Ç., *Bir İnsan Hakları Koruma Mekanizması Olarak Ulusal Eşitlik Kurumları: Kamu Denetçiliği Kurumu ve Türkiye İnsan Hakları ve Eşitlik Kurumu Örneği*, Eşit Haklar İçin İzleme Derneği, İstanbul, 2020, <https://www.esithaklar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ESHID-ulusal-insan-haklari-kurumlari-TR.pdf>
- 13 *Türkiye'de Din, İnanç veya İnançsızlık Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu*, p. 4.
- 14 Hrant Dink Foundation's project titled 'Media Watch on Hate Speech' displays various examples. Please see: <https://hrantdink.org/en/asulis/activities/projects/media-watch-on-hate-speech/420-media-watch-on-hate-speech>
- 15 *2022 Human Rights Violations Report*, Protestant Churches Associations, <<https://www.protestankiliseler.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/2022-Violations-report-22.pdf>>.
- 16 *Decision of the Constitutional Court*, 22.05.2019, <https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/tr/haberler/bireysel-basvuru-basin-duyurulari/turkiye-ermenileri-patrikligi-secimi-yapilmasi-tale-binin-reddedilmesi-nedeniyle-din-ozgurlugunun-ihlal-edilmesi/>
- 17 This news article is based on the information provided by the Parliamentary Petitions Commission in response to an application from Diyarbakır, which claimed that Protestant churches and associations were carrying out missionary activities and asked for the closure of these churches. *Independent Türkçe*, 5.11.2019, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/88486/haber/t%C3%BCrkiye%E2%80%99de-hristiyan-ve-yahudilere-ait-439-ibadethane-ve-24-dernek-var>
- 18 *2022 Human Rights Violations Report*, Protestant Churches Associations; 'Kod G 87: Hükümet Protestan rahiplerinden arındırıyor', *Bianet*, 25.03.2022, <https://bianet.org/haber/kod-g-87-hukümet-protestanlari-rahiplerinden-arindiriyor-259588>
- 19 For other places of worship that have been repaired and/or are currently undergoing repair, please see: <https://www.vgm.gov.tr/vakiflarimiz/vakiflarimiz/cemaat-vakiflari>
- 20 Please see: Romain Ors, İlay, Tanyeri Erdemir, Tuğba, 'Former Byzantine churches are being converted to mosques – this threatens Istanbul's cosmopolitan identity,' *The Conversation*, 15.09.2020, <https://theconversation.com/former-byzantine-churches-are-being-converted-to-mosques-this-threatens-istanbuls-cosmopolitan-identity-145419>
- 21 Please see the details of these attacks: *Türkiye'de Din, İnanç veya İnançsızlık Temelli Nefret Suçları Raporu*.
- 22 'Türkiye'deki Yahudiler ve İsraililer endişeli,' *Avlaremoz*, 18.10.2023, <https://www.avlaremoz.com/2023/10/18/turkiyedeki-yahudiler-ve-israilliler-endiseli/>; 'İzmir Beit Hillel Sinagogu önünde kompo teorilerinden esinlenmiş protesto', *Avlaremoz*, 22.01.2024,

- <https://www.avlaremoz.com/2024/01/22/izmir-beit-hillel-sinagogu-onunde-kompo-teorilerinden-esinlenmis-protesto/>; 'Balat Musevi Hastanesi: Hastanemizin hedefini kınıyoruz,' *Bianet*, 23.11.2023, <https://bianet.org/haber/balat-musevi-hastanesi-hastanemizin-hedef-gosterilmesini-kiniyoruz-288338>
- 23 'Güvenlik Kaygısı Nedeniyle Uzaktan Eğitim izni', *Avlaremoz*, 24.11.2023, <https://www.avlaremoz.com/2023/11/24/uomlye-guvenlik-kaygisi-sebebiyle-uzaktan-egitim-izni>
- 24 Danzikyan, Yetvart, 'CHP'de Değişimden Ne Anlayalım ve Kilise Saldırısına Dair İki Soru', *Agos*, 31.01.2024, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/29762/chpde-degisimden-ne-anlayalim-ve-kilise-saldirisina-dair-iki-soru>
- 25 *Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation*, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2010.
- 26 For details please see: <https://www.vgm.gov.tr/foundations-in-turkiye/foundations-in-turkiye/cemaat-community-foundations>
- 27 Between 2003-2018, 1,084 immovable properties were registered in the name of community foundations and 21 immovable properties were decided to be paid to community foundations. <https://www.vgm.gov.tr/vakiflarimiz/vakiflarimiz/cemaat-vakiflari>.
- 28 Also see: Özbek, Ayşegül, 'Cemaat Vakıfları Zirvesi', *Bianet*, 25.04.2022, <https://bianet.org/haber/cemaat-vakiflarinin-bagajlarinda-agir-yukler-var-260975>
- 29 *Agos*, 01.01.2024, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/29629/2023-bitti-hastane-vakiflari-secimleri-yapilamadi>
- 30 *Bianet*, 13.11.2023, <https://bianet.org/haber/kisanak-azamitutukluluk-surem-dolduysa-neden-hala-icerideyim-287791>.
- 31 'Turkey: Release Politicians Wrongfully Detained for 7 Years', 03.11.2023, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/03/turkey-release-politicians-wrongfully-detained-7-years>
- 32 According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), understanding Turkey's high rates of incarceration of journalists requires a closer look at its domestic politics, particularly the long-running Kurdish conflict. Anti-terror and penal code statutes have allowed authorities to conflate journalistic reporting that they consider favorable to banned groups, like the PKK, with membership of a terrorist organization—for which the punishment is up to 15 years in prison. The number of journalists in prison change every day under these conditions. One of the Kurdish journalists summarizes the situation in one sentence: 'Being a Kurdish journalist makes your non-existent crime even heavier.' Öğret, Özgür, 'Drop in jailed Turkish journalists belies a long-simmering press freedom crisis,' 13.02.2024, <https://cpj.org/2024/02/drop-in-jailed-turkish-journalists-belies-a-long-simmering-press-freedom-crisis/#:~:text=In%20CPJ's%202023%20annual%20prison,from%2040%20the%20previous%20year>
- 33 *The Report on Trustee Regime in Turkey & Denial of Right to Vote and Right to be Elected*, 2019, <https://hdp.org.tr/en/kayyim-trustee-report/13740/>; 'HDP's Patnos co-mayors arrested on bogus charges', 19.07.2023, <https://hdp.org.tr/en/hdps-patnos-co-mayors-arrested-on-bogus-charges/17427/>.
- 34 *06 Şubat 2023 Pazarlık Elbistan Kahramanmaraş Depremleri Raporu*, 02.06.2023, [https://deprem.afad.gov.tr/assets/pdf/Kahramanmara%C5%9F%20Depremi%20%20Raporu\\_02.06.2023.pdf](https://deprem.afad.gov.tr/assets/pdf/Kahramanmara%C5%9F%20Depremi%20%20Raporu_02.06.2023.pdf)
- 35 To find most of them: *Recent Earthquake Reports*, 05.04.2023, <https://baskamecra.com/guncel-deprem-raporlari/>
- 36 Please see: Aktaş, Aytekin, *Deprem Bölgesinde Yaşanan Ayrımcılıklar*, 23.07.2023, <https://baskamecra.com/deprem-bolgesinde-yasanan-ayrimciliklar/> and Can TV Earthquake Archive, <https://cantv.tv/tag/deprem-ozel>
- 37 'Onlarca tarihi yapı depremlerde hasar gördü', *Kültür Meclisi*, 17.02.2023, <https://kulturmeclisi.com/onlarca-tarihi-yapi-depremlerde-hasar-gordu>
- Yıldız, Ümit, 'Mekansal Anlamların Politik İnşası: Deprem ve Antakyalı Ortodokslar,' *Nehna*, 27.01.2024, <https://www.nehna.org/post/mekansal-anlamin-politik-insasi-deprem-ve-antakyalı-ortodokslar>
- 38 Uluşahin, Aslı, 'Adana'dan Hatay'a, Deprem ve Dayanışma,' *Kültür Meclisi*, 5.03.2023, <https://kulturmeclisi.com/adanadan-hataya-deprem-ve-dayanisma/>
- 39 As a network participant pointed out at the eighth meeting of MRG's Minorities, Accountability, Rights, Collaboration (MARC) programme, which aims to fully realize the rights of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in Türkiye, other ethnicities are indeed perceived as more privileged 'whites' compared to Roma. ('Peripatetic Ethnicities and Closed Stratification', 11.11.2023, Antalya). This concept goes beyond Türkiye and is crucial for understanding the discrimination faced by Roma worldwide. However, this perspective takes on added importance in the earthquake zones of Türkiye, where different minority communities live side by side.
- 40 'Accusations such as looting and theft put Syrian refugees and Dom, Abdal and Roma people in a very difficult situation in the aftermath of the earthquakes. 68.83 percent of the individual interviewees (106 people) stated that they were subjected to these accusations or that they witnessed these accusations. This situation has made the Dom, Abdal and Roma living in the region the target of hate speech and hate attacks.' Baysak, Serkan, 'Report on the Monitoring of Discrimination Experienced by Dom, Abdal, and Roma People in Southern Turkey Following the 2023 Earthquake', *MRG MARC field report*, p. 4.
- 41 *Deprem'in Roman Hali*, 2023, Romani Godi & ESHİD, <https://www.esithaklar.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Deprem-in-Roman-Hali-EnSon-12.pdf>; İpek, Pınar, 'Antigypsism Against Dom Groups in the Earthquake Region', *MRG MARC field report*, September 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/resources/antigypsism-against-dom-groups-in-the-earthquake-region/>; Çiftçi, Esra, 'Depremzede Romanlar ayrımcılığı anlattı', *Artı Gerçek*, 23.03.2023, <https://artigercek.com/guncel/depremezde-romanlar-ayrimciligi-anlatti-zabitalar-bizi-cadirdan-kovup-hasarli-243544h>, Baysak, *ibid.*
- 42 'Depremzede Romanlar: Her yere başvurduk konteyner vermediler,' *Yeni Yaşam*, 21.12.2023, <https://yeniyaşamgazetesi5.com/depremezde-romanlar-her-yere-basvurduk-konteyner-vermediler/>
- 43 Güzel, Defne, *6 Şubat Depremlerinin LGBTİ+'lara Etkisi Raporu*, Koas GL & 17 Mayıs Derneği, 2023, <https://kaosgldernegi.org/images/library/deprem-raporu.pdf>; Göçer, Atalay, *Deprem Sonrası Geçici Barınma Mekanları: Diyarbakır'da Depremden Hayatta Kalan LGBTİ+'lar*, Keskesor Amed LGBTİ+ Oluşumu & Barış için Kültürel Araştırmalar Derneği, 2023, [https://static.bianet.org/system/uploads/1/files/attachments/000/003/747/original/DEPREM\\_SONRASI\\_GEC%CC%A7%CC%87C%CC%87\\_BARINMA\\_MEKANLARI.pdf?1678447144](https://static.bianet.org/system/uploads/1/files/attachments/000/003/747/original/DEPREM_SONRASI_GEC%CC%A7%CC%87C%CC%87_BARINMA_MEKANLARI.pdf?1678447144); Fidan, Aysel, Göçer, Atalay, *Deprem Sonrası LGBTİ+'ların Durumu Raporu*, Bakad, 09.10.2023; Tar, Yıldız, "Depremde katmerlenen ayrımcılık", T24, 19.02.2023, <https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/yildiz-tar-insan-manzaralari/depreme-katmerlenen-ayrimcilik-agzimi-yuzumu-kapatyordum-trans-oldugumu-anlamasinlar-diye.38760>
- 44 *The Girona Manifesto*, Pen International, <https://www.pen-international.org/girona-manifesto>
- 45 During the first two decades of the newly established Republic of Turkey, known as the Republican Period, the Turkish language emerged as a pivotal marker of national identity. In 1928, a campaign was launched under the banner 'Citizen Speak Turkish!' specifically targeting minorities whose mother tongues differed from Turkish. This campaign, initiated by university students, received significant support

- from the government and was actively sustained throughout the 1930s.
- 46 Lost Languages of Anatolia, <https://kayipdiller.com/en/anadolu-kayip-dilleri/> and please see: <https://tehlkealtin.dakidiller.org/>.
- 47 Agos, 27.09.2013, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/5734/suryanilerin-okul-sevinci>
- 48 Bilmez, Bülent, Çağatay, İrfan and Serhat Aslan, *Öğretmenlerin, Aktivistlerin ve Medyanın Gözünden Yaşayan Diller ve Lehçeler Seçmeli Dersi, Kültürel İncelemeler ve Toplumsal Araştırmalar Derneği*, İstanbul, 2022, <<https://etkiniz.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/RaporKITAMasterK.pdf>>; Topçu, Murat, 'Türkiye'nin Kayseri İlinde Çerkesenin Durumuna İlişkin Saha Raporu', *MRG MARC field report*, 25.09.2023, <https://minorityrights.org/tr/resources/turkiyenin-kayseri-ilinde-cherkesenin-durumuna-iliskin-saha-raporu/>; Oral, Yasemin, 'Circassian Minority in Türkiye: Samsun Case', *MRG MARC field report*, 24.09.2023, <https://minorityrights.org/resources/circassian-minority-in-turkiye-samsun-case/>; Topçu, Murat, Oral, Yasemin, 'Circassians and Abkhaz-Abazas in Metropolitan Areas: The Case of Istanbul and Ankara', *MRG MARC field report*, 2024.
- 49 Topçu, *ibid.*
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 *Artı Gerçek*, 16.02.2024, <https://artigercek.com/kultur-sanat/kurtce-tiyatro-oyunu-qral-u-travis-istanbulda-da-yasaklandi-284456h>
- 53 'Hemshins: A journey through the impact of urbanisation and migration on the loss of culture and language', MRG, 2023, <https://minorityrights.org/resources/hemshins-a-journey-through-the-impact-of-urbanisation-and-migration-on-the-loss-of-culture-and-language>
- Başol,Elçin, 'The Abkhaz in Turkey: Navigating Identity, Unity, and Belonging', *MRG MARC field report*, 2024; Şendeniz, Özlem, '*Kimdir Bu Lazlar?*' *Laz Kimliği ve Sanal Mekanda Lazca*, İstanbul, İletişim, 2020.
- 54 Kürt Meselesi ve Kürt Algısı: Özet Rapor, Kurdish Studies Center, 2023, [https://kurdish-studies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/KSC\\_Kurt\\_Meselesi\\_Algilar\\_Talepler\\_Tutumlar\\_Sunu m.pdf](https://kurdish-studies.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/KSC_Kurt_Meselesi_Algilar_Talepler_Tutumlar_Sunu m.pdf), p. 16; Turhalli Balsak, Cemile, 'Children's Access to Zazaki (Kirmanjki)', *MRG MARC field report*, 2024.





# working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority  
Rights  
Group

## Unveiling Discrimination: Minorities in Türkiye

This report provides a summary of key legislation in Türkiye and identifies systemic discrimination both in the drafting of law and its implementation (or lack thereof). The report covers important minority rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief, the right to political affiliation and representation, and right to language.

The report argues that discrimination against minorities in Türkiye is a structural problem grounded on historical and current forms of Turkish nationalism. Turkish nationalism, the author maintains, negatively affects minorities across several rights, and is in turn exacerbated by intersectional forms of discrimination. Insights into the nature of systemic discrimination in Türkiye include limited legal protection and gaps between legislation and enforcement as well as ineffective institutional mechanisms.

Offering a general account of structural discrimination faced by a number of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities in Türkiye, this report also outlines a series of important recommendations to government, international organisations and civil society. Finally, the author outlines the impact of recent earthquake disasters on minority communities in Türkiye. Highlighting the discriminatory attitudes and practices faced by minorities during the most recent earthquake in February 2023, the author argues that disaster management policy in Türkiye exacerbates vulnerability among Roma communities and LGBTQI+ persons especially.

© Minority Rights Group, April 2024

This report is published as a contribution to public understanding. Copies of this study are available online at [www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)



Minority Rights Group San Marco street 56/A, 4th floor, 2, 1034, Budapest

Tel +36 30 209 3152 Email [minority.rights@minorityrights.org](mailto:minority.rights@minorityrights.org) Website [www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)

[www.twitter.com/minorityrights](https://www.twitter.com/minorityrights) [www.facebook.com/minorityrights](https://www.facebook.com/minorityrights)

