

### **Challenges facing minorities in Turkey**

Minority Rights Group Europe publishes its bi-annually Bulletin that introduces major issues of minority rights in the last six months (July- December 2021).

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In this Bulletin you can read about urgent issues experienced by ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities in Turkey concerning language, places of worship places, minority media, women and LGBTQ+ person's rights and political participation.

### **Right to education in minority languages**

Minorities in Turkey struggle to prove their existence. In this sense, there is still no right to mother tongue education at schools.

There is a protocol to choose Kurdish, Laz or Hemshin language education as an elective course. However, students and parents do not know how they can apply for these courses. These courses are not run due to `lack of enough students` as an official explanation.

According to first-hand accounts local people are sufficiently about the availability of such elective language courses in southern Turkey, where there densely populated Kurdish areas.



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This is also one reason why parents do not submit application for Kurdish as an elective course for their children in other regions.

It is stated that the majority of parents speaking Hemshin and Laz languages, do not ask for mother tongue education, as they do not want their children to be stigmatized and associated with terrorist organizations especially in the East Black Sea Region.

In 2021, one of the most important topics on the agenda of minorities in Turkey was the right to education in a mother tongue.

The Kurdish Language Platform ([Platforma Zimane Kurdi](#)) wrote an open letter to President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, demanding that the government control on Kurdish language teaching and practice should be lifted and that Kurdish should be recognized officially. In the same letter signed by the spokesperson of the Platform, Serefhan Ciziri, the importance of mother tongue education was emphasized.

The Language Rights Monitoring Documentation and Reporting Network (DHİBRA), comprising 99 organizations, institutions, and platforms announced their demands concerning 19 mother tongues in Turkey on 21 February 2021, World Mother Language Day. In its message, the Network stated that `All mother languages and linguistic pluralism which are the richness of Turkey, need to be embraced and supported by everyone. Removing barriers to language rights is an essential part of democracy. `

Kurdish PEN, the Mardin Mesopotamia Writers Association, the Birca Belek Language and Culture Association, the Kurdish Writers Association and the Mesopotamia Language and Culture Research Association made a joint statement ahead of 21 February, the World Mother Language Day, and requested that Kurdish should be accepted as a language of education at public schools.



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## Attacks on places of worship

There are 388 registered churches in Turkey. The province with the most churches in Turkey is Istanbul, which has 158 churches. Istanbul is followed by Nevşehir with 92 churches, Gümüşhane with 78 churches and Mardin with 69 churches.

Churches that are not protected for touristic purposes, that is, most of the churches outside of Istanbul, are either used as barns or converted into another means of use. Apart from this, there are attacks on churches that continue to exist as churches. There are two specific attacks on churches in 2021;

After the Surp Toros Church in Turkey's Aegean province of Kütahya passed into the ownership of a private individual, it has been completely destroyed. There is now a flat piece of ground in place of this historical church.

As reported by Agos newspaper, local sources said that they went to the place where the church was located upon hearing that it was demolished.

The church had recently come into the possession of a person. It is now believed that the demolition was carried out following the decision of this person.

An attack was carried out on the Marta Şimoni Church in the Kovankaya (Meeri) village of Şırnak's Beytüşşebap district. While the statues in the church were thrown to the ground, the rosaries were found to have been thrown out.

Again, in July 2021, there was an act of desecration at an important religious center in Kadıköy, this time in the middle of Istanbul. A group danced outside the door of the Surp Takavor Armenian Church in Kadıköy.

Three people were taken into custody in connection with the incident but were released by the court where they were taken. Messages of reaction and condemnation came from the government and opposition on the subject.



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### Pressure on minority media

Kurdish journalists were especially the target of repression. The website of Jinnews, considered a key part of Kurdish media, has been blocked at least 21 times. In addition, the Mesopotamia Agency, which is also from the same group, was repeatedly blocked from access. Four journalists from the Mezopotamya Agency were arrested for their news coverage.

The journalists, who were imprisoned for 4-6 months, were released as a result of public pressure. These journalists were personally targeted by the Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu.

### Pressure on women and LGBTQI+ persons

If we look at the situation of minorities in terms of an intersectional approach, it is necessary to pay attention to the issues confronting women and LGBTQI+s persons belonging to minority communities.

Being a minority woman in Turkey will be understood more clearly through this example. Fatma Altınmakas, a mother of six children living in Gölağılı village of Malazgirt district of Muş, went to the Malazgirt Gendarmerie Station with her husband Kazım Altınmakas on 12 July 2021 and said that she was sexually assaulted by her husband's brother Sinan Altınmakas for three months with death threats. Sinan Altınmakas who was taken into custody upon the complaint of Fatma Altınmakas, but was released on probation on 14 July by the Malazgirt Criminal Peace Judgeship in the courthouse to which he was transferred.

Another case that İpek Er, who was driven to suicide. İpek Er committed to suicide after the sexual assault of a Kurdish girl and expert sergeant Musa O. The letter he left behind and his



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mother's tears made the subject known in public. Musa O. was sentenced to only ten years in prison and was not even arrested.

Kurdish LGBTIQ+ activists Havin and Yıldız İdil Şen, who were also detained after the appointment of a trustee at Boğaziçi University, also announced that they were subjected to a strip search when they were detained.

## Conclusion

The situation of minorities in Turkey was defined by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. Since Lausanne, communities in Turkey, especially those defined as minorities, have gained some of their rights. Like opening their own schools and establishing media. However, there are also communities who are excluded from the definition of minority in the Treaty of Lausanne, and the rights already recognized in Lausanne are not implemented due to systematic assimilation policies. Today, we see that most of the minorities have left the country and the rest are living in very difficult conditions. The murder of Hrant Dink is a turning point for the Armenian people. When it comes to 2021, it is stated by the Dink family that the people tried in this case are only a part of the crime, and those who gave the real "-kill-" order have still not been prosecuted. Again, what happened to the Diril family, attacks on religious places, lack of a right to education in mother tongue, and continuing pressure on politicians representing minorities show the challenging state of minorities in Turkey during 2021.



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