

# **CIRCASSIAN MINORITY IN TURKEY: THE SAMSUN CASE**

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## **1. Introduction**

Although Turkey's cultural and linguistic diversity is quite broad and thus rich, there is no updated consensual data on the languages spoken in Turkey today. The most recent official data was collected in the 1965 population census according to which there were 36 languages spoken in Turkey. The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger reports that 15 of these languages are endangered today and 3 of them are already extinct. Among these endangered languages spoken in Turkey is Circassian.

Circassians are Northern Caucasian people, majority of whom were exiled to the Ottoman Empire during and after the Russo-Circassian War, which ended in 1864. Today, the Circassian population mainly lives in the autonomous republics within the Russian Federation, primarily in Adygea, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Krasnodarsky Krai. However, due to the exile, they are also geographically dispersed outside their motherland, mainly Europe and the Middle East.

It is estimated that about 4 million Circassians live in Turkey today, which is higher than the population in their motherland. Despite this large population, there is no solid statistical data on the number of Circassian speakers in Turkey. Ubykh, which belongs to the same language family group as Circassian, already went extinct in Turkey when the last native speaker of the Ubykh language, Tevfik Esenç, passed away in 1992.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this report is to examine the cultural and linguistic practices and situation of the Circassians living in Samsun, Turkey. The issue is first addressed in the broader context of Turkey, providing a short overview of Turkish national law as it relates to the linguistic rights of minorities. The next section focuses on the Circassian language. It is then followed by the description of the research methodology and primary findings.



## **2. The Legal Framework for the Linguistic Rights of Minorities in Turkey**

The most direct and relevant jurisprudential basis of the minority rights in Turkey are the Treaty of Lausanne and the Turkish Constitution. According to the Turkish Constitution, Turkish is the only official language of Turkey and its 42nd article states that no language other than Turkish can be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens in educational institutions. For its minority policy, the Turkish legal framework relies as the primary basis on the Treaty of Lausanne, which asserts that only the non-Muslim communities- Armenian, Greek and Jewish, are considered minorities and thus granted the rights to language and education.

Following the Helsinki Summit in 1999 that granted European Union candidate status to Turkey, yet, some changes regarding the teaching of foreign languages and learning of different languages and dialects were made in the form of amendments to the legislation within the scope of the seventh reform package adopted in July 2003. The amendment ensured that Turkish citizens who "use various traditional languages and dialects in their daily lives" could get language education through private language courses, provided these courses were approved by the National Ministry of Education (European Commission, 2003). These regulations also brought about the lifting of the ban on naming children in minority languages and publications in these tongues made possible.

The Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED) then had a burst of activity, including seminars and workshops for language teaching and materials preparation with the guidance of teachers, academics, and experts from the Caucasus (KAFFED, 2005). Thus, the academic year 2006-2007 saw the first mother tongue classes organized by 23 Caucasian associations around Turkey with 32 classes and 28 teachers (ibid). The academic year 2012-2013 saw another milestone in language education with the introduction of the elective 'Living Languages and Dialects' which provided language lessons in public secondary schools in a variety of languages spoken in Turkey, including Circassian & Abkhaz. In 2010, KAFFED applied for the provision of university programmes for the Circassian & Abkhaz language and literature, and 2011 saw the first Circassian language and literature programme open at Erciyes University in Kayseri, Turkey; followed by another programme at Düzce University in Düzce, Turkey in 2013.



Boğaziçi University and Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul also offer the Circassian language as elective courses.

Although these developments are undeniably significant achievements in a context dominated by official monolingualism, they have not brought about tangible contributions to the linguistic rights of the minorities. Making a law without making the necessary provisions for its successful implementation has just created a large gap between the law as it is written and the way that it is practiced, as can be observed in the bureaucratic obstacles, complex application procedures, inadequate course materials, lack of proper teacher training, lack of promotion and awareness-raising activities in the public sphere. Enrollments in the Living Languages and Dialects courses are quite low, compared to the other elective courses, on the grounds that parents, teachers and school administrators are nervous about course offers and pedagogical leadership due to reasons such as fear of stigmatization and being labeled, widespread perception of these courses as ideological choices rather than a legal and legitimate right and the resulting negative attitudes towards and prejudices against these courses, not to mention the impossibility of teaching/learning any language only through these 2-hour elective courses. In a similar vein, Circassian Language and Literature departments do face similar difficulties and more such as the lack of sufficient academic staff and a foreseeable lack of job opportunities for their graduates and struggle to overcome them with mainly the support of civil society organizations.

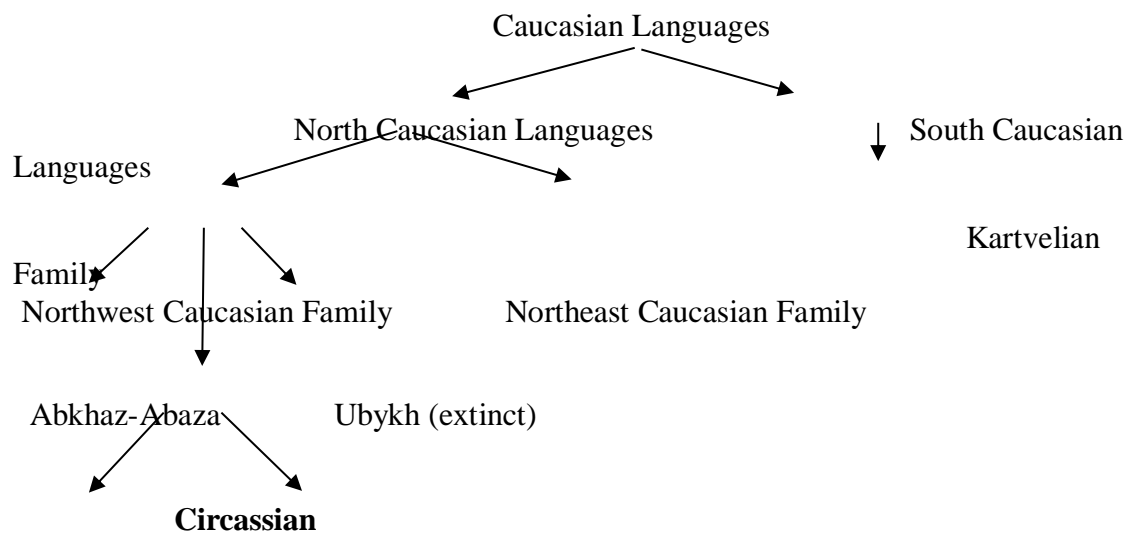
Overall, the legislation and policy as they stand today by no means measure up to a level that would alter the status of linguistic rights in Turkey without legal recognition of minority languages but rather creates ‘de jure and de facto language discrimination’ (Gezer and Dixon, 2021: 260) as well as a linguistic hierarchy.

### **3. The Circassian Language**

Circassian belongs to the Northwest Caucasian (NWC) language family, together with the Abkhaz-Abaza and Ubykh languages. Traditional homeland of the speakers of NWC languages are the areas to the north and partly to the south of the western part of the Caucasian Ridge including the northeastern coast of the Black Sea (Arkadier and Lander,



2020: 370). The dialects of Circassian can be viewed in the following figure, together with their relations to the other NWC languages.



- |                         |                         |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>West Circassian:</b> | <b>East Circassian:</b> |
| Bzhedugh                | Besleney                |
| Shapsugh                | Baksan                  |
| Abzakh/ Abadzekh        | Mozdok                  |
| Temirgoy                | Malka                   |
|                         | Terek                   |
|                         | Kuban                   |

Figure: Linguistic Family Tree of Circassian

All of the indigenous languages of the Caucasus are endangered or potentially endangered due to the fragile ecology of these languages (Friedman, 2010: 134). This fragile linguistic ecology can be accounted for, according to Friedman (2010: 135), historically by the Russian wars of conquest in the mid-nineteenth century, the famines and Stalin’s deportations of the mid-twentieth century, and the wars, rebellions, and ethnic cleansings of the end of the twentieth century, and recently by the processes of modernization, urbanization, and the ongoing effects of Russification. The language and educational policies of the Russian Federation, especially since 2000, has reinforced and elevated the role of the Russian language as the state language and downgraded the status of minority languages and their role



in education with a significant decrease in teaching official and minority languages of the republics. The UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages reports that in Russia only three minority languages are not endangered. Among those endangered languages is Circassian.

The situation in Turkey is also not much different. One primary factor is obviously that Circassians are still not officially recognized as an ethnic and/or linguistic minority by the Turkish government. Another major factor that has contributed to the present-day position of Circassian is the official Turkish national identity, which is founded upon one country-one nation-one language-one culture policy. Other external factors can be listed as the ongoing effects of their dispersed settlement during the post-exile period in regions where the Ottoman government had limited authority, where Muslims formed a minority, or where unrest had broken out, decades-long state assimilation policies following the establishment of Turkish Republic, rapid urbanization rates especially usually in search of higher education opportunities, better jobs and better life conditions, and the widespread negative public take of the matter characterized by ideological stereotypes and/or indifference.

#### **4. Methodology**

This report is based on a field research carried out in Samsun, in July 2023. Samsun has been selected as the research setting for a set of interrelated reasons. Firstly, it is one of the cities where a great number of Circassians settled during exile due to its geographical location in the central part of the Black Sea region, facing the ports on the other coast of the Black Sea. It is usually referred to as the most Circassian-populated city in Turkey. Circassians are mostly settled in the villages of Çarşamba district alongside Bafra, Alaçam, Terme, Havza, Ladik, Asarcık, Vezirköprü, and Kavak districts and the city centre. There are also four different Circassian organizations in Samsun. Despite the large Circassian population, Samsun is also often referred to for high levels of cultural assimilation among the Circassians (Benk, 2021). The number of Circassian villages in Samsun is 88, which is considerably high given that the total number of Circassian settlements/villages in Turkey is 572 according to the Network of Endangered Languages in Turkey (Oral & Topçu, 2023), and it is mainly West Circassian (i.e. Abzakh and Shapsugh) that is spoken there.



As for the data collection, the primary sources of data were the semi-structured in-depth interviews that were conducted with members of the Circassian community during the field trip. The aim of the interviews were to explore the cultural and linguistic practices, experiences and understandings of the community in relation to their Circassian identity. The methodology used for this study also comprises the review of relevant literature, projects, legislation and documents. First-hand observations also informed the data analysis as the author is a member of the community.

Overall, 10 participants were interviewed face to face by the researcher. Research participants have been selected on the basis of volunteering and willingness to provide rich descriptions of their experiences. The gender and age distribution of the participants can be seen in the following table. The interviews were all carried out in Turkish, although there were times when some participants would use Circassian words to express certain culture-specific notions.

<b>Code Number</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>
#P1	Male	65
#P2	Female	61
#P3	Female	20
#P4	Male	35
#P5	Male	68
#P6	Male	59
#P7	Male	67
#P8	Male	72
#P9	Female	64
#P10	Male	24



To comply with ethical considerations in conducting research, all participants were first informed about the background and purpose of study by the researcher and then provided written consent to be interviewed and to participate in the research. Permission to audio record the interview was also obtained from the participants and none of the participants had difficulties with the recording of the interviews. While sharing the information about the study, the participants were also informed about the confidentiality policy. In the present report, the identity of the participants have thus been removed and code numbers were used.

The data analysis started with the production of working transcriptions of interviews and went on with the low-level coding of the data. Emergent categories were identified with respect to the recurring topics and codes, which in turn were reduced to a number of key themes through multiple readings of the data.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Language Shift

One major theme emerged in the data analysis is the acknowledgement of **Turkish as a mother tongue**, rather than Circassian. The participants in the 60+ age group have expressed varying degrees of competence in Circassian- high levels of proficiency in listening and speaking, or survival-level proficiency in listening and speaking, or proficiency in four skills, or varying degrees of competence in listening comprehension. Despite those varying degrees of competence in Circassian, all those participants still seem to identify themselves with Turkish, even if it is not the first language they have learnt (origin criterion), since it is the language they know best (competence criterion) and they use most (function criterion). It can be best accounted for by the widespread, if not at the level of the entire community, **language shift** from Circassian to Turkish, and in some cases **language attrition**, involving the loss of Circassian over an individual's lifetime, often the result of language replacement, as is explicit in the extract 1. The recognition of Turkish as the mother tongue is quite telling, since **variation in speaker proficiency in the minority language** is usually symptomatic of **language shift ecologies** (Grenoble, 2021). The younger participants also acknowledge



Turkish as their mother tongue with reference to the criteria of origin, competence and function. Regarding the identification criteria, while older participants express their internal identification with Circassian, younger participants do not refer to Circassian at all. The external identification criterion (i.e. the language one is identified with by others) has not emerged in the data at all.

**Extract 1:**

*“Most people stopped speaking Circassian, including the elderly. Young people do not know it anyway. Even those who knew Circassian have forgotten it.” (#P7)*

**Extract 2:**

*“Today only our grandparents and sometimes our parents are able to speak Circassian. We can not, neither does the generation before us. My mother tongue is Turkish.” (#P2)*

Regarding the causes of the language shift, one major emergent theme is unsurprisingly the **cessation of intergenerational language transmission**. The data suggests that those participants in the 60+ age group acquired Circassian naturally at home as it was spoken by their parents and grandparents but mostly could/did not pass it on to their own children. Although the particulars vary from case to case, language shift is generally the result of a combination of demographic, historical, social, economic, political and economic factors, which are highly interrelated, and thus makes the cause-effect difficult to tease apart (Grenoble, 2021). However, there is scarce reference to those overarching factors in the data, especially by the participants in the 60+ age group, except for the urbanization and the concomitant scattered settlement patterns in cities alongside the effects of technological advances. The data rather implies the acceptance of language shift by the elderly as a **natural and normal** phenomenon due to the intense and prolonged contact with the Turkish language and the shift from agricultural/rural to industrial/urban life, as can be seen in the following extracts. Furthermore, the issue seems to be perceived as an **internal matter** of the Circassians primarily related to the individual and family, which at times even echoes self-blame.

**Extract 3:**





*I learned it at home. There was no television, no radio. We learned from our elders by listening to them. I wanted to teach my children but we had to work to survive in the life circumstances of the time. When we got home we didn't have the mood or the opportunity to deal with it. (#P6)*

**Extract 4:**

*“In the past, Circassian was spoken at home, by my grandparents, my parents, everyone. We lived together with my grandparents until I started secondary school and they always spoke Circassian. Then we moved to İstanbul when I was 15, so we stopped speaking it. Today I speak Circassian only with my peers while I stay here in the village. ... Young people, let alone speaking Circassian, do not even know what it means to be Circassian. I think this is primarily because we, the elderly, did not care about it.” (#P4)*

**Extract 5:**

*“We all tended to speak Turkish instead of Circassian. Then urbanization accelerated it. But a language is learned only if it is spoken at home. What we are experiencing now is the inevitable ending. What were you expecting? There is no turning point from here. People of all ages learn English but we keep saying we can't learn Circassian.” (#P7)*

This perception extends from the individual and family to Circassian associations as well, given that the cessation of intergenerational language transmission has brought about the lack of opportunity for later generations of **natural language acquisition** and left **classroom teaching/learning** as the only option to learn Circassian within the legal framework in Turkey. Those courses offered by the Circassian associations are mainly viewed to be inadequate to learn a language though as is exemplified in the extracts below.

**Extract 6:**

*“You cannot learn Circassian in the associations. What can one learn in 2 hours a week?” (#P8)*

**Extract 7:**

*“My mother tongue is Turkish. It is the first language I learned and I can best express myself. My father speaks it. I wanted to learn. I attended Circassian classes organized by the*



*Circassian Association here but it didn't work, except for learning the alphabet. Honestly speaking, it has never been my priority- education, professional life, then marriage and kids. I think this sensitivity toward the disappearance of the language is quite new among us, and it is also mostly with words not with deeds. Those courses start with the participation of 20 or 25 students but always end up with 3 or 4 participants.” (#P3)*

## **5.2. Language as Capital and Investment**

The insufficiency of class hours definitely provides a solid groundwork for the inadequacy of the language courses, yet the issue is more complex than that. The data suggests that younger generations are not motivated to learn Circassian since they view it either useless or unnecessary. It could be interpreted, with reference to Bourdieusian theory of capital (1986), that Circassian have lost their value to a large extent as a form of **economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital** among the younger generations. In other words, the knowledge of or proficiency in Circassian is not instrumental to accumulate financial assets, educational or professional qualifications, social ties or networks, or prestige.

The issue of minority languages is closely intertwined with the **identity** work of its speakers. By theorizing the complex relationship between the language learner and the social world, Darwin and Norton (2015) assert that language constructs our sense of self, identity which is multiple, changing, and a site of struggle and that **investment** holds a significant place for demonstrating this socially and historically constructed relationship between language learner identity and learning commitment. Against this background, they argue that if learners invest in a language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. Theorized around the concepts of language, identity, capital, and social world, the investment theory is quite explanatory of the low investment levels of young Circassians in the language.

### **5.2.3. Language, Identity and Culture**

In theoretical literature, the deterministic **essentialist conception of culture** based on one language-one culture equation has been replaced by more decentered, deterritorialized,



socially constructed views of culture allowing for the conceptualization of multiple, dynamic and fluid identities and multilayered affiliations. The data demonstrates frequent references to this essentialist language and culture discourses as is evident in that majority of the participants expressed that ‘language has a defining role in the maintenance of culture’ and thus ‘loss of language means loss of culture’. The emergent conflict between the verbal acceptance of the Circassian **language as an identity marker** and the low investment in language learning in practice requires further research though.

Another significant identity marker that emerged in the data is **Xabze** (i.e. the orally transmitted set of rules, customs, and values regulating the social conduct among Circassians). In response to those questions that aim to explore how participants understand and construct Circassianness, Xabze seems to be a common point of reference as is clear in the 8th extract. Yet, the data at hand does not lend itself to further elaboration except for extract 9 which seems to question the extent to which widely-accepted values of Xabze mark the boundaries of Circassianness.

**Extract 8:**

*“Circassianness means Xabze, we are unified by it. But it is very difficult to define it. You know, it is our customs and traditions.” (#P4)*

**Extract 9:**

*“When we speak of Circassianness, Xabze, the very first things that come to our minds are respect, manners and cleanliness. But if you ask for one more defining feature, no one can name it. Moreover, those features may have been distinguishing traits once but today they are actually universal human values and etiquette.” (#P4)*

#### **5.2.4. The Roles of Politics**

Although language shift is mostly perceived as an internal matter of the Circassians primarily related to the individual, family and organizations, the role of politics and political institutions come to the fore in the context of language maintenance. The data suggests two main but opposing lines of thinking- the need for the **politicization** of Circassians and their organizations so as to maintain or revitalize their language and culture and the need for their



**depoliticization** so as to bring Circassians of all political thoughts together. Some participants explicitly stated the significance of politicization and political participation as the only means of **democratic struggle** for acquiring linguistic and cultural rights in today's world, while some others view it as a means of **dissidence and division**, as is evident in the following extracts.

**Extract 10:**

*“Today we need to politicize. We have to continue our struggle in the political arena. Some say don't bring politics into our associations. If politics will not enter the associations, where will it enter?...I'm sure the government and the statesmen think that they cannot find anyone else but us who are this loyal and obedient. We are the good kids of the state and we love it.”* (#P7)

**Extract 11:**

*“Today there is no other way, we must get organized and politicize. I am a regular taxpayer and a good citizen of this country. The government has to hear and meet my cultural demands. They are my legitimate citizenship rights. This romanticized understanding of culture and identity dominating our organizations does not work any more. If the government does not legally recognize your identity, all the responsibility to maintain our identity falls on to us, which is an impossible mission to complete.”* (#P4)

**Extract 12:**

*“Some of us are communist, some others are political Islamist, and some others are liberal. We are divided by these different political thoughts. We must find a way to unite around Circassianness, by pushing politics away from our organizations.”* (#P9)

### **5.2.5. Elective Circassian Courses**

Despite the large Circassian population, **no Circassian classes**, as part of elective courses on Living Languages and Dialects in secondary schools, have been opened in Samsun so far according to the Federation of Caucasus Associations. One commonly mentioned reason for this is the **dispersed settlements** of Circassian in a variety of districts and the resulting difficulty to meet the requirements of course opening. One of the participants, who



previously worked in the administrative board of Samsun Circassian Association, explained that they took some actions at different times to promote those courses among learners and parents so that they can be opened; however, it has never been possible to meet those requirements. The other reasons are quite similar to the ones related to language courses organized by the Circassian organizations. There are also few instances in the data which suggest that these elective courses are just ‘**token gestures**’ by the government, as can be seen in the following excerpt.

**Extract 13:**

*“The government officials, bureaucrats and school administrators sit on their hands; we have to find the sufficient number of learners, we have to find the teachers, we have to prepare the materials. They do not even publish the coursebooks. What they provide for these classes is only their buildings. These elective courses only look good on paper.” (#P4)*

**6. Conclusion**

The findings of this report overall demonstrate that de jure recognition of minority languages is critically essential in their maintenance or revitalization. Without such a legal framework, the efforts of the minority communities seem to face insurmountable challenges as is the case with the Circassian minority in Samsun. Despite the lack of sufficient empirical evidence, it would be safe to claim that the language attrition and shift that have already occurred in the Samsun context well applies to the broader context in Turkey. The Circassian language is endangered in Turkey and its revitalization requires coordinated and multilateral actions and support.

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