

A Study on Understanding the Changing Diaspora and Virtual Communities through Digitalization*

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This article contains a research study within the framework of the diaspora approach, focusing on the connection of the Circassian community, which had to leave the Caucasus during the Tsarist Russia period in the 1860s and settle in Turkey, their new homeland. Although various definitions exist, the concept of diaspora is generally used to describe people who were forcibly separated from their homelands during historical processes and settled in at least two countries. With the advent of the digital age, the diaspora concept has evolved, particularly in terms of diaspora communities, as communication tools with the homeland have improved, and social and geographical mobility has changed through virtual communication platforms. In a physical sense, it enables access to numerous resources, such as maintaining connections with the homeland and diaspora members who are physically distant. Diasporic communities can create virtual communities, collaborate, and establish cultural connections through new media. Although this process has not yet spread to every aspect of life, initial steps have been taken through communication initiated by Caucasian Associations. The digital realm adds a digital dimension to the concept of diaspora. In this context, the virtual communities established by Circassians living in Turkey with their homelands in the Caucasus are examined through in-depth interviews with key figures from Caucasian Associations in the diaspora and participants from the homeland.

Keywords: Russia, Turkey, Caucasus, diaspora, Circassians, migration, “digital” diaspora

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Рассмотрены проблемы чеченских переселенцев, вынужденных в 1860-е гг. покинуть Северный Кавказ и поселиться на территории Турции, и вопросы их связи с исторической родиной. Показана эволюция понятия «диаспора», обусловленная наступлением цифровой эпохи и появлением новых средств связи, виртуальных коммуникационных платформ, а также улучшением социальной и географической мобильности, позволяющими сохранять связь с членами диаспоры, удаленными на большие расстояния, а также с исторической родиной. Диаспорные сообщества могут создавать виртуальные сообщества, сотрудничать и устанавливать культурные контакты через новые медиа. Данный процесс еще не охватил все аспекты жизни, но первые шаги в этом направлении уже предпринимаются. Цифровое пространство предоставляет в этом отношении новые возможности. В указанном контексте виртуальные сообщества, созданные чеченцами, проживающими в Турции и связанными с исторической родиной на Кавказе, рассматриваются на основе глубинных интервью с ключевыми лицами кавказских диаспорных сообществ и их соотечественниками на родине.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Турция, Северный Кавказ, диаспора, черкесы, миграция, «цифровая» диаспора

“Diaspora” is a Greek concept that denotes the dispersion of people from the same regional origin across the world. The affiliations of diaspora communities transcend national borders, enabling these communities to become trans-global entities [Rafael, p. 1]. According to the International Organization for Migration, diaspora refers to “ethnic and national community members who have left their homeland but maintain connections with it”. The broadening of the usage of the diaspora concept has not only increased its impact and significance but also introduced various approaches, leading to conceptual complexity.

The exile of the Caucasus peoples to the Ottoman Empire continued from the second half of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century [Кушхабиев, Магомеддаев]. The Circassian peoples were resettled in distant regions along the Russian border by the Ottoman Empire, with the purpose of preventing and complicating their return, as stipulated by the agreement between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire [Özcan, p. 450]. The second section of the article’s literature review examines the settlement of the Circassians from the North Caucasus to Ottoman territories and their presence in these lands.

Circassians tried to protect themselves against traditions they did not know in these foreign lands they came to and created a new diaspora. In today’s digital age, the concept of diaspora is observed in various forms, with the emerging concept of “digital diaspora” gaining prominence. Digital diaspora typically exhibits a structure that operates on three different levels. It is specific to the internet, network-oriented, and encompasses a broader range of social applications while also manifesting itself through political,

geographical, and historical characteristics. This article explores the concept of diaspora in this new context, which is emerging in connection with communication and digital developments, and the use of digital diasporic networks and virtual formations. While this new concept of diaspora does not entirely replace the traditional diaspora concept, it is evident that digital formations facilitate and transform diasporic connections.

Articles that acknowledge the presence of Circassians in Turkey as a diaspora point out that they meet the criteria based on studies on diaspora. Academic research and theses have been conducted in Turkey under the concept of the Circassian diaspora. For instance, a thesis entitled "Perception of Circassian Identity in Circassia and the Diaspora" was conducted at the Hitit University Institute of Social Sciences [Bingöl], and another thesis entitled "The Abkhazia Issue and Identity Problem from the Perspective of the Georgian and Circassian Diaspora in Turkey" was conducted at the Yıldız Technical University Institute of Social Sciences [Wakizaka]. Additionally, academic articles in Turkey addressing the concept of the Circassian diaspora include "Diaspora Nationalism and the Circassians in Turkey" conducted at Istanbul Commerce University Institute of Social Sciences [Duman], and "Political Participation Strategies of the Circassian Diaspora in Turkey" by Ahmet Kaya [Kaya, 2004], published by Routledge. Metin Uçar's article titled "To Be or Not To Be a Diasporic Community: Analysis of a Vital Issue for Circassians" [Uçar] also utilizes the classification of the German sociologist Robert Hettlage to argue that the Circassians in Turkey constitute a diaspora. Furthermore, articles such as Çurey's "A Glance to Instrumental Music Folklore of Abkhaz-Adyghe Diaspora in Turkey (Caucasus-Diaspora)" [Çurey], and Okçuoğlu's "Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: Identity Construction and Its References" [Okçuoğlu] refer to the presence of Circassians in Turkey as a diaspora. Çiftçi's "Circassian Diaspora in Turkey and Return Dilemma" [Çiftçi], Sakut's "The Diaspora Culture of Circassians in Turkey" [Sakut], and Çelikpala's "Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey and Its Impact on Turkish Foreign Policy" [Çelikpala] also discuss the approach of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey.

Russian scholars also recognize the Circassian diaspora in Turkey as a significant part of the North Caucasus Diaspora. In their article titled "Activities of Public Organizations in the North Caucasus Diaspora in Turkey," Kusxabiev and Magomeddadaev state that Circassians are an important part of the North Caucasus Diaspora and that Circassians organized under the umbrella of associations carry out cultural and enlightening activities to preserve their cultural identity [Кушхабиев, Магомеддаев]. In her study titled "The Migration of North Caucasus Peoples to Turkey," Russian scholar Biragova mentions three types of diasporas within the North Caucasus, one of which is the Circassian diaspora under the Caucasus Associations Federation [Бирагова, с. 330]. In conclusion, despite ongoing debates, numerous academic studies and articles regard the Circassians in Turkey as a diaspora.

In the context of this study, referencing previous research that considers Circassians in Turkey as a diaspora, a study is being conducted within the scope of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. This article employs in-depth interview methods, a research technique commonly used in the social sciences, with the aim of identifying the connections established within the diaspora framework as a new communication process begins within the framework of digital diaspora concepts. Within this context, interviews are conducted with both Caucasian Associations in Turkey and individuals who have connections between Turkey and the Caucasus. The gathered information is collected and analyzed under the designated headings in the data analysis section.

Conceptual Overview of Diaspora

“Diaspora” is a Greek term used to describe a nation or part of a nation that has left its own state or homeland and has dispersed internationally while preserving its own national culture [Dufoix, p. 27]. The term “diaspora” was first used to describe the Jews whom the Roman Empire expelled from their homeland and scattered around foreign lands. It initially carried negative connotations due to the suffering this community endured in the lands where they settled [Çelikpala, p. 36].

Diaspora brings together those who have relocated based on their affiliations and within a common framework of origin [Bernal, p. 1]. Initially, the concept of diaspora was primarily associated with dispersion and forced exile. However, it has evolved over time to extend beyond merely defining forced migrations [Clifford, p. 303]. Cohen identifies the period from 1980 onwards as the second stage in his book, using the term “diaspora” to encompass various elements, such as ethnic and racial minorities, who are forced to disperse. Examples include expatriates, the exiled, political refugees, migrants, and foreigners [Cohen, 2008, p. 1]. According to Cohen, the third stage involves researchers in the field of social sciences influenced by the post-modern era, who attempt to separate the inseparable concepts of “homeland” and “ethnic-religious community” within the diaspora definition [Cohen, 2019, p. 2]. In their view, during this period when identities become deterritorialized, the diaspora concept is being redefined in a more flexible manner. Cohen characterizes the fourth stage as a period when the framework of the diaspora concept has been established. Starting from the early 2000s, during this period, the homeland and the motherland continued to be an integral part of the diaspora.

According to William Safran, these features characterize a diaspora:

1. They must be dispersed to at least two different environmental spaces away from their homeland.
2. They should maintain memories, visions, and narratives related to their homeland.
3. They believe that they are not fully accepted by the native population of the countries they have settled in.
4. They consistently maintain the desire to return to their homeland, considering their current place of residence as only “temporary.”
5. They demonstrate a willingness to make sacrifices for the betterment or welfare

of their homeland. 6. They maintain continuous and enduring relationships with their homeland [Safran, p. 83–84].

The concept of diaspora, as opposed to the traditional understanding of dispersion in the past, is now associated with communities coming together under a common identity and shared heritage to maintain communication, create traditions, and form a collective narrative to continue their lives. While they may maintain their daily routines locally, on a global level, diaspora signifies the need to establish connections with the homeland they have left behind or yearn for [Silverstone, p. 19]. This conceptualization began to undergo transformation with technological advancements, particularly in the 1980s. The rapid developments, especially from the 1990s and 2000s onward, necessitate a fresh perspective on the diaspora approach. Technological advancements and new media have encouraged diaspora communities to establish strong connections with their homelands [Kurtoğlu, p. 10].

The Presence of Circassians in the Turkish Diaspora

The northern part of the Caucasus, which includes the northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, is referred to as the North Caucasus, and it has been home to a significant portion of the Circassian population throughout history [Berkok, p. 1–13].

The term “Circassian” is believed to have been first used by Plano de Carpini in the year 1215. However, Ernest Chanter suggests that the Circassians are an ancient people dating back to around 500 BC [Öner, p. 18–39]. The majority of the Circassian population that migrated from the North Caucasus currently resides in vastly different geographical areas from their homeland. As a result of this migration, approximately 1.5 million Circassians left their homeland and settled in various countries worldwide, with a significant number residing in the Ottoman Empire’s territories, among others [Kaya, 2004, p. 223].

The migration of Circassians from the North Caucasus region began through ports such as Taman, Tuapse, Anapa, Tsemez, Sochi, Adler, Sukhumi, Poti, and Batumi in the Black Sea to various destinations, including Russian, Ottoman, and British ships. They eventually arrived in areas within the Ottoman Empire, including Trabzon, Ordu, Samsun, Sinop, Kefken, Varna, Burgas, Istanbul, and the Aegean coasts [Habiçoğlu, p. 78]. Among these, Samsun and Trabzon were notable for the significant number of Circassians disembarking from ships. In Samsun, due to the concentration of the Circassian population, the “Birlik ve Karşılıklı Yardım Çerkes Derneği” (Union and Mutual Aid Circassian Association) was established in the early months of 1908. The aim of the association was to conduct cultural and educational activities among the Caucasian peoples and seek ways to facilitate their return migration. The association established a middle school in Samsun that provided education in the Circassian language and taught students how to write in the Circassian alphabet. Similar schools began to open in other regions as well [Кышха-

биев, Магомеддадаев]. It is estimated that there is a Circassian population in Turkey ranging from 1,000,000 to 3,000,000. The cities with the highest Circassian populations are Istanbul, estimated at around 350,000, and Samsun, estimated at around 300,000.

Mutual visits and connections were difficult to establish. However, today, Circassians in the diaspora can easily develop their relationships with their homeland thanks to modern communication and transportation tools. Through the transportation and communication services facilitated by globalization, the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and various other geographic locations can recreate their homeland within the diaspora [Kaya, 2011, p. 29]. While the term “diaspora” was initially used to describe communities forcibly displaced from their homelands and desiring to return, it is now recognized that this criterion conflicts with the modern reality of diaspora. Today, Circassian communities have the chance to return to their homeland, but the literature suggests that such returns are relatively rare [Çiftçi, p. 68].

Digital Diaspora Communities, Virtual Communities

Simultaneously, communication is undergoing a significant transformation thanks to the internet, which serves individuals, organizations, communities, and societies [Van Dijk, p. 75]. Social media, by bringing individuals together around common goals, contribute to culture as a new form of socialization. In this structure supported by the medium, the question of whether virtual communities are real or not is answered by Castells with both “yes” and “no”. Virtual communities have a different reality, even though they do not follow the communication and interaction patterns of physical communities [Castells, p. 479–480].

The widespread use of digital media and smart devices in daily life has made the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds more distinct. Entering the online realm is now considered entering a different world, and it constitutes a significant portion of daily activities [Bernal, p. 3]. In the fields of migration and new media, rapid changes and fluctuations have continually affected structural conditions and social realities [Andersson, p. 143]. The concept of digital diaspora encompasses various approaches within different disciplines and media studies. It focuses on web-based research that explores terms like ‘e-diasporas,’ ‘net diasporas,’ and ‘web diasporas,’ which are centered around the internet. Digital diaspora is defined as the interaction and connection of diasporic communities worldwide using the internet [Ponzanesi, p. 983–984]. It represents an organized and active migrant collective on the web. The development of technology, in addition to physical ties, has facilitated the interaction and communication of migrants who belong to various diasporas scattered worldwide within digital networks, paving the way for digital diasporas. The proliferation of the internet and various online networks has played a significant role in the formation of these digital diasporas. It has extended the reach of physical diasporas into the realm of digital ones. The widespread use of

social media platforms (such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*¹, *Twitter*, *Linkedin*, etc.) alongside both Web 1.0 and 2.0 usage has also influenced the adoption and utilization of digital platforms by diaspora members [Diminescu, p. 452]. In this context, digital diaspora refers to displaced communities, traditionally understood, maintaining their relationships, connections, identities, traditions, and cultures online by means of information and communication technologies.

The concept of diaspora is often associated with exile and displacement but is also used to express notions of boundaries, trans-temporal belonging, proximity, and connections that transcend time [Candidatu, Ponzanesi, p. 265–266]. The development and widespread adoption of communication technologies and digital devices have transformed the forms of temporal and spatial interactions. Digital media, through digital proximity, have reduced physical distances and reshaped notions of belonging and emotional relationships [Ponzanesi, p. 982]. The development of communication technologies and rapid advancements in internet networks has facilitated the growth and sustainability of diaspora communities. Tools like mobile phones, tablets, and computers have played a significant role in developing, sustaining, and reconstructing networks among diaspora members in both the digital and physical worlds. Additionally, these tools have contributed to shaping and reinforcing collective identities among diaspora members [Oirazabal, Reips, p. 1334]. Through digital communication and social media networks, diaspora members living in different geographical regions can connect with their roots and with each other. They can participate in cultural activities, share knowledge and experiences, and collaborate on social, political, economic, and humanitarian issues [Bernal, p. 3]. Digital diasporas are a set of practices that intersect with power relations, shaped by both online and offline users through material, symbolic, and emotional interactions [Andersson, p. 142]. The representation of digital diaspora offers the possibility to effectively reconfigure forms of representation, facilitating the creation of social ties. This, in turn, is indicative of a change that enables diasporic solidarity [Witteborn, p. 180–184].

Digital diasporas are reshaping participation and identity formation. In this sense, digital media providers (social media platforms, digital devices, and information and communication infrastructures) create, sustain, and expand the environment for diasporic gatherings. Evolving digital diasporas do not contradict or replace traditional diasporas; rather, they expand and transform their agencies in the digital age [Candidatu, Ponzanesi, p. 262]. Immigrants and diasporas use computer-based and mobile technologies to communicate, exchange information, promote their cultural and religious practices, and enhance their political mobility beyond borders, as documented in European sources [Oirazabal, Reips, p. 1334]. Research indicates that diaspora groups frequently use new media

¹ Social media *Instagram* and *Facebook* belong to *Meta Platforms Inc.*, a company recognized as an extremist organization in the Russian Federation.

[Ponzanesi, p. 983]. Digital diasporas facilitate communication among diaspora members and individuals of the same origin whom they may not know and who are located far away.

Associations founded by Circassians have played a significant role from the past to the present in preserving Circassian culture. There are various social organizations and associations among different Caucasian-origin communities. These associations often organize cultural events and aim to preserve the cultural heritage of these communities. Moreover, they play an important role in promoting collaboration and solidarity [Кушхабиев, Магомеддадаев].

In this context, in present-day Turkey, Circassians are involved in various activities through associations with the goal of gaining an “ethnic minority” status in Turkey, improving relations with the North Caucasian republics, and shaping and enhancing the socioeconomic, political, and legal conditions in their homeland of the Caucasus [Chochiev, p. 226]. Within the “Caucasian Cultural Association,” there are groups that speak Circassian (Adyghe), and these groups provide language education to children two days a week. Additionally, they offer traditional Circassian folk dance and music courses. The association regularly organizes conferences, seminars, and events related to the history of Caucasian peoples and the Southern Circassian diaspora [Кушхабиев, Магомеддадаев]. During these efforts, communication is established through a digital diaspora created through connections made on social media, leading to the formation of virtual communities. The concept of digital diaspora is relatively new and has not yet gained widespread recognition in Anatolia. In the context of Turkey, the concept of digital diaspora is mainly associated with Circassian associations and individuals who are members of these associations. However, the majority of Circassians who use social media are members of virtual communities that comprise the Circassian diaspora from many countries, including those established on the international stage in the Caucasus.

Method of the Study

The impact of digitalization and the concept of digital diaspora among Circassians, who migrated to Ottoman territories following the conflicts in Russia’s North Caucasus region in the 1860s, is being examined in Turkey. Within the framework of digital diaspora, it has been observed that connections in the virtual realm between Circassians in Turkey and those in the Caucasus are primarily used by Circassian associations and individuals affiliated with these associations. The ability of Circassians living in Anatolia to establish digital connections with the Caucasus remains limited. Therefore, this study focuses on the digital diaspora approach within the context of Circassian associations. In this context, interviews were conducted with individuals involved in Circassian associations, particularly those who are striving to maintain their cultural presence within the diaspora. In Turkey, there are organizations, especially in regions with a dense Circassian population, operating under the names “Caucasian

Association” or “Circassian Association,” with the primary goals of cultural preservation, economic activities, and mutual assistance.

This study involves qualitative research. Qualitative research typically begins with identifying the problem, followed by data collection, analysis, and reporting. During this process, various data collection tools can be used, including different forms of observation, interviews, and visual or auditory materials [Akdemir, Kılıç, p. 408–502]. In this research, open-ended questions were used in a more flexible manner. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their experiences and opinions in their own words, fostering a deeper understanding of the research topic.

The study’s general scope includes the following key areas of inquiry and points to be addressed:

- Are there virtual communities on social media that encompass different regions of Turkey and involve participation from the North Caucasus region?
- Are cultural exchanges taking place within virtual communities created through digital applications? If so, what languages are being used for these exchanges?
- What changes has the concept of digital diaspora brought about in the understanding of diaspora in Turkey and the North Caucasus?

The study is conducted through in-depth interviews with the aim of determining the contributions of the digital diaspora to cultural diversification or enhancement resulting from the changes and transformations undergone by digital diaspora within the framework of the defined research questions. In this context, in-depth interviews have been conducted with the administrators of Circassian associations established in Turkey to keep the Circassian Diaspora together within the framework of traditions and customs. Interviews were also conducted with administrators and youth from the “Istanbul Caucasian Cultural Association” located in Istanbul, where the Circassian population is most concentrated, and the “Samsun Circassian Association” located in Samsun, another region with a significant Circassian population. In addition to this, interviews were conducted with Circassians living in the Caucasus with whom communication was established.

The aim of this study can be evaluated as the examination of the effects of the newly introduced concept of digital diaspora and the continuous communication between the diaspora and the homeland through social networks.

Evaluation of Data

In this section of the study, findings obtained through in-depth interviews with a total of 11 participants are presented (see table).

The data collected through in-depth interviews were categorized and analyzed based on predetermined categories. Interviews were conducted with a total of ten individuals, including three participants from the Istanbul Caucasian Cultural Association, four participants from the Samsun

Circassian Association, and three participants from the North Caucasus. All participants are active social media users, using smartphones and belonging to multiple social media platforms. The participants mentioned using platforms such as Facebook, *Instagram*, *Linkedin*, *Whatsapp*, *Twitter*, *VKontakte*, *YouTube*, and *Telegram*. In the evaluation process, the first initials of the participants' names and surnames are used to maintain anonymity.

Turkish Diaspora and Caucasus Virtual Communities on Social Media

Members of the Circassian Diaspora, especially those involved in Circassian Associations and individuals who are members of these associations, actively use social media. Groups and events created on social media platforms constitute the fundamental dynamic of interaction among group members. These digital formations are organized through the Circassian associations in which diaspora members participate. While communicating and interacting with each other through these virtual communities, diaspora members also engage in joint activities.

Both the civil society organizations established by diaspora members and the virtual communities they participate in facilitate communication among group members. Participant 3 (Ş. K.) emphasizes that Civil Society Organizations support them in establishing communication and developing relationships with Circassia, contributing to the strengthening of ties between the two communities.

Digital diasporas are established on social media platforms such as *Telegram*, *Whatsapp*, *Facebook*, and others. *Telegram*, developed by Russian programmer Pavel Durov, is seen as the most preferred social media platform due to its ability to provide multi-platform support and its widespread use in the Caucasus region. The interviewees mentioned that they engage in active communication on *Telegram*, not only for work or event-related matters. Virtual communities created on this platform consist of participants from both the Caucasus and Turkey.

The 4th participant (M. M.) from Nalchik in the North Caucasus mentioned that he communicates with his friends, relatives, and diaspora members in Turkey through social media. The 10th participant (L. H.) from Maykop also mentioned that she is mostly involved in *WhatsApp* groups and communicates through this social media platform. Additionally, she mentioned her participation in social groups on Facebook and stated, "We follow each other on *Facebook* with my friends and acquaintances in Turkey, and we have video calls on *WhatsApp*."

The language factor plays an important role in communication and interaction among members of the Circassian diaspora between Turkey and the Caucasus on digital platforms. Middle-aged diaspora members can generally maintain their mother tongue, allowing them to communicate in their native language on social media. The 1st and 3rd participants (A. Y. and Ş. K.) "stated that they use Circassian when communicating

with the homeland, both face-to-face and on social media, and they do not experience language issues". The 4th participant (M. M.) emphasized that he communicates in Circassian through voice messages and written correspondence. She mentioned that she converted her messages from Cyrillic to Latin script. However, young members of the diaspora have lost their proficiency in the native language, so they communicate with other diaspora members in English. The 2nd participant (F. T. S.) stated, "Young people, especially those in the diaspora, use English through *WhatsApp* groups as they improve their English skills." The proliferation of English among young people in the Caucasus has led to an increase in the number of virtual communities established by young diaspora members.

Samsun, despite being a primary entry point for Circassians into Turkey and having a substantial Circassian population, is one of the cities where the Circassian language has been forgotten. The President of the Association, the 5th participant (İ. A.), stated, "Our biggest problem with the Caucasus is the language. We do not know Circassian, so we translate when communicating." He emphasized that language is a significant barrier. The 6th participant (S. S.) mentioned that they face difficulties in groups because they do not know Circassian, saying, "I am a member of many social communities in the Caucasus, but I cannot be very active because I do not know Circassian." The 7th participant (S. Ç.) stated, "Everyone in the Caucasus speaks Circassian, so we communicate through someone's translation."

Cultural Sharing from Groups Created on Virtual Media

Circassians in digital diasporas share elements of their culture, such as traditions, foods, dances, and music, with the aim of preserving and passing on their heritage. The primary reason for this is the profound system changes experienced in Turkey and Russia. The 9th participant (N. V.), who is in communication with Maykop in the North Caucasus, mentions that she is a member of many groups and virtual communities in Turkey. She explains that Maykop, being one of the regions with a significant Russian population, and the policies implemented during the Soviet era, led them to adopt Russian cultural identity, making it challenging to preserve Circassian values. By communicating with Circassian diaspora members through virtual communities, they can come together and learn and share their ancestral cultures. The 1st participant (A. Y.) notes that Circassian youth with limited knowledge of Circassian culture use virtual communities to research their identities, lineage, and family crests, striving to feel a connection to their own community. The 10th participant (L. H.) mentions having many friends and acquaintances in Turkey and emphasizes the importance of social groups in maintaining friendships and cultural solidarity when unable to visit Turkey regularly. She also mentions that the preservation of traditions is facilitated by maintaining a closed lifestyle to prevent assimilation in the Turkish diaspora.

Diasporas, especially for the younger generation, hold significance as carriers of culture, and this is why social communities and digital

connections have been established. Young individuals actively using digital platforms can strengthen their ties with the homeland and get to know elements of their cultural identity more closely. The 2nd participant (F. T. S.) mentions that on *Telegram*, virtual communities are formed where cultural activities and cooperation in case of disasters and other issues are shared.

The 2nd participant (F. T. S.), who frequently visits the North Caucasus region, states that “the application of traditions varies from region to region in the North Caucasus, but these groups, which are becoming closer to each other through digitization, are reviving their cultural values.” This highlights how digitization is facilitating interactions between communities that may not have direct connections otherwise.

The 4th participant (M. M.) from the North Caucasus mentions that they are sharing forgotten Circassian dishes and traditions from Circassia with Circassians in Turkey through the social media groups they participate in. They help reintroduce these traditions by sharing them. They note that, in general, cultural characteristics are similar in both regions, but especially wedding traditions in Turkey have been passed down from generation to generation in their original form. They say, “The wedding ceremonies shared through the social media groups we participate in, and the traditions practiced there capture our interest and bring our culture’s past back to life for us.” As a member of the Kabardian community, the 4th participant (M. M.) mentions that they exchange information about how Circassians in Turkey are living, what traditions they are practicing, and how they are preserving them through the social media groups they have formed, thereby strengthening their connections.

The 9th participant (N. V.) states that in Russia, women are predominantly involved in the workforce and that in the diaspora, the responsibility for household chores lies on men, reflecting Russian culture. Furthermore, they describe their activities within digital groups, emphasizing cultural exchanges related to how children are raised according to better-preserved traditions in Turkey, the attitude of the elderly, and the forgotten traditional culinary culture in the Caucasus. Additionally, they note that finding their relatives in Turkey through social media has initiated communication, fostering digital connections between both communities.

The 5th participant (İ. A.) in the interview points out that “There is a significant amount of cultural exchange in the homeland, and the primary reason for this is the influence of the dominant culture, which is the Russian cultural structure, on the local population.” The 7th participant (S. Ç.), who mentions that cultural interaction is intense in major cities like Maykop, states, “The villages in the Caucasus are not like the small villages in Turkey. During the Circassian migration, those who remained were gathered in specific camps, and later these camps were transformed into villages. The Circassians living in these areas have preserved both their traditions and their language.” The same participant, who mentions having visited these regions, adds, “During the Soviet Russia era, Kafkasya was an inaccessible place for us, but today, we live closely intertwined

with it through social media,” emphasizing that they virtually participate in cultural activities on both sides.

The 8th participant (E. Y.) in the discussion about cultural interactions between diasporas remarks, “In the Caucasus, people undergo gradual cultural changes as part of their normal life processes, while we, to preserve our existence, remained more closed off. They don’t have an instinct to preserve their traditions with their past characteristics intact, so they learn about our traditional features through social interactions with us.” The 7th participant (S. Ç.), sharing their perspective, states, “We have many common social groups with the Caucasus, and we are constantly in communication with these groups. We engage in mutual sharing. We find our relatives who share the same roots, and we connect with our heritage,” highlighting that digitization has facilitated communication and allowed curious Circassians to reach out to one another.

Changes brought about by Digital Diaspora in the Understanding of Diaspora in Turkey and the North Caucasus

Participant 3 (Ş. K.) emphasizes that with digitalization, communication opportunities have expanded, ensuring the continuity of communication. However, they note that digital diasporas bring members closer together but may diminish the sincerity and warmth of communication. It is mentioned that before the pandemic, diaspora members used to hold meetings and events in physical settings, but this process transitioned to social media during the pandemic. Participant 2 (F. T. S.) states that digital technologies enable diaspora members to maintain regular communication with their families, friends, and communities. They say, “This situation strengthens emotional bonds and facilitates the transmission of cultural values. However, while digital platforms facilitate communication, they weaken real connections and social interaction among individuals,” thereby emphasizing the shift in the understanding of digital diaspora.

Participant 3 (Ş. K.) states, “Before social networks, the homeland was a utopia for us; today, thanks to easy communication through social media, it has ceased to be a utopia.” They emphasize that even though people are not physically present, they can reach every region of their homeland. Participant 6 (S. S.) mentions, “Despite the decrease in travel to and from the Caucasus due to technological advancements, connections continue intensely through groups established on social media, and we participate in cultural activities happening on both sides online.” Participant 8 (E. Y.) remarks, “With digitization, we communicate with communities we’ve formed on social media without the need for constant visits between Turkey and the Caucasus.” Participant 10 (L. H.), joining from Maykop, says, “We communicate with Circassians in Turkey via social media, and it feels as if we haven’t been separated for 140 years. Social communities allow us to connect with even more people.” They emphasize that social communities bring together a significantly larger number of individuals, including those who cannot physically meet.

In the concept of digital diaspora, it is highlighted that distances have diminished, seamless communication and interaction are facilitated, and lost values between the two regions are transferred to each other. Additionally, many aspects of Circassian culture, such as handicrafts, accessories, clothing, and cuisine, are shared through digital platforms. Participant 1 (A. Y.) mentions, "I am a Circassian handicrafts teacher, and people from the Caucasus who see my handicrafts through groups join my page and get in touch with me." This illustrates how digital platforms enable the sharing of Circassian cultural elements like handicrafts and create connections across regions.

All participants emphasized that the digital process has led to people in diaspora communities, who may not know each other physically, becoming friends solely because they share the same heritage and engage in online sharing. Participant 2 (F. T. S.) notes, "Renewed algorithms on the internet have made it easier for unrelated Circassians to form social communities. People find each other more easily. At events held in Turkey or in the Caucasus, people come up to me and say, "I know you; we are friends on social media." This highlights that, for Circassians, sharing the same heritage is often sufficient for joining social communities.

Participant 4 (M. M.) mentions, "I find my relatives who have emigrated to Turkey by communicating through the groups I am part of on the digital platform, and I connect with them," highlighting how digital diaspora has made it easier for communities to establish connections or find relatives. Participant 9 (N. V.) adds, "Through live broadcasts on social media groups, we can virtually participate in Circassian weddings in Turkey," illustrating how they engage with villages, weddings, and gatherings in the diaspora through digital means. They emphasize that with digitization, the necessity for physical presence to be in a particular setting has disappeared.

Virtual meetings are conducted between Circassian associations in Turkey and those especially located in Maykop and Nalchik in North Caucasus, and many participants from both countries interact in this virtual environment. Participant 8 (E. Y.) mentions, "We participated in an online Circassian Cheese competition in the Caucasus and received awards. In addition, many of our friends send products to the Caucasus via *Telegram*, and we receive their products from there," highlighting not only cultural interactions but also the establishment of commercial connections. Participant 5 (İ. A.) states, "There are so many members in virtual communities that intercultural mingling is easier and more comprehensive," pointing out that it would be difficult for so many people from different regions to come together outside of social media platforms.

Regarding the challenges faced in the digital diaspora, Participant 2 (F. T. S.) mentions, "The presence of numerous groups and virtual communities in the digital space, where sharing occurs beyond the intended purpose, can lead to information pollution." Some participants also mention that due to such issues, virtual communities are occasionally closed, and new groups are established. This highlights the complexity

of managing digital diaspora communities and ensuring that they serve their intended purposes effectively.

* * *

Digitalization has transformed the realm where the purpose becomes instrumental, with virtual communities taking the place of physical communities. These virtual communities operate within different rules and dynamics, but they are not opposing; instead, they represent a different form. With digitization, diaspora experiences have taken on a new and distinct dimension. The proliferation of digital technologies, diversification of communication tools, and the emergence of social media platforms contribute to people with the same cultural roots coming together culturally, establishing connections, and strengthening their diasporic ties.

Circassian diaspora communities primarily find their reflections in digital diaspora settings centered around associations rather than being widespread across the general population. After migrating from the Caucasus to Ottoman territories, the Circassians made efforts to preserve their culture and identity in their new settlement areas. As communication technologies advanced over time and the internet and social media emerged, digital diaspora experiences began to take shape, and digital media started to transform the practices and experiences of the Circassian diaspora, although it may not yet be widespread. This transformation may not have had a significant impact on Circassian communities in rural areas, but it is gradually spreading. Circassians living in different regions have rapidly embraced digital media, and this adoption is beginning to influence the sharing and acceptance of social values and norms through these platforms. Circassian associations are often at the forefront of this shift, leading the way in embracing and utilizing digital technologies to connect and engage their communities in the diaspora.

Digital media provides the Circassian diaspora with the instant capability to connect not only with people and institutions in their homeland but also with communities and fellow countrymen in the diaspora. Digital diaspora appears to be a platform where Circassian communities communicate online, generate cultural content, and sustain diasporic bonds. Social media tools enable Circassians living far from their homeland to come together, share their traditions, and interact with each other. The Circassian diaspora uses the internet to communicate, transcending political and geographical boundaries. Those residing in the homeland can connect simultaneously with those in the diaspora. Through digital media, the Circassian diaspora is creating new public spaces, developing new forms of protest, and expanding the social movement arena by forming social groups.

Digital diaspora narrates the transformation observed in Circassian communities as they begin to establish connections with their homelands. However, this relatively recent process requires further development and expansion to strengthen relationships. Today, it is evolving through active

utilization by Circassian Associations and individuals connected to these associations, which helps activate the concept of digital diaspora. In these environments where initial applications are observed, the language, music, dance, and traditional cultural activities shared on social media platforms support interaction among Circassian communities and the formation of a common identity. Furthermore, through digital diaspora, Circassians can follow developments in their homeland, engage in information exchange on political, social, and cultural matters, and strengthen their diasporic bonds.

Therefore, when examining the process of Circassian communities communicating through social networks within the scope of digital diaspora, it is observed that this process is not yet widely used across the entire Circassian community but rather limited to a certain segment. The advancement of communication technologies has led to the establishment of connections in the digital world, ensuring continuity in communication and cultural ties among communities. In-depth interview results also indicate that these connections provide more continuity compared to face-to-face meetings. While digital diaspora is not yet actively utilized in all areas within the Circassian community in Turkey, the connections emerging within associations suggest that its gradual expansion will contribute to the communication process.

List of Informants

Informant	Initials	Sex	Age	Education	Place of residence
Participant 1	A. Y.	Female	60	Middle school graduate	Istanbul, Turkey
Participant 2	F. T. S.	Male	30	University graduate	Istanbul, Turkey
Participant 3	Ş. K.	Female	46	University graduate	Istanbul, Turkey
Participant 4	M. M.	Female	54	University graduate	Nalchik, Russia
Participant 5	İ. A.	Male	53	University graduate	Samsun, Turkey
Participant 6	S. S.	Female	56	University graduate	Samsun, Turkey
Participant 7	S. Ç.	Male	51	University graduate	Samsun, Turkey
Participant 8	E. Y.	Female	22	University student	Samsun, Turkey
Participant 9	N. V.	Female	37	University graduate	Maykop, Russia
Participant 10	L. N.	Female	53	University graduate	Maykop, Russia

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