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# Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Nationalism

Edited by Ajaya K. Sahoo



Covering such a large region and wide array of topics was always going to be difficult, but the editor and his twenty-three contributors have risen to the challenge with great élan. It is impossible to praise everyone, but the chapters on youth nationalism are particularly notable. This volume will provide a rich resource for many scholars.

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This timely and insightful volume is an essential resource for students and researchers exploring nationalism, migration, and transnationalism. By examining Asian diasporas in the context of rising nationalisms, it offers a nuanced understanding of identity, belonging, and digital engagement across borders. A vital contribution to diaspora and global studies.

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This is an important collection that brings together illuminating and careful analyses from different academic disciplines to help us understand the complexity of national and transnational processes in a rapidly globalizing world. The focus on Asian diasporas is particularly important as power shifts from the Global North to the Global South, where the Asian region is playing an increasingly crucial role.

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This handbook offers a very rich compilation of case studies on various Asian diasporas and their politics, identities, and specific episodes, during which they have been mobilized or tend to self-mobilize. For anybody interested in Asian diasporas, this handbook is not to be missed.

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This volume thoughtfully explores the complex intersections between diaspora and nationalism through rich case studies of Asian communities. By focusing on homeland politics, cultural expression, and ethno-nationalism, it offers a grounded and multifaceted view of how diasporic identities are shaped, negotiated, and mobilized across time and space.

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# Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Nationalism

*Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Nationalism* presents cutting-edge research on various temporal and spatial dimensions of Asian diasporic nationalism. It examines how nationalism is negotiated and renegotiated in the diasporic context, and how diasporic nationalism significantly contributes to the ongoing processes of transnationalism and ethnonationalism.

Divided thematically into four broad sections, the chapters critically examine how diasporic nationalism remains a subtle yet prominent characteristic of Asian diasporas today:

- Historicizing Diasporic Nationalism
- Diasporic Nationalism and Homeland Politics
- Diaspora and Cultural Nationalism
- Diaspora and Ethnonationalism

Contributing to the growing diaspora and transnational studies, this book serves as an essential reference guide for students and scholars across the social sciences and humanities.

**Ajaya K. Sahoo** is Professor and Head of the Centre for Study of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad, India. His teaching and research interests include immigration, diaspora, ethnicity, religion, and transnationalism. He is the editor of the *Journal of South Asian Diaspora*, published by Taylor and Francis.

# **Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Nationalism**

**Edited by  
Ajaya K. Sahoo**

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# 11 Engagement with Expectations

## Institutionalisation and Challenges of Turkey's Diaspora Policy

*Vahram Ter-Matevosyan*

### Introduction

Turkey did not have a sizable and organised diaspora until the 1960s. Only with the launch of guest worker (*gurbetçi*) programmes during the following two decades in several Western European, Gulf countries, and Australia did the number of Turkish citizens increase overseas (Abadan-Unat, 1976). The rise of asylum seekers followed it, as domestic politics became more polarised, along with the left and right divide, and because of the Kurdish movement, as many tried to escape persecution or improve their life standards. In addition to these reasons, thousands joined the migrant communities abroad “through various schemes including family reunion, humanitarian programmes, and skilled migration” (Şenay, 2012, p. 1618). At the end of the 1970s, more than 800,000 Turkish citizens had settled in Western European countries, approximately 80% of whom resided in the Federal Republic of Germany. By the early 1990s, the number of migrants and their dependents had reached approximately 2.5 million (4.4 % of Turkey's total population), including 2 million in Europe, 150,000 in Gulf States, 40,000 in Australia, and around 50,000 in the US; the rest were dispersed in various parts of the world (İcduygu, 1994, pp. 72–73). In 2020, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “the total population of Turkish people living abroad exceeds 6.5 million people, around 5.5 million of which live in Western European countries.”<sup>1</sup> It needs to be clarified that the phrase “Turkish people” entails various ethnic and religious backgrounds and does not necessarily imply only ethnic Turks. And those who identify as Turks are not necessarily affiliated with the Turkish diaspora communities and organisations. At any rate, the sheer size of 5.5 million makes the Turkish diaspora the largest Muslim immigrant group in Europe. This number, which was already five years old by the time of the writing, however, is set to increase as, according to the European Agency for Asylum, in 2023, more than 100,800 Turkish citizens applied for asylum in countries across the European Union; the figure was only around 55,400 the year before, and approximately 23,700 in 2021. In 2023, most asylum seekers from Turkey applied for asylum in Germany (63.5%), France (12%), and Austria (7.5%) (EUAA, 2024).

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Over the decades, the Turkish migrants went through various challenges of integration, socialisation, resistance, and assimilation. Subsequent Turkish governments, being aware of problems that the various Turkish (former) citizens were facing in Germany, Austria, France, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and elsewhere, were unable to do much, given the peculiarities of the era and the limitations of resources the Turkish state possessed until the early 2000s. While Turkish embassies and consulates in various European countries were trying to track dynamics within the newly formed diaspora communities, they lacked institutional competencies and skills of meaningful engagement with them. Turkey's earlier policies, or the lack thereof, were "ad hoc and aimed at attracting remittances" (Arkiliç, 2020, p. 595). With the end of the Cold War and the opening of the Turkish economy, it shifted gears and gradually appreciated the untapped potential that the Turkish diaspora possessed. Although not as institutionalised and resourceful as Jewish, Greek, and Armenian diasporas, the Turkish diaspora organisations needed mobilisation, guidance, and empowerment. Against this backdrop, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth "AKP") won the snap elections in Turkey in 2002 and introduced a foreign policy that was both ambitious and unprecedented in its scope and intentions. The European agenda came to occupy a central place in the AKP's foreign policy. To successfully realise foreign policy objectives, the AKP needed partners in Europe that could lobby for Turkey and amplify its messages in European capitals and societies. The initial contacts with the diaspora organisation, however, revealed that their resources were limited; they were in dire need of competence-building, institutionalisation, and engagement in local politics. While reflecting on these deficiencies, the ruling party also realised the limited impact of its institutional set-up to foster relationships with its diaspora. Drawing upon these observations, the AKP launched several dedicated institutions, organisations, and initiatives to diversify its engagement with its diaspora and expand its resources abroad. In parallel to the institutionalisation and empowerment of Turkish communities abroad, the AKP government has also used the expanded network of diaspora and state organisations to control dissident groups and intellectuals or rally against those initiatives and movements that were categorised as incompatible with Turkey's state interests. Thus, the Turkish government's engagement with the diaspora pursued clear expectations and interests conditioned by a set of new political, economic, and cultural incentives.

This chapter will, therefore, look into the key parameters and models of engagement with the diaspora and examine the domestic and external drivers behind the efforts of enhanced engagement. It will also study the observable implications and results of the engagement and the problems while advancing a new diaspora policy. The chapter's central argument revolves around the assertion that, although the AKP has introduced several institutions and co-opted most of the existing ones, its strategic objectives are yet to be accomplished. The AKP constantly recalibrates and revises its diaspora institutions

and their engagement parameters with Turkish communities and organisations abroad.

The chapter will proceed as follows: the first section will look into the institutional set-up of the AKP's diaspora-related institutions and the dynamics of their evolvement; the second section will look into political objectives that the AKP has pursued while strengthening its engagement with the Turkish communities; and the last section will look into policy outcomes and discuss several problems and hindrances that the ruling party has faced while implementing these objectives.

### **New Diaspora Institutions for the New Era**

For decades, the Jewish, Armenian, and Greek diaspora organisations and lobbying groups set standards for other nations. Unlike the Greek diaspora, which had a state as a reference point, the Jewish and Armenian diasporas pursued different objectives until World War II. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the Armenian diaspora stood out as a distinct case in global politics, when somewhat influential diaspora institutions and organisations, churches and schools, political parties and organisations persisted, while the idea and ideal of the homeland had various connotations (Tölölyan, 1996). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian diaspora also, albeit reluctantly and slowly, shifted its attention to the newly established Republic of Armenia and concentrated all its attention and resources on it (Alfonso et al., 2004).

At the turn of the century, with the expansion of globalisation, and neo-liberal policies and practices, many nations realised that a sizable number of their people lived and worked abroad, and that they needed to be understood and discussed. Diaspora studies, therefore, gained a new currency in the early 2000s. The proliferation of research on diaspora has also accentuated manifestations of increasing attention that states have started to pay to their former or current citizens. This has opened a new wave of research on the proliferation of state-led diaspora engagement initiatives, which pursued the objective of “cultivating, (re)building, (re)shaping and (de/re)mobilizing diasporas” (Öztürk et al., 2022, p. 303).

Research on the state's engagement with the diaspora offers various conceptualisation models. While some authors contend that Michel Foucault's “governmentality” perspective offers an explanatory framework to examine how states assert influence over diaspora through consent and appeasement (Gamlen, 2018), others contend that states' assertive engagement with the diaspora communities should be viewed from the perspective of social engineering projects (Aksel 2022).

The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, henceforth “YTB”), the institution that was tasked to shape, enact, and coordinate all state policies related to “our citizens living abroad, our kin and relative communities and international students

studying in our country,” was launched only in 2010, eight years after the AKP assumed power in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> The basis of the YTB’s policies are multifold: “preserving the Turkish Diaspora’s identity and culture, especially its mother tongue; strengthening of patriotism; and the fortification of their economic, social, cultural and legal positions in their countries of residence constitute the basis of YTB’s diaspora policy”.<sup>3</sup> In addition to ideological and political determinants, these objectives are rather ambitious and multifaceted, requiring tremendous resources and coordination. To achieve these objectives, Turkey needed to invest in producing sustainable mechanisms and tools, which is what Damla Aksel has proposed: “transnational social engineering” (Aksel, 2022, p. 311). Preserving the identity, culture, and language, as stipulated in the objectives, requires a visible and substantial investment in the education and religious domains in the host countries. Knowing the challenges of working in host countries, the YTB is determined to achieve those goals. Strengthening patriotism is another ambitious and complex task the institution sets for itself and state institutions. This framework suggests a pre-existing patriotism, and the institution’s job is to strengthen it. No less contradictory are the goals associated with fortifying their economic, social, cultural, and legal positions in the host countries. The fact that cultural aspects are emphasised twice in the list of objectives is rather telling. However, to achieve visible “fortification” of the economic, social, and legal status of Turkish citizens in other countries requires an elevated level of official engagement in the internal affairs of other countries. The motto of the YTB, “Strong Diaspora, Strong Turkey” is a telling manifestation of the AKP’s accentuated approach towards its diaspora.

Another interesting aspect of this institution is reflected in the second part of the title, as proposed by “Related Communities.” The latter refers to “cognate and related communities with which we share a common history and culture,” and the YTB aims to conduct activities in “a wide range of civilizations stretching from the Balkans to Africa, from the Caucasus to Eastern Europe, from Central and East Asia to the Middle East.”<sup>4</sup> These communities are referred to as “brothers.” This aspect is another demonstration of the complex yet ambitious, and at times ambiguously defined, nature of its operational target. Even though it does not refer to the Muslim nations, the analysis of the YTB activities reveals that “related communities” and “brothers” mainly refer to Muslim nations and people in the Eurasian and African continents. Therefore, the institution’s title entails a broader context involving geopolitical, cultural, political, and civilisational objectives.

The third field of activity of the YTB involves managing “Türkiye Scholarships” for international students and working with tens of thousands of scholarship recipients worldwide. By enrolling a “Türkiye graduate” to the “Türkiye Alumni” family, the YTB pursues a twofold objective: “contributing to the relations between their countries and Türkiye in every field, [and] on the other hand, strengthen[ing] the inter-communal cooperation and common understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

The staff of the YTB enjoy broad support from the government agencies and ministries. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Turkey and its Diplomatic School organise training programmes for the YTB staff members, teaching them diplomatic practices. In a similar vein, the YTB has secured a cooperation protocol with the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and the Turkish Maarif Foundation to cooperate in education, research, and development, and university fair organisations. In that scope, for instance, to make Turkish universities more accessible to international applicants, entry exams can be held in six languages in 78 exam centres in various countries.<sup>6</sup>

Another key institution that has expanded its activities in various countries, intending to offer religious services and preserve the cultural roots of the Turkish diaspora, is the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, henceforth “Diyanet”). Established in 1924 as an institution to oversee the rigid secularisation of Turkish politics and society and tightly control the religious domain, Diyanet has become one of the largest state institutions. Over the decades, its functions and operational responsibilities have expanded. Since the 1960s, when the first labour migrants started to arrive in Western European countries, Diyanet has invested sizable resources in publishing religious materials and organising state-sponsored Muslim associations (Bruce, 2020, p. 1166). From the 1970s, Diyanet started “sending religious affairs counselors and attachés to Turkish consulates and state-salaried imams to lead the prayers and sermons at Diyanet-authorized mosques abroad” (Şenay, 2012, p. 1626). In 1977, a Diyanet-franchised office, named the Religious Services Unit at the Turkish Consulate in Sydney, was opened in Australia (Şenay, 2012, p. 1626). In 1982, Diyanet opened its first overseas office in Berlin. After two years, a national office was established in Cologne under the name of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği*, henceforth “DİTİB”). Over the years, the geography of providing religious services has expanded, as has the number of religious officials working for Diyanet. As of 2019, Diyanet has sent more than 1,500 religious officials abroad (Bruce, 2020, p. 1167).

On Diyanet’s recommendation, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs appoints imams for a period of four years. Over the years, the Turkish government has continuously recalibrated its policies about the religious services offered abroad. One of the outcomes of that approach was the introduction of the International Theology Program in 2006. Within the next 15 years, it attracted around 700 students from 15 countries. The programme’s objective was rather ambitious, and was based on the feedback and criticism received from host countries. The programme required the students to be diaspora Turks who would come to Turkey to study Islam in Turkish universities, and, upon successful completion, would be offered positions in their home countries (Bruce, 2020, p. 1167).

The Yunus Emre Institute, as part of the Yunus Emre Foundation, was founded in 2009 in order to get engaged with three types of activities abroad: first, to promote Turkish language and culture in 80 cultural centres

established abroad; second, to conduct cultural and art activities abroad to promote Turkey; and, lastly, to support scientific research about Turkish language and culture. It also establishes or financially supports the Departments of Turkish Studies in many educational institutions worldwide.<sup>7</sup>

Taking over the schools and organisational infrastructure of the Gülen educational institutions abroad, the Maarif Foundation became another Turkish state-led institution that works with the diaspora, particularly emphasising education. Founded in 2016, the Maarif schools had expanded to include 55,000 students in 500 educational institutions in 55 countries by 2024 (Maarif Bulletin, 2024, p. 5). Through educational activities directed not only to foreigners but also to Turkish (former) citizens and youth, the Maarif Schools cultivate cultural norms and values which prioritise Turkey and the Turkish language.

The World Turkish Business Council (*Dünya Türk İş Konseyi* – “DTIK”) was established in 2007 as an extension of the Foreign Economic Relations Board (*Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu* – “DEİK”). The objective of the DTIK was to gather “a successful and entrepreneurial diaspora of Turkish businesspeople and Turkish professionals at the helm of decision-making mechanisms of highly influential international corporations under a single platform”, in order “to strengthen the ties of the Turkish expat business community, to lobby on their behalf, to find solutions to common problems and to provide national image-building leadership.”<sup>8</sup>

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Council (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı* – “TIKA”), founded in 1992, initially had a narrow functional and geographical focus. Housed within the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, its primary objective was to provide humanitarian assistance and development aid to the Turkic-speaking nations of the newly collapsed Soviet Union. With time, TIKA transformed into “an implementing intermediary of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in the countries with whom we have shared values, as well as in many other areas and countries.”<sup>9</sup> Over the years, TIKA has extended its missions and activities to include capacity-building in these Turkic countries and Turkmenistan, which TIKA called “sister countries” in “ancestral lands.” In the 2000s, with the AKP’s direct endorsement, TIKA enlarged its areas of activity. If in 2002, there were only 12 Program Coordination Offices, there are currently 63 such offices located in 61 countries.<sup>10</sup> TIKA’s official website also suggests that it serves as a cooperation mechanism and a coordination platform “for the state institutions and organisations, universities, non-profit organisations, and the private sector.”<sup>11</sup> With a modest start of US \$85 million in 2002, TIKA’s – implying Turkey’s – budget reached US \$8.3 billion in 2021.<sup>12</sup> Hakan Fidan, Turkey’s current minister of foreign affairs, headed TIKA between 2003 and 2007, before working for the Prime Minister’s Office, then heading the Turkish Intelligence Agency.

The Turkish state has also transformed its consular services abroad. The number and quality of services the diplomatic missions and consulates provide have increased significantly. In 2002, Turkey had only 163 embassies,

permanent representatives, and consulates abroad. In contrast, in 2018, there were 239 diplomatic missions worldwide (with more than 62,300 personnel), ranking Turkey as the fifth nation in the world for the number of its diplomatic missions (following the US, China, France, and Russia) (Oğuz, 2018). In countries with sizable Turkish populations, Turkish consulates have opened positions for cultural and religious attachés to assist Turkish citizens with various services and advance Turkish state interests in multiple countries.

Discussing these institutions and their declared objectives aimed at empirically contextualising the eclectic yet cooperative nature of the institutional design that the Turkish state has set up in its work with the diaspora, Yunus Turhan succinctly summarises the objectives of each institution listed above through the following categories: the YTB works to promote diaspora diplomacy, the Yunus Emre Institutes are involved in cultural diplomacy, the Maarif Foundation emphasises educational diplomacy, and TIKA is involved in aid diplomacy (Turhan, 2023, p. 333). DTIK and its umbrella organisation, DEIK, meanwhile, promote business diplomacy. The latter even publishes a journal called *Business Diplomacy*.

### **Promoting Politically Active Citizenship in the Diaspora**

Since the mid-2000s, Turkey has advanced a strategy that has encouraged its diaspora to obtain citizenship in their host countries and actively engage in public politics. The second leg of its policy of engaging the diaspora in Turkish politics was the decision to enact extraterritorial voting rights for non-resident citizens, in 2012. Turkey has also implemented the Blue Card programme,<sup>13</sup> granting former citizens many benefits of Turkish citizenship (except for voting) and ensuring their continued registration and monitoring even after they renounce their Turkish nationality (Aksel, 2022, p. 317).

In the late 2000s, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan<sup>14</sup> personally participated in massive rallies in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. In his speeches, he openly urged diaspora communities not to stay idle about local politics, consolidate their resources to achieve more recognition and power, and advance Turkey's interests in their host countries. The Turkish state institutions have actively mobilised the diaspora organisations, especially conservative and nationalist groups, to actively participate in those European rallies that aimed at halting France, Germany, the Netherlands, and other countries from adopting resolutions recognising the Armenian Genocide. The same networks provided essential infrastructural support to Azerbaijan when protesting against Armenia and Armenian diaspora organisations during Azerbaijan's aggression against Armenia and Artsakh during the 2020–2023 war.

The Turkish leadership and institutions have also been vocal about discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia in Europe, and have tried to safeguard ethnic Turks through various political initiatives. Building upon these sentiments, and possibly inspired by the recommendations of the Turkish leadership to be actively engaged in the politics of host countries, the DENK party

has become a visible actor in Dutch politics. Founded in 2014 by Dutch-Turkish and Muslim members of the parliament, DENK (which translates as “counterweight” in Turkish and “think” in Dutch) came to occupy a small, albeit important, niche in the Netherlands, as it successfully represented ethnic and religious minority electorates in the Dutch parliament. In the most recent parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, held in November 2023, DENK received 246,765 votes, and it has three members in the 150-seat parliament, the same number of seats as in the 2017 and 2021 elections (Holsteyn and Irwin, 2024: 470). The primary reasons that the Dutch citizens voted for DENK are Muslim in-group favouritism, immigration attitudes, and experiencing discrimination for being Muslim (Oosten et al., 2024, p. 617).

Germany, however, stands out in terms of the political activism of Turkish (former) citizens. In addition to DITIB, mentioned above, through which Diyanet manages the mosques and organises associations in Europe, the Islamic Community Milli Görüş (*Islamische Gemeinschaft Milli Gorus* – IGMG), which was established in Germany in 1969, maintains close collaboration with various Turkish state institutions, and particularly with Diyanet. They cover a huge operational base, have thousands of members, and control over 1,000 mosques across Germany and other Western European countries. Examining Diyanet’s activities and practices in Europe, Zana Çitak argues that, when it was formally established in Germany, “it found itself as a latecomer in the religious market, hitherto dominated by a wide range of dissident networks such as Milli Görüş, Suleymancis, Kaplancis” (Çitak, 2010, pp. 621–622). By the late 2000s, Diyanet was ahead of Milli Görüş regarding its influence and network of religious organisations in Europe.

The Union of European Turkish Democrats, which changed its name to the Union of International Democrats (UID) in 2018, was founded in 2004 in Cologne with several objectives, all of them related to “Turks and sister communities”: supporting their integration in the host countries; respecting diversity and mutual understanding; eliminating prejudices; and acting as a bridge between Turkey and the countries in which they reside.<sup>15</sup> The Union functions in 17 European countries and is particularly active in countries with large Turkish communities. The 2023 report of the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*), an institution that provides domestic intelligence services, dedicated a special section to the UID. It designated the UID as “the largest state- or government-aligned interest group,” which exerts influence on “communities of Turkish origin in Germany; these activities can have an impact on decision-making or the development of informed political opinion in Germany.”<sup>16</sup> The same report also raises concerns that the Turkish intelligence services conduct activities in Germany and “spy on organizations and individuals in Germany which oppose or are thought to oppose the Turkish government.”<sup>17</sup>

Several German Turks are also actively engaged in German local and federal politics. The Democratic Alliance for Diversity and Awakening (*Demokratische Allianz für Vielfalt und Aufbruch* – DAVA (“case” in Turkish)), the two leaders

of which are former members of the IGMG and DITIB, registered a political party in Germany in early 2024. Critics of the initiative and observers of German politics immediately characterised DAVA as another AKP offshoot (Topcu, 2024).

Starting in the early 2010s, Erdoğan was personally involved in the identity engineering of the Turkish diaspora. In 2011, in his address to the German Turks, he urged them to “[i]ntegrate into German society, but do not assimilate (...) Assimilation is a crime against humanity” (Gezer and Reimann, 2011). In the following years, his “integrate, not assimilate” approach became the hallmark of Turkey’s diaspora policy. Erdoğan, however, was not the first politician to warn Turkish migrants about the significance of identity retention. Banu Şenay’s analysis indicates that, already in the 1980s, after dual citizenship was introduced in 1981, Turkish policymakers and bureaucrats not only encouraged Turkish citizens abroad not to return but also warned them “about the dangers of assimilating to those societies, or of losing their ‘Turkishness’” (Senay, 2012, p. 1619). Many conservative European organisations have adopted it as a guiding principle and amplified that message through various platforms.

Erdoğan was also continuously involved in the empowerment of the Turkish diaspora. In March 2017, to rebuke the Netherlands authorities for preventing Turkish ministers from holding campaign meetings with local Turkish citizens, Erdoğan told Turks in Europe: “Go live in better neighborhoods. Drive the best cars. Live in the best houses. Make not three but five children. Because you are the future of Europe. That will be the best response to the injustices against you” (Associated Press, 2017). These comments were upsetting to many European leaders. The European policymakers, especially in Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria, albeit reluctantly, realised that their failure to integrate the Turkish expatriate population opened the gates for Turkey’s outreach efforts and embracive initiatives towards the Turkish diasporic communities (Arkilic, 2018).

The Grey Wolves organisation, also known as *Ülkücü*, which is better known for its affiliation with the Nationalist Action Party, a far-right and ultra-nationalist party in Turkey that currently serves as a coalition partner of the AKP, first came to prominence outside of Turkey in the 1970s. Its networks have been particularly strong in Germany, France, and Austria. For decades, the Grey Wolves have carried out assassinations and caused a grave threat to the Kurdish, Armenian, and Alevi communities and left-wing Turkish activists and intellectuals residing in Europe. The notorious organisation was finally banned in Austria in 2019, and France in November 2020, after its members attacked Armenians in Lyon and vandalised the Armenian Genocide memorial.<sup>18</sup> The opposition in Germany initiated a similar motion days later, after France had enacted the ban; however, Germany has yet to make a final decision on its ban. In May 2022, the European Parliament urged “the EU and its Member States to examine the possibility of banning their associations in EU countries” and called “on the Member States to

closely monitor the racist activities of this organization and to fight back to curtail its influence.”<sup>19</sup>

In 2012, in a landmark move, the AKP decided to grant the Turkish diaspora the right to vote in Turkish general elections. Since 1965, there have been discussions on external voting; starting from 1987, Turkish citizens could cast a vote in general elections, but only at designated major customs gates, such as airports, seaports, and land-border crossings. It was, however, rather uncomfortable, as diasporans had to return to the land (Edirne) and air customs (İstanbul, İzmir, Ankara, Antalya, and Adana) for voting (Akçapar and Aksel, 2017, p. 147). As a result of the 2012 amendments to the Basic Provisions on Elections, starting from 2014, 2.8 million Turkish citizens living abroad were granted the right to vote in diplomatic missions and consular offices. Since then, members of the Turkish communities abroad have voted in four parliamentary and three presidential elections, and the 2017 constitutional referendum. Consequently, the interest of the mainstream Turkish political parties in diaspora-related matters has increased, as reflected in the election manifestos. External voters constituted a central place in Turkish politics, accounting for around 5% of the total voting population (Çobankara 2023: 25). Analysing the results of the diaspora voting, it becomes evident that Erdoğan and his coalition partners, the Nationalist Action Party, have enjoyed a higher popularity among Western European diaspora voters than the Turkish average. However, Turkish expatriates in North America, Italy, Greece, the UK, and the UAE prefer to vote for the opposition. Another interesting aspect is the steady increase in the diaspora voter turnout. With around 19% in 2014, the voter turnout rate reached 56% (1.9 million) in 2023 (Sevi et al., 2019; Sevi et al., 2023; Arkilic, 2021).

### **Dealing with the Heterogeneous Diaspora(s)**

The AKP’s toolbox for engaging with the diaspora communities varies. In addition to the institutional design discussed in the previous sections, this section outlines how Turkish institutions have sought to cooperate with or suppress diaspora members. The policy designers in Ankara realised that the Turkish diaspora is heterogeneous, as there are several diasporas. Therefore, diaspora engagement is contingent upon how diaspora members “perceive, relate to and engage with various Turkish diaspora engagement policies and practices” (Wackenhut, 2022, p. 374).

Unlike the social composition of the initial waves of migration (1960s and 1970s) from Turkey to Europe, the AKP era’s massive migration has a discernible political and ideological underpinning. The highly heterogeneous wave of current migration occurs because of creeping authoritarian practices, an anti-intellectual atmosphere, persecutions, dismissals, and Islamisation of public and political spheres in Turkey (Baser and Öztürk, 2022, p. 402). Some of the political dissidents prefer to remain silent, while many activists and public figures continue with their struggle against Erdoğan from a distance

and shape public opinion in (and from) their host countries (Baser and Öztürk, 2022, pp. 403–404). The abortive coup in July 2016, when thousands of members of the religious Fethullah Gülen movement fled the massive crackdown of the Turkish authorities, led “to an exilic diasporization of the movement” (Taş, 2022, p. 385). Despite the calls of the movement’s leadership to unite under the umbrella of “Hizmet Diaspora,” the Gülen movement, or what is left of it, has added a new dimension to the Turkish diaspora. The Gülenists in Europe and the US have been under scrutiny and “massive surveillance and profiling ... by Turkish diplomats and imams, the denial of diplomatic services, the intimidation of relatives in Turkey” (Taş, 2022, p. 395). The erosion of the established institutions over the last nine years has made some Gülenists leave the movement. However, many stayed and initiated intracommunity debates about the new contours of the collective identity. Exogenous shocks to collective identities create conditions for change (Taş, 2022, p. 397). Therefore, many view the Gülenists as possessing the potential to consolidate the anti-AKP social base in the Turkish diaspora.

In a 2012 article examining the Turkish diaspora, Şenay concludes that, through political transnationalism, the Turkish state aims “to nationalize, secularize, and mobilize” the Turkish communities abroad to secure “the virtual construction of the Turkish state in the diaspora” and “the reproduction of the Turkish state’s ideology of Kemalism” (Şenay, 2012, p. 1616). The author uses the term “trans-Kemalism” as an accurate phrase to describe “the cross-border work of the Turkish state in a ceaseless secular-nationalist project to configure its ‘civil society’ abroad” (Şenay, 2012, p. 1616). It is rather interesting that she listed secularism and Kemalism, among others, as AKP’s transnational political strategic objectives. By 2012, with already a decade of being in power, the AKP had demonstrated its political Islamic creed and religious conservatism, which were the antitheses of the Kemalists’ principles and world views of the previous decades. The set of ideas, ideals, principles, and practices embedded in Kemalism (Ter-Matevosyan, 2019) and the fundamentals of secularism had been visibly shaken by 2012. Yet the author still viewed them as central pillars of Turkey’s state diaspora politics. Her observations were before the Gezi Park protests and the authoritarian turn in Turkish politics after 2013, and perhaps, therefore, she still observed traces of secularism as a strategic goal pursued by the Turkish state abroad. It needs to be added, though, that despite the AKP’s effort to strengthen religious-conservative values and a political Islamic agenda among Turkish communities abroad, not all members of the Turkish diaspora share those political sentiments. The secular nature of the Turkish state remains non-negotiable for many members of the Turkish diaspora, and they are vocally critical of the AKP’s creeping Islamisation of the Turkish education system and public spaces. They still view Kemalism and Atatürk’s legacy as guiding principles of the Republic of Turkey, with nationalism and secularism as its central pillars.

Another aspect of academic discussions and policy debates has been how the Turkish state institutions have worked with the youth in the diaspora

communities. As the Turkish state increased its engagement with the diaspora, many of its policies and approaches came under scrutiny. The criticism of the Turkish state's diaspora policies has evolved over the years. If, before, the criticism was mostly the inadequate attention or inaccessibility of resources, now the critique has acquired new layers. One of the most important aspects includes the practices when religious officials working abroad fail to consider local contexts and youth where they work with Turkish nationals, or are not proficient in the languages spoken in host countries, or lack knowledge of cultural norms and practices in their host countries. Various engagement practices with the diaspora youth have evolved over the past decades (Bruce, 2020, p. 1167). Through initiatives ranging from youth camps, commemoration events, and celebration of national holidays, to language courses, the Turkish state institutions pursued several objectives: strengthening cultural ties with Turkey, enhancing identification with the homeland, and shaping and co-opting future generations of diasporans which "will promote the regime's interests at home and abroad" (Baser and Böcü, 2025, p. 85). The AKP, however, was criticised for its selective and tiered approaches towards the youth in the diaspora, as it preferred to deepen its engagement with nationalistic and religious segments of the youth abroad while neglecting, excluding, and repressing segments of the diaspora that were in opposition to the regime, such as Kurdish, Alevi, or Kemalist youth (Öktem, 2014). Through the promotion of content and messages that emphasise identity categories of Turkishness and Islam, the regime shapes the parameters of "an ideal diaspora youth" and excludes other identities (secular, Kurdish, Alevi, etc.) (Baser and Böcü, 2025, pp. 86–87; Böcü and Baser, 2022).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined various aspects of Turkey's evolving diaspora politics. With more than 6 million Turkish (former) citizens living abroad, the Turkish state acknowledged the immense potential of engaging with various segments of the Turkish communities overseas. Unlike the decades of low institutionalisation of diaspora politics, the past 15 years have demonstrated how the AKP has drastically transformed Turkey's relationship with the diaspora. By launching several directorates, agencies, and institutions, and expanding Turkey's diplomatic missions and operational functions, the Turkish state has instituted a new paradigm of diaspora engagement. Turkey has been able to build qualitatively new relations with its diasporic communities through a dynamic process of "learning by doing" based on the institutional infrastructure reformed, invented, and reinvented abroad. Giving them a voice and empowering them with voting rights, the ruling party in Turkey has engaged them in Turkish politics and, thereby, strengthened its foothold in the diaspora communities and host countries. In the meantime, diaspora affairs, as well as questions of Islamophobia, exclusion, integration, assimilation, and identity retention/construction, came to occupy an important place in Turkish

domestic politics and define Turkey's relations with those European states that housed a sizable Turkish population. However, the AKP's engagement with the diaspora demonstrated not only the immense opportunities but also its limitations. While conservative, religious, and nationalist segments of the diaspora communities were eagerly responding and cooperating with the Turkish diaspora institutions, Kurdish, Alevi, and secular youth segments of the diaspora communities felt excluded in the face of social-engineering and identity-building projects promoted by Turkey. Within the past 20 years, especially after 2010, the narrative and parameters of engagement with the diaspora have changed beyond recognition. Building upon Islam, conservatism, and nationalism and promoting cultural norms and education programmes, the state-led diaspora governance has achieved new dynamics.

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### Notes

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- 2 *Institution*. <https://ytb.gov.tr/en/corporate/presidency-for-turks-abroad-and-related-communities>.
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- 7 *Yunus Emre Institute*. <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/yunus-emre-institute>.
- 8 *World Turkish Business Council*. <https://www.deik.org.tr/special-purpose-business-councils-world-turkish-business-council?pm=&sm=kunye>.
- 9 *Institutional*. <https://tika.gov.tr/en/institutional/about-us/>.
- 10 *Institutional*. <https://tika.gov.tr/en/institutional/about-us/>.
- 11 *Institutional*. <https://tika.gov.tr/en/institutional/about-us/>.
- 12 TIKA, 2021.
- 13 As of April 2025, there were approximately 550,000 Blue Card holders in Germany.
- 14 Recep Tayyip Erdoğan served as Turkey's prime minister between 2003 and 2014. In August 2014, he was elected Turkey's president, and was re-elected twice, in 2018 and 2023. He currently serves as Turkey's president.
- 15 Union of International Democrats. <https://u-id.org/en/home/>.
- 16 Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2024.
- 17 Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, 2024.
- 18 Deutsche Welle, 2020.
- 19 European Parliament, 2022.

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