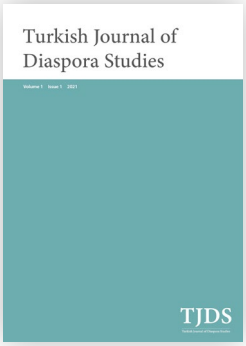

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Interview

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Q1. *The concept of diaspora is used to define almost any community who has a distinct identity tied with an imagined or territorialized nation outside the resident country. Nationalization of the concept of "victim" diaspora seems no longer prevailing but communities beyond the territory of a nation generally fit the picture. Migration or exile is not the only cause to form diasporic communities. To some studies, socially, culturally, religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and/or geopolitically amalgamated communities are also deemed to form diaspora. Having said that, what do you think about the impact of the proliferation of the usage on the conceptualization of diaspora? And/or, how would you conceptualize diaspora?*

A1. The historical prototype of a diaspora is of course the Jews in the "dispersion" after the Second Jewish war. With the Jewish defeat in that war in 135 they were no longer allowed to live in Palestine, and were "dispersed" all over the Mediterranean world and further afield. It is true that also prior to that momentous event there had been permanent Jewish communities outside Palestine, but we nevertheless associate Jewish diaspora-ness with a people deprived of a homeland. Also some other diasporas conform to this understanding, for instance, the Polish diaspora in (primarily) Western Europe in the period between the eradication of the Polish-Lithuanian state in 1795 and the resurrection of modern Poland in 1919.

Later on, the concept of a diaspora has been expanded and taken on new meanings. In most cases, we use the concept of a diaspora today as referring to groups of people living *outside* their "homeland". Hence, they *do* have "their own" state, but they do not "belong" to it politically (as subjects or citizens), only ethnically or culturally[1]. In that expanded sense we can refer to a Chinese diaspora in southeast Asia, an Armenian diaspora in the Middle East, France, and North America, a Lebanese diaspora in Africa, an Indian diaspora in East Africa and the Caribbean, and so on and so forth. These diaspora members have either moved out of "their" ethnic homeland of their own volition in search of work and a better livelihood, fled from persecution, been moved there as indentured laborers, or for some other reason.

Finally, the concept of a diaspora is used also in the third sense, about people who have not moved at all but happen to live outside their homeland because the political borders have moved over them. This is the case with Hungarians living outside Hungary but within the borders of the

[1] I use quotation marks here and many other places in this article to indicate a certain distancing from these terms, meaning that I do not necessarily subscribe to the content which some readers might give them. To claim that a certain group "belongs" to a state could conceivably be construed as if other groups living there have less claim to "ownership" in that state, an inference which I am not prepared to draw.

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former Habsburg Hungary, Turkish minorities in the Balkans (former subjects of the Ottoman Empire), and Russians who live outside the Russian Federation but within the former USSR.

With regard to the Russians, this means that today we can talk about two different Russian diasporas: 1. The "old" Russian diaspora: those who conform to the second variety described above, meaning those who fled from Russia after the October revolution and have later been replenished by new waves of migrations – including some two million after the fall of communism. 2. The "new" Russian diaspora, who live in states just across the border of the Russian Federation (or at least not very far away, such as in one of the Central Asian republics.) David Laitin has referred to them as a "beached" diaspora, analogous to stranded whales who have ended up on the shore when the sea has receded.

All of these meanings of diaspora, in my view, have both a political and a cultural dimension. The cultural dimension is obvious: the diaspora members hold on to the language, culture, memories, mores, and traditions of the (dominant) culture of their homeland, which they continue to identify with. (Some don't, in particular in the second or third generation, but then they are no longer members of the diaspora in any meaningful sense of the word). The political dimension is also crucial, but also more controversial. It is a constitutive element also in the case of the first, original variety of diaspora, in the shape of an absence, in the dream about restoring the lost state: The Jews in medieval Europe continued to remember the homeland they were expelled from ("Next year in Jerusalem"), and for more than a century thousands of Poles struggled to reestablish "their" state, something which they eventually succeeded in doing.

However, even though the political concept of a homeland is an integral part of the definition of a diaspora, not all people lacking a national homeland will be regarded as a diaspora. Poles, who in the 19th century, continued to live within historical territory of the old Polish settlements to the south of the Baltic Sea were not regarded as a diaspora. The concept of a diaspora, of course, always includes also a *geographical* dimension: only those Poles who had left this region would be members of a Polish diaspora. Similarly, only ethnic Kurds living in Western Europe or elsewhere outside the Middle East today will be considered a diaspora", while those who live in eastern Turkey or northern Iraq will not.

Also in the second variety of diasporians, the political link to the "old" homeland – what Rogers Brubaker calls "the external national homeland[2]" – is implicitly a part of the very definition of diaspora. Among those migrants who have left their home country and have no longer any political attachment to the old country it does not make sense to use the concept of diaspora. For instance, in the last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Norwegians migrated to the United States, but their descendants today, even those who continue to celebrate the Norwegian National day (17 May), eat a Norwegian national dish for Christmas (lutefisk), and so on, with extremely few exceptions, are so well integrated into American society that their Norwegianness is purely historical and symbolical. In fact, it does not even make sense to regard them as a "national minority": they are full-fledged Americans.

In other instances, diasporians of the second variety *do* retain political links to their

[2] Rogers Brubaker, Nationalism reframed, Cambridge: Cambridge University press 1996

external homeland, links that can be, and have been, activated when the political situation "at home" has changed. Thus, for instance, considerable numbers of Balts, Armenians, and Croats from North America and Western Europe returned to their historic homelands after the fall of communism when their nation-state was reestablished (as was the case with the Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians), or was established for the first time (Armenians and Croats). Some of them contributed constructively – both with their skills and their money – to building countries ravaged by decades of communist mismanagement while others injected unwholesome doses of radical nationalism into the body politic of the new or newly reestablished state.

In the third variety– the "beached" diasporas – the political dimension is even more salient – but also more contentious. When the diasporians live just outside the borders of the external national homeland – such as in interwar Hungary and Germany, and in today's Russia –the question of *irredentism* can arise, that is, a demand to have the territories which they inhabit (re) included into the external homeland. Such irredentist programs are of course highly destabilizing in any political setting. Therefore, even though I highly respect David Laitin as a scholar and have read his book *Identity in formation*:[3] several times, I think the concept of a "beached" of diasporas must be regarded as deleterious. This metaphor suggests that the diaspora members are "suffocating" for lack of air when they are no longer in their right "element".

And I will pursue this point further and insist that even the concept of a "new diaspora" is problematical. The words we use are not innocuous; they carry with them political overtones, indeed, sometimes implicit political programs. This I did not fully understand when I wrote my book *Russians in the former Soviet republics (*1995*)* which I had first given the title "The new Russian diaspora", (a title which was used for other books and brochures published at the same time). Luckily, the publisher's reviewer of my manuscript objected to it and suggested the more neutral title which I ended up with[4].

As long as we call the members of a national group living outside the historical homeland "a diaspora" our perspective is precisely viewing them from this external national homeland, and we see them as "naturally belonging" to that state in one way or another. Such a linkage can be benevolent or malevolent: As long as the engagement of the external national homeland in the life of "its" diaspora is restricted to support for the national culture, such as for instance the promotion of the German language via the Goethe institute in other countries, I see no problems with that. But in some national discourses, references to "our diaspora" legitimizes also active interference in the domestic affairs of the nation-states in which these diasporians reside. The sinister diaspora policy of the Nazi German state, luckily, is an extreme exception, but also the Hungarian diaspora policy – certainly in the interwar period but also to some degree after the fall of communism – has had some worrying elements of meddling in the internal affairs of

[3] David Laitin, *Identity in formation: the Russian speaking populations in the near abroad*, Ithaca New York, Cornell University Press

[4] Pål Kolstø, *Russians in the Former Soviet Republics*, Hurst & co/Indiana University Press, London/Bloomington, 1995. However, I admit to having relapsed to using the term "new diaspora", in my 1996 article in *Ethnic and racial studies*, Pål Kolstø, 'the new Russian Diaspora – an identity of its own? Possible identity trajectories for Russians in the former Soviet republics', *Ethnic And Racial Studies,* 19, 3.

neighboring states.

Does this mean that ethnic communities not belonging to the dominant majority in a nation-state should be left to their own devices, or more precisely, to the mercy the political authorities in that state? No, this is not a necessary inference we must draw. The term "national minorities" designates cultural groups with specific rights and is a concept used in international law, such as in the UN "Declaration on Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities" from 1992 and the Council of Europe "Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities" (FCNM) from 1998. The major advantage of using the term "national minority" over "diaspora" is that the group in question is viewed from the perspective of the country they live in and not from the one they have lived in or their forebears have lived in. This is not even something which has to be explained or spelled out. It is implicit in the very term itself: a group cannot be a minority in any other state than the one in which it resides.

If an ethnic group seeks protection and support, (which may or may not be forthcoming), from an external national homeland, then that national minority will be programmed to see themselves as belonging to that state. Conversely, as soon as they are regarded and treated citizens of the state in which they reside, they have a right to expect not only equal treatment with other citizens of that state as individuals, but also protection of their culture. (At the same time, I will emphasize that the members of a national minority should have the right not only to retain and uphold their separate identities, but also to relinquish it if they should so desire. Enforced segregation is just as reprehensible as enforced assimilation).

To clarify: I am not saying that we should stop using the word "diaspora" altogether as a "politically incorrect" term. There are contexts in which it would be quite natural and appropriate to use it, in particular when we are discussing the relationship between a cultural group and the state where the majority of their ethnic kin reside. However, I think we would be well advised to try and avoid it as a general, default description of these groups, as if their diaspora-ness is their most important and defining characteristic.