

## **Avrupa'daki Alevi Diasporası: Kimliğin Korunması ve Siyasal Katılım**

The Alevi Diaspora in Europe: Identity Preservation and Political Participation

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### **Özet**

Bu çalışma, Avrupa'daki Alevi diasporasının kimlik koruma ve siyasal katılım süreçlerini Almanya ve Fransa örnekleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Alevi topluluklarının diasporadaki örgütlenme biçimleri, transnasyonal yurttaşlık pratikleri ve kimlik politikaları çerçevesinde ele alınmakta; çok katmanlı aidiyet yapıları içerisinde hem Türkiye ile olan kültürel ve siyasal bağlarını hem de bulundukları ülkelerdeki demokratik katılım mekanizmalarına entegrasyonlarını eş zamanlı olarak nasıl sürdürdükleri analiz edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Alevi diasporasının hem kimliğini muhafaza etme stratejileri hem de yaşadıkları toplumlarda görünürlük ve hak temelli talepler etrafında geliştirdikleri siyasal tutumlar değerlendirilmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Alevilik Diasporası, Transnasyonal Kimlik, Avrupa'daki Alevi - Örgütlenmeleri, Siyasal Katılım ve Yurttaşlık Hakları

### **Abstract**

This study examines the identity preservation and political participation processes of the Alevi diaspora in Europe through the cases of Germany and France. It explores the organizational structures of Alevi communities in the diaspora within the framework of transnational citizenship practices and identity politics. The analysis focuses on how these communities simultaneously maintain their cultural and political ties with Turkey while integrating into the democratic participation mechanisms of their host countries, within the context of their multilayered sense of belonging. In this regard, the study evaluates both the strategies employed by the Alevi diaspora to preserve their identity and the political stances they develop around visibility and rights-based demands in the societies they inhabit.

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## Introduction

Following the Prophet Muhammad's death, political struggles for power and differences of opinion within the Islamic community paved the way for sectarian and religious diversity to emerge. These developments intensified over time due to historical events and intellectual debates. In this context, sects with different doctrines emerged, particularly among communities loyal to the Prophet Ali. One of these sects is Alevism, which continues to be influential today and has also been known as "Kızılbaşlık" throughout history. However, since the term "Kızılbaş" acquired negative connotations over time, "Alevi-Bektaşî" has become more common. The historical development of Alevism can be divided into four main phases. The first period lasted from approximately the 11th to the 15th century, until Balım Sultan's institutionalizing influence. During this period, the philosophical foundations of Alevism were established, and it interacted with thought systems such as Kalenderism, Mevlevism, and Bâtınism. The second period covers the period from the 16th to the 19th century, when Safavid influence was intense. In this period, Alevism gained a more systematic identity with its belief principles, ritual structure and social arrangements. The third and fourth periods were shaped by modern and postmodern developments. Since the 19th century, urbanization, globalization and modern ideologies have been decisive factors in the transformation of Alevism. Although Alevism is considered to be a tradition within the Shiite interpretation of Islam, with historical ties to the Ismaili sect, it has developed its own belief and worship practices over time. Today, it continues to exist as a belief system embraced by millions of people in various countries, especially in Turkey (Aydoğdu & Tekin, 2024, p. 83).

Since the mid-20th century, the migration movement from Turkey to Europe has been shaped to include Alevi communities and gained a significant momentum especially with the labor agreement signed between Turkey and Germany in 1961. This migration, which was initially motivated by economic reasons, transformed into a more permanent diaspora in time with the impact of social and cultural conditions. The post-1980 political developments and some social events in the 1990s encouraged Alevi communities in Europe to engage in various organizational activities in order to protect their identity and increase their visibility.

The Alevi diaspora in Europe has developed strong institutionalization practices, especially in countries such as Germany and France, creating not only a religious, but also a cultural and political space for movement. Umbrella organizations such as the Federation of Alevi Associations in Germany (AABF) and the French Alevi Federation (FAF) have played an important role in not only making Alevism visible in the public sphere, but also in transmitting Alevi identity to younger generations, integrating Alevi identity into the education system and expanding citizenship rights.

"Alevi Diaspora in Europe: Preservation of Identity and Political Participation" aims to analyze the processes of identity preservation, cultural reproduction and political participation of the Alevi diaspora in Europe. The development of Alevi organizations, transnational identity practices and identity politics in the context of diaspora will be evaluated through the examples of Germany and France. In this framework, it will be revealed how the Alevi diaspora is shaped in the context of its relations with Turkey, its multi-layered identity structure and democratic participation mechanisms in Europe. In addition, by drawing on sociological, political science and diaspora studies literatures, the study will analyze how Alevi identity is reconstructed in

Europe and what kind of transformations this process leads to on both individual and collective levels.

### **Historical Background of the Alevi Diaspora**

The emergence of the Alevi diaspora in Europe should be considered in the context of mass labor migration from Turkey. Beginning in 1961 with the signing of a labor agreement between Turkey and the Federal Republic of Germany (Acar, 2023, p. 42), the migration wave developed as a multidimensional process with not only economic but also socio-political and cultural effects. This agreement paved the way for an intensive migration movement to Western European countries such as France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Austria, and Germany in particular (Gelekçi, 2014, p.104). An important segment of the migrants were Alevi communities living in Central and Eastern Anatolia, especially in Turkey. In this context, Elise Massicard discusses the development process of Alevi migration to Europe in three main stages: The first stage started in the 1960s with labor migration from Turkey to Western Europe, especially to West Germany. During this period, Alevi men headed to Europe in large groups for economic reasons and constituted the pioneer group of the migration process. The second phase started in the early 1970s with the suspension of labor recruitment, but the migration movement did not end. In this period, there was a significant increase in the migrant population with the arrival of women and children to Europe within the scope of family reunification. The third phase was shaped by the political atmosphere before and after the 1980 military coup. During this period, one of the most intense waves of migration from Turkey to Western Europe took place; most of the arrivals were asylum seekers who left the country for political reasons (Missicard, 2007, pp.104-105). These three phases show that the presence of Alevi communities in Europe is based not only on economic reasons, but also on political and social dynamics.

The 1990s marked an important turning point in the institutionalization and identity construction processes of the Alevi diaspora in Europe. In particular, the tragic events that took place during the Pir Sultan Abdal Festivities in Sivas in 1993 had a profound impact not only on the Alevi community in Turkey but also on the Alevi diaspora in Europe (Çevik, 2023, p.316). This development paved the way for diaspora Alevis to express their faith and identity-based demands more strongly, to increase their critical approach towards Turkey, and to redefine Alevism as both a cultural and social form of belonging in the countries where they reside.

In the aftermath of the tragic events in Sivas, the sense of solidarity among Alevi communities in Europe has strengthened, and an increasing number of cemevis, cultural associations and Alevi federations have been established in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and France (Massicard, 2015). These institutions have become the bearers of a collective discourse that defines Alevism not only as a belief system but also as part of a struggle for identity and rights. The process of institutionalization not only facilitated Alevi communities to continue their religious rituals in the diaspora, but also helped them to become more effective actors on issues such as cultural rights, freedom of religion and anti-discrimination in the countries where they reside. In this context, the 1990s was a period in which European Alevism gained visibility in the public sphere, expressed its demand for legitimacy through organizational structures, and clarified the constitutive elements of diaspora identity.

Moreover, the rise of transnational citizenship since the 1990s has made it possible for migrant communities to maintain their transnational ties and establish simultaneous relations with both their country of origin and their country of residence. In this context, the Alevi diaspora has both maintained its historical, cultural and religious ties with Turkey and become a diaspora actor by integrating into democratic representation mechanisms in Europe.

In this process, Alevi institutions have come to the fore not only as faith-based organizations but also as civil society actors. Cemevis, cultural centers and Alevi associations have played an important role in both the identity construction and political participation of the Alevi community in Europe, from the performance of religious rituals to cultural transmission activities for younger generations. Furthermore, through these institutions, the Alevi diaspora has taken an active role in the harmonization policies of the host countries and has been able to closely follow the social and political developments in Turkey and collectively express its reactions when necessary. Therefore, within the framework of transnational citizenship, the Alevi diaspora is not only a community stuck between two societies, but also an active identity bearer and political subject in both contexts. This has paved the way for the redefinition of Alevi identity in diaspora conditions and the emergence of a multi-layered structure of belonging.

### **Alevi Organizations in Europe**

The process of institutionalization of Alevi communities in Europe has accelerated since the 1990s and has enabled the collective reconstruction of religious, cultural and political identity under diaspora conditions. Community structures, which were mostly shaped around temporary living practices in the early periods of migration, experienced a serious institutional awakening in the diaspora, especially after the Sivas tragedy, and the traumatic effects of this event strengthened the reflex of claiming Alevi identity. This process led to the establishment of Alevi associations, cultural centers and federations in various European countries.

Germany, in particular, is the center of Alevi organizing as it hosts the largest Alevi population in Europe. Founded in 1993, the Federation of Alevi Associations in Germany (AABF) has become one of the largest and most effective umbrella organizations of diaspora Alevism (Tosun, 2009, p. 100). There are around 160 cemevi, cultural associations and youth organizations within the AABF, and these institutions not only keep the Alevi faith alive, but also work in areas such as identity recognition, education, women's rights and youth activities (Mat, 2019). One of the most notable achievements of the AABF is the inclusion of formal religion classes based on the Alevi faith in the curriculum in some German states. This is considered an important institutional achievement towards the recognition of Alevism as an “autonomous belief system” (Tosun & Zengin, 2009, p. 347). In France, the Federation of Alevi Unions is the main representative body of the Alevi community. Active in cities such as Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Strasbourg, Alevi associations focus on increasing cultural visibility, cemevi construction and institutional cooperation with local governments. In this context, Alevi associations have attempted to be recognized as a cultural minority community within the secular system in France, aiming to gain visibility not on the basis of faith but on the basis of cultural identity.

Another important dimension of Alevi organizations in Europe is their efforts to establish international networks and represent the diaspora identity on a transnational level. Founded in 2002, Turkey-based organizations, such as the Alevi Bektashi Federation, and diaspora organizations occasionally organize joint events, but at the same time, various differences of opinion are observed in terms of identity definition and interpretations of belief (Özcan, 2024). In particular, Alevi organizations in Europe adopt a secular, democratic and universal human rights-based understanding of Alevism; in this respect, they develop a more participatory and secular organizational model outside of traditional hierarchical structures (Vertovec, 2009, p. 144). Furthermore, Alevi organizations in Europe are not only faith-based but also operate within a rights-based civil society approach. Alevi youth organizations, women's commissions and media outlets (such as YOL TV) play an important role in the intergenerational transmission

of identity consciousness. These organizations play strategic roles in promoting Alevism to the European public, breaking down prejudices and making intra-Islamic pluralism visible.

Alevi organizations in Europe have become an important carrier of both religious belonging and social participation under diaspora conditions. This organizational process shows that Alevism is being redefined not only as an individual form of belief, but also as a collective identity and a quest for rights. At the same time, these structures have assumed a central role in protecting the cultural heritage of the Alevi community, passing it on to younger generations and defending their democratic rights in the countries where they live. Thus, Alevi diaspora movements in Europe continue to be an important dynamic in terms of identity construction as well as political and social representation.

### **Transnational Identity and Identity Preservation**

The identity structure of the Alevi diaspora has gone beyond the classical immigration paradigm and acquired a transnational character. This structure is shaped not only by the processes of adaptation in the country of origin, but also by the preservation and reproduction of multidimensional ties with the community of origin. The concept of transnationality implies that diaspora communities simultaneously establish social, cultural and political relations with both the country of origin (Turkey) and the country of settlement (e.g. Germany, France, the Netherlands) (Vertovec, 2009, pp. 1-2). In this context, diaspora Alevism should be considered as a cross-border practice that ensures the continuity of identity at local and global levels.

In transnational identity formation, it is noteworthy that Alevism is placed in both a religious and cultural framework. In addition to faith-based organizing, Alevi institutions keep the identity consciousness of diaspora individuals alive through various activities that reinforce cultural belonging. Especially for the Alevi youth in Europe, such activities both strengthen the sense of belonging and contribute to the protection of identity against assimilation (Hanoğlu, 2025). To this end, Alevi organizations regularly organize panels, symposiums, cultural festivals, summer camps and online education programs every year, enabling the transfer of knowledge and values between generations.

An important dimension of transnational practices is digitalization. Diaspora Alevism has been able to express and reproduce its identity regardless of location thanks to activities carried out through digital media. Through Alevi television channels (e.g. YOL TV), social media platforms and digital magazines, Alevis in Europe are able to follow developments in Turkey and make their identity practices in the diaspora visible. In this way, Alevism is transmitted not only through traditional ceremonies but also through contemporary means of communication and reinterpreted through contemporary discourses. However, transnational identity formation is not a one-way process. Political and social developments in Turkey have a direct impact on diaspora Alevis, while the relations between Alevi organizations in Europe and Alevi movements in Turkey create a network of interaction. In this context, diaspora Alevism is a carrier of Turkey-centered identity demands and human rights struggles as well as local integration efforts (Çetin, 2018, p. 96). The transnational space is therefore a strategic ground for both preserving and transforming identity into a political discourse.

Alevi communities in Europe maintain their faith, identity and culture in dynamic ways through transnational relations; this identity, redefined under diasporic conditions, shapes both individual belonging and collective struggles. In this respect, Alevism has become not only a nostalgic space of belonging in diasporic spaces, but also an expression of social resilience, intergenerational solidarity and political demands. This multi-layered structure reveals that Alevi identity is not a fixed but a constantly transforming and reconstructed phenomenon. In

this process of transformation, Alevi organizations in Europe serve as a means to preserve traditional values while at the same time expressing modern political and cultural demands. Thus, Alevism, as a form of identity that transcends borders in the context of diaspora, develops strategies of self-existence at both local and global levels.

### **Political Participation and Civil Rights**

The Alevi diaspora in Europe has gone beyond its immigrant identity and has become an active political subject within the democratic social structure. The political participation of Alevi individuals and organizations is both a part of citizenship practices in the countries where they live and an effective tool for the Alevi community in Turkey to carry their demands for rights to the international arena.

In particular, the Federation of Alevi Associations of Germany, which operates in Germany, has gained an influential position in the political arena not only as a representative of a faith community but also as a civil society actor. In many German states, the AABF has obtained the status of Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts (public legal entity) and has been recognized as a religious body with equal rights with Catholic and Protestant churches (AABF Board of Faith, 2025). This status provided the AABF with institutional opportunities such as including the Alevi faith in school curricula and providing spiritual guidance services in prisons and hospitals, thus increasing the visibility and legitimacy of Alevism. In addition, the political participation of individual Alevi is also important. In countries such as Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, many politicians of Alevi origin serve as deputies or municipal councillors in federal and local parliaments. For example, in Germany, some MPs known to be close to the AABF have made speeches in the Bundestag on the demands of Alevi and have contributed to law-making processes on education and religious freedom. Similarly, in France, representatives of the Federation of Alevi Unions of France, in cooperation with local governments, are working to ensure that Alevi identity is recognized and included in public policies.

The political participation of the Alevi diaspora has not only been limited to the political processes in their countries of residence, but has also been instrumental in bringing various social demands of the Alevi community in Turkey to international platforms. In this regard, Alevi organizations have made evaluations before international institutions such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the United Nations Human Rights Council on issues such as religious education, the legal status of places of worship and cultural rights, thus making significant contributions to making the structural problems encountered in these areas visible (Köse & Tuğsuz, 2021, pp. 101-102). On the other hand, although these initiatives are sometimes perceived by some circles as interference in Turkey's internal affairs, when evaluated within the framework of transnational citizenship understanding, it is seen that these activities emphasize universal norms and democratic principles based on human rights. As a matter of fact, the Alevi diaspora makes meaningful contributions to the efforts for equal citizenship, freedom of belief and pluralism both in the societies they live in and in the Turkish context by referencing the democratic achievements they have made in the countries they live in. These contributions have been decisive in both voicing demands for legal regulations and gaining visibility in the public sphere, and diaspora actors have been able to represent the social, cultural and political dimensions of Alevism at the international level through the institutional structures and transnational collaborations they have developed in the field of civil society. Thus, Alevi identity is not limited to traditional religious practices, but is being redefined and strengthened within a broader framework of democratic rights, identity politics and social equality.

Alevi organizations also organize activities within the scope of European Union projects and funds and carry out activities to raise political awareness, especially among the younger

generation. Educational projects, media work and cultural programs encourage Alevi youth to embrace their identity and participate in active citizenship practices. These activities of Alevi youth in Europe to increase democratic participation also reinforce the future political weight of the diaspora.

In this framework, the Alevi diaspora in Europe is not only integrated into the political processes in the countries where they live, but also contributes to making the social and political demands of Alevis in Turkey visible at the international level. The organized structures of the diaspora have an effective advocacy function in areas such as human rights, equal citizenship, freedom of belief, and the recognition of cultural identity, thus setting an important example both in the political representation of communities of immigrant origin and in the transnational struggle for rights. Awareness-raising activities for younger generations and the promotion of participatory citizenship practices ensure the continuity of Alevi identity and strengthen the democratic capacity of diaspora communities.

## **Conclusion**

In the last three decades, the Alevi diaspora in Europe has undergone a remarkable transformation in the areas of identity preservation, cultural and religious heritage, institutionalization and political representation. Unlike the passive integration processes of traditional immigrant communities, this transformation has contributed both to the institutionalization of Alevism as an institutional and public identity in the countries of residence and to the international visibility of the democratic demands of the Alevi community in Turkey.

Alevi federations and local associations established in countries such as Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands have demonstrated successful examples in areas such as the construction of Cemevis, the introduction of Alevi religion classes in public schools and the development of cooperation with public institutions. This process of institutionalization has enabled Alevism to move from being a faith confined to the private sphere to becoming a public and legitimate actor within the pluralistic structure of Europe. Furthermore, panels, cultural events, youth work and digital media activities organized by Alevi institutions help to transmit Alevi identity to new generations living in the diaspora and ensure cultural continuity.

The transnational identity structure has become one of the main determinants of diaspora Alevism. Alevi communities not only enjoy citizenship rights in the European countries where they live, but also closely follow the social and political developments in Turkey, and become involved in these processes. This has paved the way for members of the diaspora to develop a bidirectional understanding of citizenship and reshaped Alevi identity as a cross-border space of belonging and struggle. The activities carried out in platforms such as the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, especially on human rights, religious freedoms and minority rights, show that diaspora Alevism has become not only a cultural but also a political subject.

The Alevi diaspora in Europe has overcome the difficulties experienced by an immigrant community and developed a unique identity politics; it has not only struggled to survive, but also transformed Alevism into a more visible, participatory and democratic faith community. In this context, diaspora Alevism offers a concrete example of transnational belonging, multi-layered citizenship practices and faith-based identity struggles in today's globalized world. This experience in Europe is both an inspiring model and a potential source of international support for the Alevi community in Turkey.

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