

Diasporic Narratives of Serhedî Kurds in France –Memory of Homeland, Refugee–hood and Social Exclusion

Li Fransayê Vegotinên Diyasporîk ên
Kurdên Serhedê - Bîranîna Welat,
Penaberî û Redbûyîna Civakî

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PUXTE:

Ev gotar li ser Kurdên Serhedê yên di nîvê duyem ê 1990î û nîvê yekem ê salên 2000î de li French Provenceyê wek penaber, penaberên redkirî û penaberên siyasî jiyane hatiye nivîsîn û di dora hesta qurbanîbûna giştî de vegotinên dîyasporîk ên Kurdên Serhedê destnîşan dike ku ji ber sedemên civakî û siyasî derketine holê. Loma jî ev nivîs derbarê gotara diyasporaya qurbanî û guvaş û travmayên Kurdên Serhedê yên herêma kurdî ya li Tirkiyeyê referanseke balkêş raber dike. Ji bilî vê riya koçberiya Kurdên Serhedê ji Tirkiyeyê ber bi gelek welatên Ewrûpayê û ciyawaziya vegotina wan a dîyasporîk jî cihê girîng digire. Herwekî vê, cihê Kurdên Serhedê di nav civata Fransî de û cudakariya li hember wan rê nade bikarin perawêzistina xwe ya civakî derbirin. Ev jî di vegotinên dîyasporîk de wek regezeke din derdikeve holê.

Peyvên Sereke: vegotinên diyasporîk, Kurdên Serhedî, bîranîna welat, redbûyîna civakî, penaberî.

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ABSTRACT:

This article stipulates that the diasporic narratives of Serhedî Kurds who lived as asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and political refugees in the French Provence during second half of 1990s and the first half of 2000s are constituted in the first place

around a common sense of victimhood, rooted in the general social and political conditions that prevail in the Kurdish homeland. In this respect, the discourse of victim diaspora reveals significant references to the notion of oppression and trauma that Serhedî Kurds experienced in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Moreover, the migration trajectory of Serhedî Kurds that displays a notable dispersion throughout Turkey and a number of European countries constitutes likewise a significant feature of the diasporic narratives among this population. Correspondingly, the social positions that Serhedî Kurds occupy in the French society which more often than not give utterance to a perceptible experience of social exclusion and discrimination appears as a further component in their diasporic narratives.

Keywords: diasporic narratives, Serhedî Kurds, memory of homeland, social exclusion, refugee-hood.

1. INTRODUCTION

My initial knowledge of the Serhedî Kurds in France dates back to the years 1997–98, when I traveled from Sweden to the French Provence, in order to study political science at the Institut d'Études Politiques in Aix-en-Provence. During my sojourn there I realized that the majority of the Kurds in this part of France has come from a particular Kurdish rural area in Turkey, called Serhed. They lived and developed their diasporic organizations in a number of cities and localities of the French Bouches-du-Rhône, including Marseille, Marignane, Vitrolles, Aubagne and Aix-en-Provence. Serhedî Kurds, who mostly were asylum seekers, worked primarily in the building and restaurant trades, more often than not in harsh conditions. Moreover, I became gradually conscious that, like many other exiled Kurds, Serhedî Kurds regularly evoked a number of negative experiences of oppression and suffering in their societies of origin; a way of being which in the writings on diaspora frequently presented as victim diaspora (see, Cohen 1995).

Victim diaspora discourse which is strongly rooted in the notion of “homeland” appears as a paradigmatic case that according to Rogers Brubaker makes use of the experiences of trauma and dispersion among the Jewish people or other “classical diasporas”, such as those of Armenians and Greeks (Brubaker, 2005, p. 2). As Robin Cohen (1995, p. 5). points out, the idea of “victim diaspora” can be also evoked in the case of Armenians and Africans, as there was nothing voluntary in the “patterns of out-migration, or a mix of impelled and colonizing migration” that Armenians and Africans experienced.

This article will discuss whether the diasporic narratives of Serhedî Kurds are constituted around a common sense of victimhood, rooted in the general social

and political conditions that prevail in the Kurdish homeland or whether there are other experiences and practices that affect their narratives of exiles and subsequently the process of diaspora formation and the creation and development of related transnational organizations and networks among them. In that case what are these other experiences that –along with the sentiment of victimhood- that condition the diasporic narratives among Serhedî Kurds. Equally, to which extent should their social backgrounds and their social positions in the French society included in the study of the diasporic narratives among them?

It is worth noting that scope of this analysis embraces the life of Serhedî Kurds in the French Provence during the second half of 1990s and the first half of 2000s. The main part of this study's material is collected during a comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork, carried out among Serhedî Kurds in the French Provence in 2002. The material has been updated through a number of shorter or longer revisit of the field in 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2006.

2. NARRATIVE OF THE HOMELAND AMONG SERHEDÎ KURDS

The general Kurdish popular narrative of exile -which also explicitly supported by Serhedî Kurds- is deeply rooted in the belief that the Kurds, as an “oppressed nation”, have been and are systematically subjected to the politics of repression, maltreatment and uprooting (cf. Wahlbeck, 1999; Alinia, 2004; Emanuelsson, 2005; Khayati, 2008; Eliassi, 2013; Eliassi & Alinia, 2014; Khayati & Dahlstedt, 2014). In other words, the narrative of exile among Kurds to a great extent is influenced by the general social and political conditions that prevail in the Kurdish homeland. In this respect, the Kurdish homeland most often is portrayed in negative terms such as *azar* (trauma), *sitem* (oppression), *qurbani/mexdûr* (victim) and *welatê xeribiyê* (exile). Comparable vocabularies and reflections of melancholy, anger, nostalgia and trauma which can be abundantly and expressively depicted in numerous Kurdish epics, traditional recitations and lullabies, commonly evoke an awareness of a specific way of being or a state of mind, and express a traumatic experience of exile along with a powerful sentiment of nostalgia. By regularly evoking a number of salient utterances relating to discrimination, the politics of denial, assimilation, persecution, maltreatment, massacre, destruction, Anfal¹, gas attacks², forced dis-

1 Genocidal campaigns on the part of Iraqi regime against the Kurdish people in 1987–88, which resulted in the killing of more than 180,000 people.

2 The reference is to the Kurdish locality Halabja, which was the target of a brutal gas attack, ordered by the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein in 1988. This attack, which resulted in the deaths of more than 5,000 people, is for the Kurds an event that will forever constitute the

placement, and so on, the mainstream Kurdish diaspora discourse is a way not only of recalling those experiences of trauma and oppression in Kurdistan but also of legitimizing escaping from them (see Khayati, 2008).

The majority of Kurds, who have settled in the French Provence and especially in the department of Bouches-du-Rhône whose capital is Marseille, since the beginning of 1990s, are refugees and asylum seekers originating –as was said earlier– from a particular vast sub-region of the Kurdish area of Turkey called Serhed. This region is adjacent to the Armenian and Iranian borders and includes thousands of villages and major towns and cities such as Van, Muş, Varto, Hınıs, Erzurum, Kars, Agiri, Bingöl, Iğdir, and Dogubayazıt. It is worth noting that Serhed is a purely Kurdish appellation, stemming from the time of the Ottoman Empire or perhaps even earlier, when the administrative division of the regions was quite different from that of the current Turkish nation-state. Even though the Turkish state today no longer makes use of the term in administrative and geographical contexts, Serhed continues even today to be perceived, along with other ancient geographical or regional entities such as Garzan, Botan, Amed, Merdîn and Koçgiri, as an important source of identity among the Kurds in Turkey. It should be stressed that even though these geographic identities used to be in competition or conflict with each other, mostly reflecting rivalries between principalities and chieftains in former times, today they do not evoke such cleavages. Nor are they advanced as political challenges to or political substitutes for the Kurdish mainstream political movement. Rather, they contain a number of references to certain specific forms of boundary-maintenance embedded in their daily lives.

For instance, Serhedî Kurds claim that their expressive culture, embracing narratives, tales, music, dance, legends, oral history, folklore, proverbs, popular beliefs, customs, and so on is almost unique when compared with other Kurdish regions in Turkey. Likewise, they pride themselves on preserving this “rich culture” from the “harmful Turkish assimilation assault”, especially as it is maintained not only by native Serhedî in private but also by the diasporan Serhedî in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, Germany and France. It is important to bear into mind that most of the diasporan Kurds in central Asia and the Caucasus have migrated or been displaced from the region of Serhed.

However, originating predominantly in the rural areas of Varto, Hınıs, Erzurum, Bingöl and Muş, the diasporan Serhedî Kurds in the French Bouches-du-Rhône

climax of the entire Kurdish tragedy. It is commemorated every year by thousands of Kurds both in Kurdistan and in the diaspora.

– whose number is estimated to be between 3,000 and 3,500, and to comprise mostly males – display a number of distinctive features in their diasporic narratives. Above all, they evoke the experience of trauma and oppression in Kurdistan as a main cause of their escape from it.

3. NARRATIVE OF THE FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The first group of Serhedî Kurds arrived in Provence at the end of the 1980s, in very small numbers. It was in the mid-1990s that the influx started to grow and accelerate. The growth in numbers was more or less a consequence of the armed conflict between Turkish forces and Kurdish PKK guerillas, which was both accelerating and intensifying at that time. In order to suppress the guerilla insurgency and its material and symbolic support from the civilian population, the Turkish government decided to destroy more than 3,000 Kurdish villages and hamlets in the first half of 1990s (Human Rights Watch 1993c). As a result, more than three million people were displaced. The major part of this displaced population was in one way or another forced to settle in the various shanty towns in Kurdish and Turkish urban areas. The region of Serhed, which was in the past one of the “carnage areas” for the Armenians, has been hit heavily by the displacement program of the Turkish government. In this regard, the experience of a young Kurdish asylum seeker in Aix-en-Provence is illustrative:

I can never forget what we went through in Turkey. It was not a nightmare, but a real horror story. I remember the day the army and the *kurucu*³ came to our village. They told us that we had to choice between two options: to collaborate with them as village guards or to leave immediately. My father wouldn't become a *kurucu* and fight against the Kurdish guerrillas, because I had a cousin within the PKK. Finally, like the other families we left our village, which had been home to all of our ancestors. The Turkish army then destroyed the village. In the first place, my family moved to Van to join some of our relatives there. As the economic situation was not so positive there, we decided to move on to Mersin. During this harmful displacement, I lost both my grandmother and my uncle. I was lucky in that I had a couple of cousins in France. They helped me with my trip. The best thing about my coming to France is that I am spared Turkish military service. I have informed the French OFPRA about what I went through, but I am not sure that they believe my story.

3 Kurucu is the name given to those Kurds who collaborate with the Turkish army.

This account indicates that migratory movements, far from being one-sided occurrences, are complex and multifaceted phenomena that leave their mark on immigrants and refugees as multi-level time-space related experiences. In order to further elucidate the phenomenon, we quote from the account of another Kurdish asylum seeker in Marseille:

When my family moved to the Turkish city of Izmir I was only a child. At that time, many Kurds were abandoning their villages because of economic problems and poverty. As our agriculture was meagre and there was no industry in the region, a large number of Kurds had to find means of subsistence in the Turkish metropolis or in west European countries. Several years after our settlement in Izmir, I returned to the Kurdish area of south-eastern Turkey to do my military service. At that time, the war between the Turkish army and the Kurdish guerrillas was at its peak. I was dismayed by the idea of fighting against Kurds. However, a few days after my arrival, I realized that many villages were devastated. The physical aspect of Kurdistan was totally different from what I had heard from my parents during my childhood. I cannot reveal everything that I witnessed during my military service. But I can tell you that it was so horrible. I have never seen such an atrocity in my life. I couldn't simply hold out and that was the reason I finally deserted. I was lucky that I had some relatives here in France. They helped me to flee Turkey.

The accounts of these two young Kurdish asylum seekers (both were building workers) embrace several interrelated dimensions. In the first place, these accounts reveal that internal population movement, reflecting structural differences between Kurdish and Turkish areas, was a perceptible reality in Kurdish society long before the war of 1984. Moreover, the accounts indicate the ways in which the Kurds are affected by the war and its consequences. As a result of deep social transformations, caused by the war between the Turkish army and Kurdish guerrillas, hundreds of thousands of Kurds were forced to leave their native villages and towns in a process of forced migration which had both an internal and an external dimension. In this respect, Castles sees forced migration as both the result and the cause of social transformations in the South. According to Castles, the violence destroys "economic resources, undermines traditional ways of life and breaks up communities" (Castles, 2003, p. 18). The persistent armed conflict that gave rise to the process of social transformation generated large-scale population movements abroad, but particularly to large Turkish cities and towns such as Istanbul, Izmir, Ankara, Adana, Gaziantep, Mersin and the tourist areas of Alanya and Antalya. For instance, as a result of internal Kurdish migratory movement, the population

of the Turkish coastal city of Mersin has increased and been transformed to such an extent that today Kurds constitute 30 per cent of its inhabitants.

According to the former chairman of the ex-pro-Kurdish party DEHAP in the office of Istanbul, the internal displacement had a huge impact on social and demographic constellations in urban areas. He maintained that this displaced population had to struggle hard for surviving in the new environment, which could neither absorb them socially and culturally nor provide them with decent jobs. It is important to stress that the displaced Kurds were never compensated for the loss of their lands and animals (Van Bruinessen, 1999). Many Kurds blamed the Turkish government for being completely indifferent to the resettlement and rehabilitation of these people. In this regard, a former female activist within Kurdish civil society, who now lives in Marseille, said the following:

The situation of thousands of Kurds who have been forced to settle in large Kurdish and Turkish cities is deplorable. They suffer from widespread social and economic problems. The problem is aggravated because according to the prevailing assimilationist ideology no problem may be called the Kurdish problem, and consequently no solution is suggested. The denial of Kurdish identity and the accumulated social and economic problems make the situation untenable for the Kurds. This is why many of them prefer to emigrate if they have the necessary resources at their disposal.

As a part of a wider global immigration process, the arrival of Serhedî Kurds in France, which follows more or less the pattern of the migratory trajectory from a less wealthy and deprived Kurdistan to a rich and wealthy European country, mostly known as North–South syndrome, can largely be explained by what Castles calls the sociology of forced migration. According to Castles, the sociology of forced migration, which must include the refugee influx, asylum seekers and internal displacement in a transnational context, is the study of current processes of the global social transformation which is an integral part of the North–South relationship. It is important to examine the social processes in which human agency and social networks play a considerable role and also the position of the states that treat migration as a security issue (Castles, 2003).

The popular homeland narrative among the Serhedî Kurds in the region of Marseille is evidence of a persistent negative and traumatic memory of a native place, associated most often with population movements (kocberî), war (şer), persecution (eşkence), political instability (tevlîhevî siyasî), state of emergency (rewşa awarte), atrocity (hovêtî, bêrehmî), assimilation (asimilasyon, helandin), national

struggle (berxwedan) and nostalgia (xerîbî). This memory is essential for maintaining diasporic boundaries.

4. NARRATIVE OF EXILE SERHEDÎ KURDS AS ASYLUM SEEKERS

A further distinctive feature of the diasporic accounts of the Serhedî Kurds in Bouches-du-Rhône involves the unpleasant asylum conditions that these people have been experiencing since the 1990s. Accordingly, they have developed a kind of asylum discourse that portrays their situation as asylum seekers as unsustainable. For many of these Kurdish asylum seekers, who have long been waiting for their applications for asylum to be approved, the notion of time has painful connotations. They blame OFPRA for being reluctant to treat the asylum dossiers submitted. Furthermore, they acknowledge the impossibility of being reunified with their families if they are denied refugee status.

The following account of the World Refugee Survey portrays the gravity of the asylum conditions for the Sarhadi Kurds in Bouches-du-Rhône:

For Instance, in 2001, the French Refugee Appeals Commission (Commission des Recours des Réfugiés – CRR) conferred refugee status on 2,380 individuals out of 22,090 decisions taken, an 11 percent approval rate. An estimated 14,000 to 15,000 persons requested territorial asylum in France in 2001, with an approval rate of 3 percent. In 2002, the same Commission granted refugee status to 2,600 individuals out of 21,700 decisions taken, a 12 percent approval rate. In 2001, about 30,000 persons requested territorial asylum in France, of which the Ministry of Interior made decisions on about 17,000, with an approval rate of 2 percent. The French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) conferred refugee status on some 6,500 individuals, out of some 66,300 decisions made on the merits of the case, an approval rate of almost 10 percent compared to a 12 percent approval rate in 2002. The Refugee Appeals Commission (CCR) granted asylum to some 3,300 persons. (World Refugee Survey 2001; 2002; 2003)

The complexity of the asylum procedure is an additional factor that engenders difficulties for the Serhedî Kurds. As indicated previously, along with OFPRA, a set of different state institutions are involved in dealing with asylum applications. Moreover, there are various forms of refugee status, which further complicates the situation. As knowledge of the French language and information on French society are limited among the Serhedî Kurds, their ability to follow the asylum procedure is considerably reduced. This is why more often than not they have to turn to the

French refugee NGOs or their own social networks or associations, given that in France there is no state-supported interpreter service as there is in Sweden. Illustrating the painful experience of asylum among the Serhedî Kurds, a Kurdish restaurant worker who has been in France since 1991 has the following words to say:

It seems that I will never obtain my refugee papers in this country. My demand has been rejected several times and now I live as a *clandestin* after 12 years. I hope that the French government has realized that I, as a Kurd, cannot return to my village in Kurdistan because the village does not exist anymore. Four years after coming to France, I heard that it was destroyed by the Turkish army. I left my wife, my little son and the rest of my family behind. Now, they live in Istanbul because of the war. I want to be frank: the worst for me was the waiting during all this period. Do you think that I would be able to see my family one day?

The account of a Kurdish woman in Marseille is likewise illustrative:

First, my husband arrived in France alone. I remained in Kurdistan together with my two children. After several years, he told us that we could not go to France legally because he had not received his refugee papers. As we missed each other so much, he decided to make us come illegally. My husband paid half of our traveling expenses, while his family took responsibility for the rest. After a terrible sea voyage from Turkey to Italy, we arrived finally in France. From the beginning, it would have been impossible to survive if we had not our close relatives to help us. As we cannot speak, French it is important that we help each other. Everything is so complicated here. It is not easier for the families. Every morning and evening, I say thank God, because we are still alive. There are so many Kurds who die when they are on their way to Europe, while hundreds of thousands of Kurds who succeed in arriving in France and ask for asylum. Believe me; their condition is no better than it was in their villages and towns. They only believe that here is better.

According to Lloyd (2003), the list of asylum seekers applying for refugee status in France does not only “reflect the conflicts in the world today, but also the existing populations in the country, especially the Kurds and the Turks who have developed a vibrant community structure over the past thirty years” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 330). By this the author means to emphasize the importance of the diasporic structures, especially when a receiving country like France has no appropriate structures to offer the refugee and immigrant populations despite its claim to be a *terre d’asile*.

As the Kurds have difficulties obtaining refugee status in France, they sometimes resort to certain specific acts such as hunger strikes or demonstrations. For instance, in March 1991, Kurds, Malians, Haitians and refugees from Cape Verde went on hunger strikes in protest against the delays in the processing of their asylum applications (Lloyd, 2003, p. 330). Twelve years later, that is, in February 2003, French authorities granted asylum on a collective basis to a group of 27 Kurds from Turkey who had staged a hunger strike after the authorities rejected their claims. The government stated that the decision was made on the basis of “new elements” without specifying what they were. Later in May 2003, a group of 91 Kurds (also from Turkey) went on hunger strike, demanding collective asylum (35 had exhausted all appeals, 34 had claims pending, and 22 had not yet claimed asylum) as soon as possible, while another group of 21 rejected “*déboutés du droit d’asile*” Kurds ended their hunger strike when the authorities agreed to re-examine their applications (World Refugee Survey, 2004).

Today, many Serhedî Kurds in Bouches-du-Rhône and other places in France are still denied refugee status. As they are aware of the importance of being recognized by the French refugee reception organization, OFPRA as political refugees, their never-ending condition as asylum seekers plays a considerable role in maintaining their negative perception of French society. However, being a long-lasting asylum seeker is a further distinctive feature of the lives of Serhedî Kurds that, along with their homeland memory, reinforces the diasporic boundary that they maintain vis-à-vis French society.

5. SERHEDÎ KURDS IN THE FRENCH LABOR AND HOUSING MARKETS

Since the mid-1990s, France, like Italy, has been a transit country for thousands of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers who try to make their way to Britain or, to a lesser extent, northern Europe. Accordingly, the region of Marseille has been transformed into a crossroads and a meeting place for many Kurdish refugees and illegal immigrants who contemplate seeking their “fortune” elsewhere than southern France. On their way toward coveted “luck”, these asylum seekers, mostly Iraqi Kurds, make contact with settled Serhedî Kurds, exchanging with them hundreds of accounts of their common suffering, their political and socio-cultural experiences and their migration trajectory, most often soaked in pain, tragedy and trauma.

According to the president of the Kurdish association La Maison du Peuple Kurde in Marseille, since the French traditional labor market was as a result of the economic conjuncture of the 1970s, no longer able to offer foreign workers new

jobs, a large number of Kurds who had lost their jobs were more or less obliged to turn toward their own social networks and internal resources in order to find means of subsistence other than the deficient French labor market. Reflecting the available competences and professional skills they had acquired in their countries of origin, they started up various entrepreneurial economic activities. There is a shared knowledge among Kurdish refugees and immigrants stressing that Kurds from Diyarbekir work generally in the domain of house maintenance, equipment and interior decoration, while Kurds from Mereş and the Serhed region are active respectively in the restaurant trade and house construction. The professional achievements of Serhedî Kurds would be fairly compatible with the particular conditions of the labor market in Bouches-du-Rhône.

As outlined by the president of La Maison du Peuple Kurde, the existence of a substantial informal labor market with a specific structure and a variety of non-declared options in Provence is highly consistent with prevailing patterns of international migration. The branches within this informal economy include the restaurant business, agricultural activities and above all a significant building sector with the capacity to provide jobs for hundreds of Kurdish asylum seekers. This region not only has the capacity to recruit those Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers who already live there but also possesses a strong potential to attract and absorb many other Serhedî Kurds whose asylum applications have been rejected by other EU countries. This kind of clandestine labor mobility, which is particularly observable between Germany and southern France, is hardly possible without transnational networks.

According to a Kurdish politician in Marseille, the development of the regional and local economy in Bouches-du-Rhône depends partially on the contribution of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers, whose presence has increased in the various sectors of an ever-extending informal economy in the region in recent years. The interviewee maintains that promoting informal economic activities and encouraging illegal immigrants and rejected refugees to take tough jobs in these informal sectors is the solution that seems to be the consequence of a “tacit agreement” among all the political, economic and administrative actors in this part of France. Similarly, a Kurdish construction worker who is at the same time a rejected (débouté) asylum seeker maintains that “the police and other local authorities are perfectly aware about what is going on but they prefer to close their eyes to it as if nothing is abnormal”.

Speaking of the reputation of Serhedî Kurds as a hard-working people, a Kurdish university graduate in Aix-en-Provence has the following to say:

The reputation of being hard workers stems first from the traditional life of Serhedî Kurds as farmers who worked in their meagre agriculture with very limited resources. Moreover, the harsh climate of the region of Serhed is a further feature to take into account. In Turkey, as their region was economically discriminated against by the Turkish government, a big number of them, long before the war started, decided to migrate to larger Turkish cities in order to find positions in the enormous building sectors there. When they came to France they had in their luggage not only their skills as good construction workers but also their reputation as hard workers. But I think it would be rather better to focus on their harsh conditions and the exclusion they experience than on their imagined human qualities.

The position of the Serhedî Kurds in the labor market in Provence should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. As a population movement “from below” (Ballard, 2001, p. 2), it may be seen as a consequence of so-called globalization and industrial restructuring, which have generated a more fragmented and polarized employment market (Castles & Miller, 1998). This polarization highlights the relationships between post-Fordist transformations, the migration influx from underdeveloped countries and the emergence of new informal arrangements in Western societies (Quassoli, 1999, p. 212). Foreign investment and the relocation of many manufacturing job from richer countries to the less wealthy parts of the world have created a new situation in which new migratory flows from the South daily add to the workforces of what Saskia Sassen calls “global cities” (Sassen, 1998). The correlation between global cities and distant localities has created “paradoxes wherein enormous wealth and highly remunerated professional employment and Third-World-like employment conditions in underground industries” coexist. The growth of illegal employment, which often coincides with high unemployment among citizens and resident aliens, is characteristic of global cities (Castles & Miller, 1998). The gap between the growth of unemployment among nationals and other residents on the one hand and the emergence of an informal economy for illegal immigrants on the other has created favorable ground for xenophobic and racist rhetoric, advanced mainly by the extremist National Front in southern France. As outlined previously, the involvement of the National Front is deeply rooted in the local and regional industry and capital investment: a local economy that cannot turn its back on illegal immigrants, who can be found in abundance in the region and who can be recruited in an informal way in the agricultural, restaurant and above all building sectors. The case of the Serhedî Kurds is not exceptional. However, there is a paradox between the need for illegal immigrants and the xenophobic rhetoric that blames the same illegal migrants and asylum seekers for “harming French culture and abusing French welfare”.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the diasporic narratives of Serhedî Kurds in the French Provence, more specially in the department of Bouches-du-Rhône with reference to the memory of their homeland, their refugee trajectories and their life conditions in the French society. By contextualizing a number of diasporic trajectories and occurrences, actualized through the narratives of Serhedî Kurds, this article shows that the discourse of victim diaspora persists among this population. The principal reasons behind this persistent victim diaspora discourse are the experiences of oppression and forced migration that Serhedî Kurds retain in their “collective memory”. As was discussed, Serhedî Kurds regularly relate the experiences of discrimination, politics of denial, assimilation, persecution, deportation and massacre inflicted to them by the Turkish state and Turkish army. In this respect, the political destiny of the Kurdish homeland is portrayed through each individual traumatic experience. The dominance of the victim diaspora discourse among the Serhedî Kurds is to a large extent compatible with one of Safran’s principles of diaspora: admitting the existence of forced dispersal, as it was the case with, for instance, Jews, Armenians, Greeks and Africans (Safran, 1991). For instance, the shocking beginning of the Armenians’ diasporic experience is their deportation by the Turks, which was resulted in their spectacular dispersal among several states such as Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Soviet Armenia, France and the United States (Cohen, 1995, p. 9) may clearly illustrate the maintenance of victim diaspora discourse among Serhedî Kurds.

The integration context of France is a further constituent factor that reinforces the sentiment of victimhood among Serhedî Kurds. This context given here comprises a particular form of life conditions where the presence of Serhedî Kurds, -in their capacity as “constant” asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and political refugees- in an exclusionary political and social environment, is more often than not narrated through a tangible victim diaspora discourse.

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