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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking the Turkish Diaspora: A Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

In recent years, the concept of diaspora has gained increasing visibility in academic, bureaucratic, and political debates on migration from Türkiye. Yet no clear consensus exists regarding its sociological scope or analytical boundaries. The different terms used to describe Turkish communities abroad—Turkish-origin, Türkiye-origin, European Turks, immigrant, *gurbetçi*—reflect not only terminological diversity but also competing understandings of belonging, identity, and governance. To address this conceptual ambiguity, this article examines the Turkish diaspora from a critical sociological perspective. Rather than treating diaspora as a state-driven foreign policy instrument or an essentialist demographic category, the article draws on Andreas Wimmer's boundary-making framework to conceptualize Turkish identity abroad as an evolving and negotiated relational boundary. It further reverses the conventional direction of inquiry by asking what the Turkish diaspora is not and develops a five-dimensional analytical framework based on distinctiveness, orientation, preservation, organization, and participation. Examining these interrelated dimensions through the historical trajectory of labor migration to Western Europe and subsequent migration waves, the article argues that, despite its growing political instrumentalization, diaspora remains an indispensable analytical category. By clarifying its sociological boundaries, the study resolves persistent conceptual ambiguities and contributes to both empirical and theoretical debates in diaspora studies.

Keywords: Turkish diaspora, diaspora studies, boundary-making, diaspora governance

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Türk Diasporasını Yeniden Düşünmek: Sosyolojik Bir Perspektif

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Öz

Son yıllarda diaspora kavramı, Türkiye'den gerçekleşen göçlere ilişkin akademik, bürokratik ve siyasi tartışmalarda belirgin bir görünürlük kazanmıştır; ancak kavramın sosyolojik kapsamı ve analitik sınırlarına dair hâlâ net bir uzlaşı bulunmamaktadır. Yurt dışındaki Türkleri tanımlamak için kullanılan örneğin Türk kökenli, Türkiye kökenli, Avrupalı Türkler, göçmen, gurbetçi gibi farklı kavramsallaştırmalar, yalnızca bir terminolojik enflasyonu değil, aynı zamanda aidiyet, kimlik ve yönetişime dair birbiriyle rekabet eden anlayışları da yansıtmaktadır. Bu kavramsal çoğulluğun yarattığı analitik belirsizliği ele alan bu makale, Türk diasporasını sosyoloji perspektifinden incelemektedir. Çalışma, diasporayı devlet eliyle inşa edilmiş bir dış politika aygıtına veya özcü bir demografik kategoriye indirgemek yerine, analizini Andreas Wimmer'ın sınır çizme yaklaşımına dayandırmakta ve yurt dışındaki Türk kimliğini sürekli evrilen, müzakere edilen ilişkisel bir sınır olarak kavramsallaştırmaktadır. Dahası, çalışmada alışılagelmiş sorgulama yönü tersine çevrilerek Türk diasporasının ne olmadığı ortaya konmakta ve onun sosyolojik gerçekliği beş boyutlu analitik bir çerçeve üzerinden işlevsellik kazanmaktadır: özgünlük, yönelim, muhafaza, örgütlenme ve katılım. Bu birbiriyle bağlantılı dinamikleri Batı Avrupa'ya yönelik işçi göçünün tarihsel yörüngesi ve onu izleyen göç dalgaları üzerinden değerlendiren makale, yukarıdan aşağıya siyasi söylemlere fazlasıyla eklemlenmiş olmasına rağmen diaspora kavramının önemli bir analitik kategori olmaya devam ettiğini göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma, söz konusu sosyolojik sınırları sistematik biçimde çizerek süregelen terminolojik belirsizlikleri gidermekte ve diaspora çalışmaları alanındaki ampirik ve kuramsal tartışmaları ileriye taşımaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Diasporası, Diaspora Çalışmaları, Sınır İnşası, Diaspora Yönetişimi

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Introduction

Over the past several decades, the concept of diaspora has expanded far beyond its association with Jewish exile to encompass populations shaped by labor migration, political displacement, colonial histories, and transnational mobility. As diaspora became increasingly detached from its classical characteristics, concerns emerged over its analytical usefulness. Anthias (1998) argued that the indiscriminate use of the term conceals internal inequalities and differences within migrant populations, while Brubaker (2005) identified a process of "conceptual inflation" in which diaspora increasingly functions as a catch-all label for migrants, transnational communities, or ethnic minorities. Accordingly, the central challenge in contemporary diaspora studies is no longer to broaden the definition of diaspora but to specify its analytical boundaries and distinguish it from related categories such as immigrant populations, transnational communities, and external citizens.

Since the beginning of large-scale labor migration from Türkiye to Western Europe in the 1960s, the terminology used to describe these populations has evolved alongside their historical and political transformation. Initially framed as guest workers or *homo economicus*, valued primarily for their labor and remittances (Abadan-Unat & Kemiksiz, 1986), they were later reconceptualized as transnational migrants following permanent settlement, family reunification, and naturalization (Abadan-Unat, 2011). During the 2000s, debates surrounding European integration promoted labels such as Euro-Turks or European Turks, emphasizing their bridging role between Türkiye and Europe (Kaya & Kentel, 2005). More recently, the establishment of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) in 2010 and the expansion of external voting rights in 2012 shifted scholarly attention toward diaspora, external citizenship, and transnational state governance (Baser, 2015; Mencutek & Baser, 2018; Sağlam, 2020).

Rather than producing conceptual clarity, however, this historical layering has generated persistent ambiguity over who constitutes Türkiye's diaspora. *The Routledge Handbook of Turkey's Diasporas* (Arkılıç & Senay, 2025), for instance, reflects this terminological fluidity by employing a spectrum of overlapping labels—including Turkish-origin, Türkiye-origin, migrants from Türkiye, and diaspora—without drawing clear conceptual boundaries among them. Similar inconsistencies appear in official discourse. Whereas Ahmet Davutoğlu defined the diaspora broadly in 2012 to include everyone originating from Türkiye, regardless of ethnic or religious background (Yeni Şafak, 2012), President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan later adopted a narrower understanding, portraying citizens abroad as "a seven-million-strong Turkish diaspora" forming an inseparable part of the Turkish nation (Directorate of Communications, 2025). The coexistence of these competing academic and political definitions has blurred the sociological boundaries of the concept and reinforced doubts about whether Türkiye possesses a coherent diaspora in the classical sense. Consequently, clarifying the analytical scope of diaspora remains a prerequisite for studying Türkiye's transnational communities.

To address this conceptual ambiguity, this article reverses the conventional direction of inquiry. Rather than asking what the Turkish diaspora is, it asks what it is not. This negative definition is not intended to police identities or exclude groups but to establish clearer sociological boundaries around the concept. Drawing on Wimmer's (2008a, 2013) theory

of ethnic boundary-making, the article conceptualizes diaspora as a socially reproduced formation rather than a demographic category, legal status, or instrument of state policy. From this perspective, geographical dispersion, common ancestry, or external citizenship alone are insufficient to constitute a diaspora unless they are sustained through enduring processes of collective identification, institutional reproduction, and boundary-making.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on Western Europe, where approximately three-quarters of Türkiye-origin populations reside and where the transition from temporary labor migration to multigenerational settlement has been most fully institutionalized (Abadan-Unat, 2011). Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative conceptual approach that integrates international diaspora theory with the literature on Turkish migration and narrative evidence from Iyi's sociological research on third-generation Türkiye-origin populations in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and France (Iyi, 2021; Iyi & Cebe, 2024; Iyi, 2025a, in press). These empirical insights are used not as case studies but as interpretive evidence for refining the conceptual boundaries of the Turkish diaspora.

The article makes three contributions. First, it addresses the problem of conceptual inflation by advancing a boundary-oriented framework that defines the Turkish diaspora through exclusion as well as inclusion. Second, it reconceptualizes the Turkish diaspora as a sociological formation reproduced across generations rather than a state-defined or policy-driven category. To operationalize this perspective, it proposes five interrelated analytical characteristics—distinctiveness, orientation, preservation, organization, and participation—that distinguish diasporic formations from broader migrant populations. Third, this study contributes to diaspora studies by showing that labor-migration diasporas, as exemplified by the Turkish case, differ from classic trauma-induced diasporas in both their motivations and the characteristics outlined above. Rather than being shaped by a victimhood narrative or a traumatic past, the continuity of a labor diaspora depends on preserving language, cultural heritage, and institutional ties across generations.

1. Conceptualizing the Turkish Diaspora

As the concept of diaspora drifted from its classical associations, it acquired multiple theoretical meanings, variously defined as a form of ethnic consciousness, a political project, a cultural network, or a multigenerational social formation (Butler, 2001; Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Sheffer, 2003; Vertovec, 1997). While this expansion enriched the field, it also sparked concern over analytical precision. Brubaker (2005) famously warned of "conceptual inflation," whereby diaspora is increasingly used as a catch-all label for any migrant, transnational, or ethnic minority population. To restore analytical clarity, Brubaker proposed analyzing diaspora through three core dimensions: *dispersion*, *homeland orientation*, and, most crucially, *boundary maintenance*. Unlike dispersion or homeland attachment, which vary widely across historical cases, boundary maintenance—defined as the intergenerational reproduction of a distinct collective identity—remains the true ontological test of a diaspora.

This tension between empirical change and conceptual expansion is particularly evident in migration from Türkiye. As labor migration evolved into permanent, multigenerational settlement, the terminology used to describe these communities also shifted—from immigrant communities and guest workers to Euro-Turks, transnational citizens, and ultimately the Turkish diaspora (Abadan-Unat, 2011; Kaya, 2001; Kaya & Kentel, 2005). Crucially, scholars

such as Ulusoy and Yaldız argue that this formation can no longer be reduced to a mere demographic surplus of immigration. Instead, it represents a "modern diaspora" in which settled populations transform into active sociopolitical subjects possessing an autonomous diasporic consciousness (Ulusoy, 2016; Yaldız, 2013, 2019). Rather than retreating into nostalgic homeland myths, these contemporary European formations act as permeable, hybrid cultural bridges that actively demand civic rights, equal representation, and integration without assimilation (Kaya, 2001; Ulusoy, 2016).

However, this organic sociopolitical evolution increasingly clashes with top-down, state-led diaspora governance. Rejecting essentialist views that treat immigrants of common origin as a monolithic mass, Baser (2015) conceptualizes diaspora as a politicized and mobilized subset—comprising both core and passive members—that engages with homeland politics through long-distance nationalism. She further shows how diasporic spaces may be divided by "imported conflicts" transmitted across generations within the political opportunity structures of European host states (Baser, 2015; Baser & Halperin, 2019). While this approach offers an important account of conflict-driven mobilization, it risks placing political contestation too close to the center of diaspora formation. It is particularly well suited to diasporas shaped by trauma, exclusion, or unresolved homeland conflicts, including some Kurdish and Alevi formations, but it is less able to explain diasporas that sustain themselves through language, culture, community institutions, and everyday belonging without exerting continuous political pressure on either the homeland or the host state.

Ulusoy (2016) captures this tension by distinguishing between the organic development of a modern diaspora and the instrumental logic of *devlet aklı* (state reason), through which expatriate populations are viewed primarily as foreign policy tools or lobbying instruments. Building on this line of inquiry, some scholars argue that state-led diaspora governance has evolved into a dual strategy. According to this view, state institutions seek to engage and strategically co-opt conservative youth to strengthen regime legitimacy and project soft power abroad (Böcü & Baser, 2024), while simultaneously employing mechanisms of "transnational authoritarianism," including surveillance and intimidation, against dissident segments of the diaspora (Baser & Ozturk, 2020).

While this literature offers important insights into the ways homeland states seek to govern diaspora populations, it also adopts a predominantly state-centric perspective that places the strategies of the state at the center of analysis. As a result, the diaspora's own sociological autonomy and agency may remain underexplored. As Sheffer (2003) argues, mature diasporas are not merely objects of homeland or host-state governance; they develop their own organizational interests and political agency and, when subjected to persistent external demands or attempts at instrumentalization by either the homeland or the host state, may increasingly assert their organizational independence. The Turkish case illustrates this reciprocal dynamic. Since the early 2000s, the expansion of diaspora institutions, external voting rights, consular services, educational programs, and other diaspora-oriented policies can certainly be interpreted as instruments of diaspora governance. At the same time, however, these initiatives have also addressed long-standing demands and practical needs among many citizens abroad. Their positive reception among significant segments of the Turkish diaspora therefore cannot be explained solely through state instrumentalization; it also reflects the

extent to which these policies were perceived as serving diaspora interests. Rather than a one-way process of state control, homeland–diaspora relations are better understood as a negotiated and mutually reinforcing interaction between state institutions and diaspora communities. From this perspective, reducing the diaspora primarily to a state-governed or state-serving actor risks obscuring its sociological reality as a self-reproducing transnational social formation with its own internal dynamics, institutions, and boundary-making processes.

From a critical perspective, Yaldız (2019) argues that the Turkish diaspora cannot be treated as a self-evident category without first defining clear sociological boundaries. He criticizes broad references to kin communities, co-ethnics, or the global Muslim community (*ummah*) for stretching the concept beyond analytical usefulness. Instead, he proposes language as a more meaningful boundary, defining the Turkish diaspora as Turkish-speaking communities outside Türkiye that maintain ties with both the homeland and other Turkish-speaking communities (Yaldız, 2019). While this language-based definition remains open to debate, it highlights the importance of language and cultural continuity in distinguishing diaspora from dispersed populations. Recent scholarship has addressed these conceptual challenges in different ways. For example, Arkılıç and Senay (2025) adopt the plural notion of Turkey's diasporas, whereas Baser (2015) and Yaldız (2014, 2019) argue that citizenship, shared origin, or geographical dispersion alone do not constitute a diaspora without collective identification and sustained organization. When diaspora is used interchangeably with international migration, the concept risks the kind of analytical inflation identified by Brubaker (2005).

This concern also appears in broader attempts to define the Turkish diaspora. For example, Köse (2021) conceptualizes it as a multilayered structure that includes both emigrant communities formed through post-1950s labor migration and autochthonous communities left outside Türkiye's borders after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. While this framework broadens the scope of diaspora beyond migration, its inclusion of historical communities, state-supported mobility, and economic networks raises questions about the analytical boundaries of the concept. As Yaldız (2019) also notes, extending the Turkish diaspora to include such diverse groups makes it less clear whether the concept refers to a socially reproduced diasporic formation or a broader category of historical and transnational connections.

2. Diaspora as a Sociological Category

The concern over analytical boundaries in diaspora studies reflects a broader methodological challenge within international migration research: analytical categories are never neutral, descriptive labels. Rather, as critical scholarship increasingly emphasizes, migration and diaspora categories operate as administrative, political, and governance instruments through which states classify, regulate, and control mobile populations (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Hadj Abdou & Zardo, 2026; Hamlin, 2021). As Bourdieu (1991) reminds us, institutional acts of naming and classification constitute profound forms of symbolic power that hierarchically order social reality. When migration scholars uncritically adopt these institutional labels, they risk falling into what Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) term "methodological nationalism"—reproducing state-centric agendas rather than uncovering actual social dynamics.

Crucially, this top-down governmentality is exercised not only by homeland states seeking to mobilize their expatriates but also by host nation-states. Germany provides a striking illustration of this dual categorization: the administrative introduction of the term people with a migration background (*Menschen mit Migrationshintergrund*) in 2005 permanently classifies individuals according to migratory origin even generations after naturalization. Similarly, institutional frameworks such as the German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*) actively produce symbolic hierarchies among Türkiye-origin populations by recognizing certain Alevi groups as legitimate religious communities while frequently framing Sunni-oriented organizations (such as DITIB) through the lens of security and foreign geopolitical interference. These state-imposed classifications do not merely describe empirical diversity; they actively fragment, govern, and reshape the social boundaries of dispersed communities.

To escape this governmentality trap, neither "Turkish" nor "diaspora" can be treated as a self-evident, administrative, or essentialist category. Both are historically contingent, politically contested, and continuously reconstructed through competing claims of representation. Therefore, this study consciously rejects categories derived from state policies, bureaucratic labels, or top-down governance frameworks. Instead, it adopts a grounded sociological approach that conceptualizes the Turkish diaspora from below as a living transnational social formation reproduced through intergenerational boundary maintenance and everyday community building.

Viewed from this sociological perspective, diasporic formations challenge Tönnies' (2001) classical prediction that modern, fragmented societies (*Gesellschaft*) would inevitably dissolve traditional communal bonds (*Gemeinschaft*). As Delanty (2018) argues, the human need for belonging persists under modern conditions and, in diasporic contexts, is expressed through what Sheffer (2003) describes as being "at home abroad." Yet this sense of community depends not simply on spatial proximity but on shared symbolic and ideological frameworks (Cohen, 1985). As Habermas (1984) and Hall (1996) argue, these forms of belonging are sustained through symbolic boundaries, as collective identity is continuously constructed through the distinction between "us" and "them."

Applying this sociological lens reveals that classical migration studies—long dominated by a Herderian ontology that treats ethnic groups as naturally bounded entities possessing an immutable culture and solidarity—fail to capture the fluidity of contemporary diasporas (Wimmer, 2013). Grounding the analytical framework in Andreas Wimmer's (2008a, 2013) boundary-making theory, this article conceptualizes Turkish identity within the diaspora not as a fixed cultural essence but as a relational boundary continuously constructed, contested, and negotiated within institutional structures and power relations. Rather than asking what ethnicity is, this article focuses on how, when, and by whom these symbolic boundaries are strategically drawn (Wimmer, 2008a). Within European host societies, "Turkishness" operates as an adaptable, negotiable category through which actors actively position themselves (Wimmer, 2008b). Depending on the sociopolitical context, these boundaries may expand—such as by merging with a broader Muslim identity to combat Islamophobia through strategies of "value transformation"—or narrow internally to protect the community's public legitimacy (Wimmer, 2009).

3. The Characteristics of the Turkish Diaspora

3.1 Distinctiveness

Within diaspora theory, distinctiveness constitutes a relational field of identity whereby a dispersed population systematically preserves its symbolic boundaries within the host society while simultaneously differentiating its collective self-understanding from that of the homeland society (Wimmer, 2008a, 2013). In the context of the Turkish diaspora in Western Europe, this distinctiveness is forged at the intersection of minority consciousness, structured migration experiences, and the daily negotiations of multicultural life. Crucially, as research on third-generation Turkish diaspora members demonstrates (Iyi, 2021; Iyi & Cebe, 2024; Iyi, 2025a, in press), Turkish identity in the diaspora is not a static, essentialist extension of the nation-state. Rather, it operates through what Wimmer terms "relational boundary-making"—an evolving identification intrinsically connected to the institutional landscapes, geographies, and languages of the host country. Among younger generations, this distinctiveness rejects rigid ethnic categorization in favor of hybrid cultural positioning. Everyday expressions such as "I do not want to fit into a single category," comparisons of belonging to choosing between one's mother and father, or descriptions of oneself as a "bridge" between societies directly reflect Safran's (2004) and Clifford's (1994) conceptualizations of diasporas as populations consciously navigating multiple social worlds. Consequently, younger generations frequently emphasize that their understanding of Turkishness differs fundamentally from that of citizens living in Türkiye, underscoring that diasporic distinctiveness is an active, locally situated construction.

At the macro-theoretical level, the Turkish diaspora differs from classical diaspora models in the source of its collective distinctiveness. Foundational studies (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991; Sheffer, 2003) argue that the cohesion and continuity of classic "victim diasporas" are rooted in collective trauma and historical persecution. In the Jewish or Armenian cases, for example, memories of the Holocaust and the events of 1915 continue to shape diasporic consciousness, political mobilization, and collective organization across generations. Because these diasporas are sustained through institutionalized memory, scholars such as Sheffer (2003) assign relatively limited importance to the preservation of the ancestral language. However, the Turkish diaspora in Western Europe emerged under very different historical conditions. Formed through post-war labor migration rather than forced displacement, its collective distinctiveness is not based on a shared experience of trauma. Instead, it relies more heavily on the preservation of language and cultural practices to maintain collective identity across generations. In this context, Turkish functions as a key medium through which cultural belonging, community life, and even religious identity are transmitted from one generation to the next.

While labor migrants of the 1960s constitute the historical core of this linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, subsequent migration waves have continuously reshaped the Turkish diaspora's boundaries and institutional profile. From the 1970s onward, the arrival of political exiles, intellectuals, students, and skilled professionals introduced new forms of organization, activism, and social capital. As Iyi (2025b) shows, leftist intellectuals and activists who migrated to Sweden in the 1970s and 1980s strengthened the diaspora's rights-based and trade-union traditions. Likewise, female university students who settled in Vienna after

being excluded from higher education in Türkiye because of headscarf restrictions expanded the intellectual and organizational capacity of the Turkish community through associations such as WONDER (Iyi, 2025a). More recently, the post-2013 migration of highly educated professionals further diversified the diaspora by bringing new forms of human capital, digital activism, and civil society engagement, broadening the representation of Turkishness beyond its labor-migration origins.

These later migration waves have strengthened the Turkish diaspora by bringing new human capital, political experience, and organizational capacity. At the same time, they have also introduced new political and ideological divisions, reflecting what Baser (2015) describes as "imported conflicts." Unlike the labor migrants of the 1960s, many later arrivals left Türkiye under political, religious, or social circumstances that they themselves perceived as compelling. Although these migration waves differed in their religious and ideological backgrounds—including political activists in the 1970s and 1980s, more religiously conservative groups during the 1990s and 2000s, and highly educated secular professionals after 2013—they shared migration experiences shaped primarily by political or social motivations rather than economic ones. These different migration experiences have diversified the internal composition of the Turkish diaspora. While later cohorts have expanded its intellectual resources, organizational capacity, and public engagement, they have also carried political tensions from Türkiye into European contexts. For example, many post-2013 migrants have distanced themselves from established labor-origin (Ağca-Varoğlu, 2020) or conservative diaspora organizations, creating new social, political, and class-based divisions within the diaspora.

This distinction is sociologically significant because migration experiences influence not only who joins the diaspora but also how it develops and becomes distinctive over time. As discussed in the following sections, these later cohorts have reshaped the diaspora's orientation toward both the homeland and the host country, as well as its strategies of preservation, forms of organization, and patterns of participation. At the same time, they have introduced new internal boundaries without altering the Turkish diaspora's founding sociological character, which remains rooted in labor migration and is reproduced primarily through language and cultural continuity.

As Yaldız (2019) argues, maintaining a shared diasporic consciousness is essential to prevent political differences from weakening collective solidarity. In this process, diaspora organizations and community leaders play an important role in bridging ideological, class, and generational divides. Although successive waves of political, educational, and economic migration have broadened the diaspora's social and intellectual resources and diversified its public profile, they have not altered its founding sociological logic. Unlike classical trauma-based diasporas, the Turkish diaspora continues to derive its distinctiveness from the intergenerational transmission of language, cultural heritage, and a shared sense of belonging.

3.2 Orientation

While distinctiveness explains the sociological foundations that give the diaspora its specific character, orientation concerns the direction of its ties to the homeland. In classical diaspora theory, homeland orientation is largely understood as a commitment to return to and restore

a lost homeland (Safran, 1991). The Turkish diaspora, however, differs from this return-oriented model. For most settled Turkish communities in Europe, orientation no longer takes the form of a desire to return permanently but is instead expressed through continuing emotional, symbolic, and political ties with Türkiye. As Vertovec (1997) argues, this creates a transnational way of life in which diaspora members are integrated into their European host societies while remaining closely connected to developments in Türkiye. These ties become particularly visible during periods of crisis. Following the devastating earthquakes of 6 February 2023, for example, Turkish communities across Europe rapidly mobilized humanitarian support, temporarily setting aside internal political differences in response to a shared sense of responsibility toward the homeland.

The form of homeland orientation is closely linked to the reasons for migration. Diasporas may direct their activities toward the homeland in different ways. Some seek to support it through cultural ties, economic contributions, humanitarian assistance, or political cooperation. Others adopt a more critical orientation and seek to influence or place pressure on the homeland government through advocacy, rights claims, lobbying, and public protest.

Communities formed through forced migration, political exile, or collective trauma are more likely to develop a pressure-oriented relationship with the homeland. Their political engagement is often shaped by memories of violence, exclusion, or unresolved claims that are transmitted across generations. This pattern can be observed among Alevi and Kurdish diaspora organizations in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and France. Following the 1993 Madımak incident, for example, Alevi organizations in Europe expanded their legal and political campaigns, contributing to the formal recognition of Alevism as a public religious community (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*) in Austria and several German federal states. Likewise, during the events in Ayn al-Arab in 2014, Kurdish diaspora organizations mobilized to influence the responses of European governments.

This trauma-based orientation also shapes how diaspora members act in their host countries. It often encourages second- and third-generation members to become active in politics, civil society, and academia. Political figures of Türkiye origin, such as Berivan Aslan in Austria, Dilan Yeşilgöz in the Netherlands, and Sevim Dağdelen and Canan Bayram in Germany, illustrate how diaspora actors can influence public debate and policies toward Türkiye. At the same time, this strong political orientation creates a risk of dual instrumentalization. Studies of diaspora governance mainly examine how homeland governments seek to use citizens abroad as sources of soft power or electoral support (Baser & Ozturk, 2020; Mencutek & Baser, 2018). Yet host states may also use politically dissident or trauma-oriented diaspora groups to place pressure on the homeland government. Thus, although mature diasporas can develop political autonomy from both sides (Sheffer, 2003), this autonomy remains vulnerable to attempts by host and homeland states to shape diaspora action for their own foreign policy interests.

Diasporic orientation is not fixed but changes over time in response to developments in both the homeland and the host country. Longitudinal research on the Turkish diaspora in North Rhine-Westphalia between 1999 and 2019 (Sauer, 2020) shows that feelings of belonging and homeland orientation are shaped by changing political and social conditions. According to Sauer (2020), the growing securitization and stigmatization of the Turkish

diaspora in Germany following the 2016 coup attempt weakened attachment to Germany while strengthening symbolic and political ties to Türkiye. Likewise, the rise of far-right movements and Islamophobia across Western Europe has reinforced homeland orientation by making many diaspora members feel less accepted in their host societies.

Because mature diasporas develop rooted, multilayered forms of belonging, subjecting them to zero-sum demands for loyalty creates profound sociopolitical friction. Homeland regimes frequently expect unconditional political and economic loyalty during national crises, while host societies demand absolute ideological conformity as evidence of "successful integration." For instance, during recent public debates surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Germany, Turkish diaspora members have faced intense pressure to align unconditionally with host-state discourses, fearing public stigmatization or accusations of antisemitism if they voice critical perspectives (Iyi, 2025a; Iyi, in press). Conversely, within Türkiye itself, the expansion of external voting rights and the increasing visibility of the European diaspora during national elections and economic downturns have triggered a substantial domestic backlash. Public resentment, manifested in anti-diaspora discourse and populist demands for a "diaspora tax," reflects a rigid homeland expectation that expatriates must continuously "pay" for their ongoing orientation toward the nation. Navigating these competing, dual hegemonic expectations without sacrificing their autonomous social standing within the host society represents the core challenge of contemporary Turkish diasporic orientation.

3.3 Preservation

Preservation refers to the processes through which the Turkish diaspora maintains and transmits the distinctive features that sustain it across generations. In diaspora theory, the continuity of a dispersed community depends on its ability to sustain language, culture, and shared practices despite the pressures of assimilation (Cohen, 1997; Safran, 1991). In the Turkish diaspora, preservation is therefore not simply the passive retention of traditions but an ongoing process of cultural reproduction. Consistent with Wimmer's (2013) boundary-making framework, it is through these everyday practices that collective boundaries are maintained across generations. Families, Turkish-language education, mosque networks, hometown associations, and communal practices such as weddings, funerals, and religious holidays all contribute to this process.

As discussed in the next section, the need to preserve language, religion, and cultural heritage also shaped the first organizations established by the Turkish diaspora in Western Europe. When labor migrants arrived in the 1960s, they did not initially organize around political lobbying or homeland politics. Instead, their first associations emerged to meet everyday needs, such as creating places of worship, providing halal food, preserving the Turkish language for their children, and maintaining community ties (Abadan-Unat, 2011). In this sense, preservation and organization developed together, as the effort to protect cultural and religious practices laid the foundation for the diaspora's institutional development.

At the center of preservation is the intergenerational transmission of collective and cultural memory. This emphasis on language partly overlaps with Yaldız's (2019) proposal to define the Turkish diaspora primarily in terms of Turkish-speaking communities rather than ethnic

origin. While Yaldız treats language as a defining criterion of diaspora membership, this study approaches it differently. Rather than using language to determine who belongs to the diaspora, it argues that language functions as one of the main mechanisms through which the Turkish diaspora reproduces its collective identity across generations. Unlike some classical diasporas, where the loss of the ancestral language has not necessarily weakened diasporic identity (Sheffer, 2003), the Turkish diaspora relies heavily on the preservation of Turkish across generations. More than a means of daily communication, Turkish connects younger generations to their family histories, cultural heritage, and sense of belonging (Iyi, 2021). Despite increasing linguistic assimilation in Western Europe, families, weekend schools, and community associations continue to play an important role in transmitting the language.

Religion, particularly Islam, is another key element of cultural preservation. In the Turkish diaspora, religious life is closely intertwined with language and culture. Mosque networks and religious associations function not only as places of worship but also as centers of socialization, language transmission, and community life. Because religious education, sermons, and communal activities are largely conducted in Turkish, the preservation of religious identity also depends on linguistic continuity. Together, language and religion reinforce one another, sustaining the Turkish diaspora's cultural continuity across generations.

3.4 Organization

Organization refers to the institutional structures through which the diaspora sustains itself and acts collectively. It differs from preservation, which concerns the transmission of language, culture, and identity, and from participation, which refers to public engagement. In the Turkish diaspora, these organizational structures emerged primarily from below rather than through state direction. Over the past six decades, informal gatherings among labor migrants in train stations, factory cafeterias, and neighborhood coffeehouses gradually developed into a dense network of civil society organizations, mosque federations, educational associations, and hometown associations (Abadan-Unat, 2011). This trajectory differs from state-centered approaches to diaspora governance (Gamlen, 2014; Ragazzi, 2009), which emphasize the role of sending states in organizing diasporas. In the Turkish case, the first organizations emerged to meet everyday social needs, including mutual support, places of worship, and Turkish-language education, long before they became actors in homeland politics or external diplomacy.

A clear example of this bottom-up institutionalization is provided by Iyi's (2025b) study of labor migrants from Bolu who settled in Sweden during the 1960s. Initially, these migrants maintained community ties through informal weekend gatherings. The turning point came after a community member died in a traffic accident and the cost of returning the body to Türkiye exceeded what individual families could afford. This shared challenge led to the creation of a mutual-aid fund, which later provided the foundation for one of the first Turkish diaspora organizations in Sweden. The case illustrates that early diaspora institutions emerged not from political mobilization but from everyday social needs and solidarity. This early organizational model shaped the historical development of the Turkish diaspora across Europe. Many mosque federations, hometown associations, and community organizations established during this period remain important actors today. Since the 2000s, however, the

organizational landscape has become more diverse with the growth of professional networks, women's organizations, student associations, and academic initiatives (Kaya & Kentel, 2005).

Diaspora organizations also adapt to changing political and institutional conditions in their host countries. In recent years, many Turkish diaspora organizations have reduced the visibility of their institutional ties with Türkiye in response to stricter regulations on foreign funding, growing concerns about foreign influence, and increased public scrutiny across Western Europe. This shift reflects a practical effort to maintain organizational legitimacy, access local funding, and strengthen their position within European civil society. Rather than remaining fixed institutions, Turkish diaspora organizations have continuously adapted to changing host-country environments while maintaining their representative and community functions.

3.5 Participation

Participation refers to the ways in which the diaspora engages with the public sphere. Unlike orientation, which concerns the direction of homeland attachment, participation focuses on how diasporic communities translate their collective identity and organizational capacity into civic, political, social, and cultural engagement in both the host country and the homeland. Participation does not mean that every member of the diaspora is continuously active in politics, civil society, or community organizations. Consistent with Sheffer's (2003) concept of the "silent diaspora," many diaspora members remain passive in everyday life. For this reason, diaspora participation should be understood not only through routine organizational activities but also through the community's capacity to mobilize when confronted with important social, political, or legal developments.

At such moments, diaspora organizations, community leaders, lawyers, academics, and other public figures play an important mobilizing role (Baser, 2015). A recent example is the debate in Austria over the proposed headscarf ban in 2025 (Iyi, 2025a). The proposal, which sought to prohibit girls under the age of fourteen from wearing headscarves in schools, generated widespread concern among Muslim communities over religious freedom and equal rights. In response, Turkish and other Muslim civil society organizations launched legal campaigns and public petitions and engaged in institutional dialogue. These efforts encouraged many previously inactive members of the diaspora to participate in public debate and rights-based advocacy, demonstrating that diaspora participation often becomes most visible during periods of political or legal contestation (Iyi, 2025a).

Participation also varies according to the historical origins of a diaspora. As discussed in the previous sections, diasporas shaped by forced migration, political exile, or collective trauma often develop more confrontational forms of participation, including lobbying, public protest, strategic litigation, and efforts to influence host-country policies toward the homeland (Baser, 2015; Sheffer, 2003; Yaldız, 2019). The core Turkish diaspora in Western Europe followed a different path. Because it emerged through labor migration rather than forced displacement, its early forms of participation focused primarily on everyday integration, community solidarity, language preservation, and cultural continuity rather than political lobbying or confrontation. In this sense, much of the Turkish diaspora resembled what

Sheffer (2003) describes as a "silent diaspora," remaining largely latent in the political sphere while maintaining a strong social and cultural presence.

This pattern, however, has gradually changed. The emergence of younger and better-educated generations, together with the growing visibility of far-right movements, Islamophobia, and other forms of exclusion in Europe, has encouraged the Turkish diaspora to participate more actively in both host-country and homeland affairs. As the Austrian headscarf debates illustrate, rights-based mobilization increasingly complements the diaspora's traditional focus on cultural preservation and community life. Participation, therefore, should be understood as a dynamic process that evolves in response to changing political conditions without altering the Turkish diaspora's labor-migration origins or its language- and culture-based foundations.

Concluding Remarks

Since the early 2000s, Türkiye's engagement with its diaspora has become increasingly institutionalized. Yet, as this study has shown, these state initiatives did not create the Turkish diaspora but engaged with communities that had already emerged through decades of migration, settlement, and institution-building. This distinction is essential for understanding the Turkish diaspora as a sociological phenomenon rather than simply a policy category. Drawing on Wimmer's boundary-making approach, this article has argued that the Turkish diaspora should be understood through the social processes that sustain it rather than through broad political or demographic labels. Examining the Turkish case through five interrelated characteristics—distinctiveness, orientation, preservation, organization, and participation—demonstrates that diaspora is neither synonymous with migration nor reducible to citizenship, ethnicity, or state policy. Instead, it is a socially reproduced, transnational formation whose boundaries are continuously maintained and renegotiated across generations. From this perspective, seven broader conclusions emerge:

First, the Turkish diaspora is not an artificial foreign policy apparatus designed from above by the sending state. Although sending states increasingly target expatriates through soft-power public diplomacy and external voting mechanisms, the core of the Turkish diaspora in Europe emerged through bottom-up social processes, grassroots solidarity, and collective organizational practices decades before the state established formal diaspora engagement policies. Reducing this formation to an ideological extension of the homeland state ignores its historical depth and sociological autonomy.

Second, the Turkish diaspora is not merely a formal legal category defined by passports or citizenship status. Legal citizenship and diasporic social belonging do not inherently overlap. Individuals who formally renounced Turkish citizenship or acquired Mavi Kart (Blue Card) status for bureaucratic or socioeconomic integration in host countries often maintain profound emotional, linguistic, and cultural attachments to Türkiye. Therefore, the diaspora must be theorized as a transnational social community structured through collective belonging, shared cultural practices, and dense social networks rather than formal legal status alone.

Third, the Turkish diaspora is not a homogeneous, monolithic ethnic bloc. It encompasses diverse social experiences, ideological orientations, class structures, and generational identities. From an anti-essentialist perspective, diasporic boundaries are neither static nor impermeable; they are continuously negotiated and reshaped within the varying political opportunity structures of host societies. The Turkish diaspora must therefore be understood as a pluralistic social field in which multiple identities, regional histories, and political stances coexist and interact in an ongoing process of negotiation.

Fourth, the Turkish diaspora is not a classical "victim diaspora" formed solely through traumatic exile or collective expulsion. Unlike the paradigmatic Jewish or Armenian historical experiences that shaped early diaspora typologies, the core of the Turkish diaspora in Europe emerged primarily through voluntary, economically motivated labor migration. Economic motivations, incremental family reunification, and permanent settlement—rather than collective historical trauma—constitute its primary sociological foundation. Consequently, for the contemporary diaspora, the homeland functions less as a literal, physical destination for permanent return than as a vital symbolic reference point through which collective identity is reproduced across generations.

Fifth, the Turkish diaspora is no longer a temporary demographic condition of *gurbetçilik*. The contemporary reality is no longer one of temporary guest workers living with packed suitcases and waiting to return home. What exists today is an enduring, multigenerational transnational social formation that is actively integrated into the civic, economic, and institutional landscapes of European host societies while simultaneously maintaining durable, negotiated ties with Türkiye.

Sixth, not every group originating from Türkiye automatically constitutes part of the Turkish diaspora. A dispersed population becomes a diaspora not simply because it shares a common country of origin or migratory experience but because it reproduces itself through the interconnected sociological processes discussed in this article: distinctiveness, orientation, preservation, organization, and participation. These dimensions should therefore be understood not as descriptive attributes but as analytical criteria that distinguish an enduring diasporic formation from temporary, fragmented, or purely transnational populations.

Finally, successive migration waves should not be understood as automatically redefining the Turkish diaspora. Although politically, religiously, or socially motivated migration since the 1970s has diversified the diaspora's internal composition, these later cohorts become part of the Turkish diaspora only insofar as they are incorporated into and reproduce its existing sociological foundations. Their arrival may reshape patterns of orientation, preservation, organization, and participation, but it does not by itself create a new diaspora or replace the labor-migration foundations upon which the Turkish diaspora historically emerged.

This article seeks to relocate the analysis of diaspora within a sociological framework that explains how diasporic formations are reproduced across generations. Rather than classifying diasporas according to their historical origins or ideal types, as in Cohen's (1997) typology, emphasizing ethnonational communities as the principal unit of analysis, as in Sheffer's (2003) framework, or defining diaspora primarily through Brubaker's (2005) three constitutive characteristics, this article proposes five interrelated analytical dimensions—distinctiveness, orientation, preservation, organization, and participation—as a sociological framework for

analyzing diaspora formation and continuity. This framework shifts the analytical focus from the origins of migration to the mechanisms through which diasporas sustain themselves over time. In doing so, it extends diaspora theory beyond its predominant emphasis on trauma-centered cases by demonstrating that labor-migration diasporas, particularly the Turkish diaspora, develop their own distinctive sociological dynamics, boundary-making processes, and forms of intergenerational reproduction.

This study also has several limitations that point to areas for future research. First, the proposed framework is based primarily on the Turkish diaspora in continental Western Europe, particularly Germany, Austria, France, and the Netherlands. Although these countries constitute the historical and institutional core of the Turkish diaspora, future studies should examine whether the same framework applies in other contexts, including North America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Gulf states, where migration histories and host-country conditions differ. Second, further research is needed to examine how post-2013 migration has reshaped the Turkish diaspora. More attention should be given to the relationship between established labor-migration institutions and newer groups of highly educated professionals, including their organizational practices, digital engagement, and interactions with existing diaspora organizations. Finally, as the Turkish diaspora reaches its fourth and fifth generations, longitudinal and ethnographic research will be important for understanding how digital technologies influence language transmission, cultural continuity, and homeland attachment among younger generations.

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