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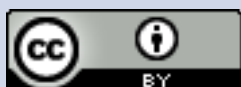
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The Human Rights Action Plan and the Representation of Turkey's Non-Muslim Minorities

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Abstract

In March 2021, Turkey's president announced a new Human Rights Action Plan (HRAP), supported by the Council of Europe, to reform the judiciary system and strengthen democratic participation. Although the human rights claims of Kurds and Alevis have been prominent, the HRAP mentions neither by name. Instead, it includes articles about improving the rights of religious minorities by fighting discrimination and hate and to advance pluralism, revising the Foundations Law regarding the establishment and election of boards of directors of non-Muslim community associations, and providing leave for religious holidays regardless of faith. Given the current distrust between non-Muslim groups and the Turkish state, this study analysed the political attitudes of Turkey's non-Muslim minorities to understand how they develop creative solutions to protect their rights. To do so, we interviewed Armenian deputies in Turkey's parliament and prominent figures from the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Jewish communities, and also reviewed in-depth the minority deputies' parliamentary work between 2015 and 2021. We found that the HRAP was widely discussed by both minority and opposition parliamentary deputies. However, they did not strongly welcome any of its provisions because the government had previously ignored or delayed their demands. As a result, while the new foundations law announced in June 2022 created hope for democratic representation, the law also reflects the

Turkish state's historical distrust of minorities, and with its constraints on election districts the process turned to a bittersweet joy.

Keywords: *2021 Human Rights Action Plan; 2022 foundation elections regulation; religious minorities; Turkey; Justice and Development Party.*

Introduction

In March 2021, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey's president and chair of the ruling JDP (Justice and Development Party-AK Party) unveiled the Human Rights Action Plan (HRAP), prepared under the vision of “freer individuals, stronger communities, a more democratic Turkey”, to reform the judiciary system and strengthen democratic participation (AA, 2021, March 2). Although the human rights claims of Kurds and Alevis have been prominent, the HRAP mentioned neither by name. Instead, it included articles about improving the rights of non-Muslim communities. “As a state that has long embraced people of all faiths and backgrounds”, Erdoğan said, “Turkey is revising the Foundations Law on the establishment and election of board of directors of non-Muslim community associations” (AA, 2021, March 2). Emphasizing his government's determination to fight discrimination and hate, as well as to advance pluralism based on a shared history, culture, and civilization, he continued, “We are preparing investigation guidelines on hate crimes and we aim to ensure a more robust collection of statistics and data by enhancing our capacity and training”. Erdoğan also declared that both public and private sector workers and students would now be allowed leave for religious holidays, regardless of their faith, whereas previously only Islamic religious holidays had been recognized.

The HRAP, which was later financed and supported by the Council of Europe, began in 2019 after Turkey implemented the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), particularly Articles 5 (right to liberty and security), 6 (right to a fair trial), and 10 (freedom of expression) (Council of Europe, n.d.). After the JDP presented the plan, opposition party members criticized it, particularly in the phrase “Ne kadar fon, o kadar hak” (the more funds, the more rights) (Medyaport.net, 2021) implying that the implementation and protection of human rights in Turkey depends on external funding and pressure from international organizations. PDP's [Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP) / People's Democrat Party (PDP)] Ankara deputy Filiz Kerestecioğlu also stated, “Before your funded action plan, you owe the peoples of Turkey a serious apology.” In August 2021, Garo Paylan, an Armenian-Christian deputy for the pro-Kurdish PDP criticized the government for including an article in the HRAP

allowing minority foundations to conduct elections when the government had previously repealed this regulation on 19 January 2013. That is, “the right of the minorities to vote is being ignored” (Duvar, 2021). A few months later, Erdoğan published his book *A Fairer World is Possible*, which highlighted global political dilemmas, particularly injustices, the refugee crisis, international terrorism, and Islamophobia, and exposing discrimination and double standards, particularly in the United Nations (Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications (2021, September 5). However, in contrast to the USA’s report on human rights practices in Turkey, he wrote almost nothing about injustices in Turkey faced by religious and ethnic minorities, opposition politicians, human rights activists, journalists, or NGO members (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, n.d.).

Consequently, although the HRAP included rights and protection for minorities, such as preventing hate crimes and discrimination, recognizing their religious holidays, and allowing election of boards of directors for their community associations, Turkey’s minorities did not welcome the promises because the government had previously ignored and delayed these demands. Furthermore, although various parties have non-Muslim parliamentarians (Ozerkan, 2015), the government ignored them while preparing the HRAP. Hence, the HRAP was considered insincere because its promises failed to match reality (Danzikyan, 2021). As a result, while the new regulation on community foundations announced in June 2022 (Official Gazette, 18 June 2022, no. 31870) opened the way for democratic representation, its constraints on election districts and the number of nominated candidates (Article 6, 7, 8, 9) meant that the law was found to be more restrictive than the previous ones (Bianet, 2022a).

Regarding ethnopolitics and minority issues, the HRAP – and minorities’ attitudes towards it – highlight several key factors in majority-minority relations. Firstly, while Turkey’s non-Muslim population¹ is too small (see Table 1) to express their problems and demands effectively, the HRAP included articles to improve and protect their rights. Secondly, the HRAP confirms that Turkey’s minorities are still considered a threat to Turkey’s national unity and they encounter hate speech and actions based on majority nationalism although they are no longer a significant economic and political force. Thirdly, after taking power in 2002, the JDP was initially supported by minorities for its pluralistic, pro-EU discourse emphasizing freedom of belief as well as policies like returning foundation properties to minorities and allowing foundation elections (Grigoriadis, 2008). However, the transition to strong presidentialism weakened institutions (Selçuk, 2016) and checks-and-balance organs such as the national assembly and civil society organizations. This also harmed the institutionalization (and Europeanization) of minority rights, which are essential to prevent policies that discriminate

against minorities (Grigoriadis, 2021). Fourthly, during the JDP's almost 20 years in power, its discourses and actions changed from a pluralist to a majoritarian perspective, from a multi-ethnic to an anti-ethnic regime, and from conservative democrat to Islamic nationalist (Esen & Gümüşcü, 2016; Cilliler, 2021). Accordingly, non-Muslim communities' attitudes and support for the government also changed.

Besides legal rights, what determines minorities' social integration and political participation in their home states? Does their political, economic, and social presence affect their substantive representation or enjoyment of their rights? What strategies do they develop to maintain their status? This study, which focuses mainly on the democratic representation of minorities at national and community level, addresses these questions by investigating the political and social attitudes of Turkey's minorities regarding the HRAP and analysing the application of the new foundations law based on the HRAP regarding the establishment and election of boards of directors of non-Muslim community associations.

Scholars of ethnic politics have long studied how minorities' socio-economic strength affects their relationship with their national regimes. Depending on the state's domestic and foreign policies, minorities develop various strategies to protect themselves in life-threatening or repressive contexts (Barth, 1969; Bird, 2003). These include subduing their identity and demands, retreating from politics, cooperating with the central government, seeking protection from kin-states, participating more in social life, or emigrating to countries offering better access to economic and political resources. Some scholars insist that universal values and rights should be forced on states and believe in increasing multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 1995), whereas some anthropologists (Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 1993) highlight the impact of interaction between majority and minority groups. Some emphasize cultural factors and the historical perceptions of the public or the new nation-states regarding ethnic and religious minorities (Todorova, 1997; Mylonas, 2012). For others, their participation depends on institutional factors (Bird, 2003) while kin-states also influence ethnic policies and nationalism (Brubaker, 1996; Van Houten, 1998). Finally, group psychology and minority-majority tensions add another factor (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

It is, however, unclear how much factors explaining the status of minorities can also explain their behaviours and perspectives. This study addresses this problem concerning a specific document (the HRAP) through interviews and surveys with members of Turkey's non-Muslim minorities. The study combines historical, institutional, and cultural approaches to understand minority attitudes and perceptions under Turkey's currently highly polarized structure. Following the national election on 7 June 2015, non-Muslim deputies entered

parliament for the first time in 50 years (excluding the Jewish MP Cefi Jozef Kamhi who served between 1996-1999), which makes the political behaviour of minorities more observable.

The following section briefly reviews the literature on Turkey's minorities since the end of the Ottoman state. The second section focuses on the transformation of minority-state relations after the JDP took power and during EU harmonization. It analyses interviews with minority MPs and prominent minority community figures to understand their alignment and later de-alignment with the JDP. The third section presents the articles in the HRAP and the demands of minority foundations, as well as the problems experienced after the annulment of the old regulation. By analysing parliamentary debates and minority newspaper reports before and after the announcement of the HRAP, it reveals the attitudes of minority members and other actors towards the HRAP. The final section analyses the process and perception of the new election law for foundation management promised by the HRAP by scanning printed and online media, and discusses the institutionalization of minority rights under Turkey's new presidential system which is based on collective over individual rights.

1. Demographic changes in Turkey's non-Muslim communities and the state's historical attitude

Religious belief was the main factor determining social status in Ottoman society, with only two classes: Muslim and non-Muslim. The Ottoman Empire during the rule of Mehmet the II (known as Conqueror) in 15th cc. adopted the *millet system* to manage its diverse communities, based on non-territorial autonomy that gave cultural, organizational, and legal privileges to religious communities (Adanır, 2003; Shaw & Shaw 1977). Although the republican state which was founded in 1923 was secular, Kemalists viewed Christians as a distinct ethno-religious community and pursued an anti-ethnic regime that excluded ethnicity from the nation's definition (Aktürk, 2013). Thus, despite the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne's generous protective provisions, republican Turkey proved rather inhospitable for its non-Muslim minorities while other non-Turkish Muslim groups and Balkan immigrants faced assimilation policies.

In order to build a nation-state and nationalize the economy, republicans restricted non-Muslim minorities to reduce their influence on Istanbul's economic, social, and cultural life, including travel bans, non-return of Lausanne Treaty' exchangees, inheritance and property acquisition limits, clothing restrictions for religious officials, and obstacles to becoming a public servant (Eligür, 2019; Çağaptay, 2002). According to Zürcher (2010, p. 60), the Young

Turks, who succeeded the Committee of Union and Progress (which ruled the empire from 1913 to 1918), continued to see non-Muslims as a separate element during the transition to the republic.

Table 1. Population of Muslims and national minorities in Turkey, 1927-2005

Census year	Muslim	Romioi Orthodox	Armenian Gregorian	Jewish
1927	13,269,606	109,905	77,433	81,672
1945	18,497,801	103,839	69,260	76,965
1955	22,804,048	86,665	60,071	45,995
1965	31,129,854	73,725	69,526	38,267
2005	72,000,000	3,000	50,000	27,000
2015	78,530,000	2,800-4,000	50,000-70,000	20,000- 23,000

Sources: Data for 1927-1965 are from Dündar (2000); statistics for 2005 are from Çağatay (2006).

Non-Muslim minorities faced persistent discrimination throughout the Republican era; although there were many non-Muslim parliamentary deputies until the 1960 military coup, the transition from millet to minority membership imposed second-class citizen status on them (Taşkın, 2019). Strategies to preserve minority cultural and religious identities were crucial but very difficult to implement because minority populations fell dramatically after the Republic was established (see Table 1). Through the 1974 decision of the General Civil Council of the Turkish Court of Cassations (*Yargıtay*), which considered a written declaration (*beyanname*) of immovable properties requested by the Turkish authorities and submitted by the pious foundations in 1936 to be their bylaws, pious foundations were deemed unable to acquire additional property after 1936 (Kurban and Tsitselikis, 2010, pp. 12-13). Despite the declining population of minorities, in addition to their religious institutions such as Patriarchates, the properties, foundations and associations belonging to these communities continued to survive. According to the Directorate General of Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü, VGM) there are at present 167 community foundations belonging to non-Muslim minorities in Turkey, including 77 Romioi, 54 Armenian, 19 Jewish, 10 Assyrian, 3 Chaldean, 2 Bulgarian, 1 Georgian, and 1 Maronite (Maruni).²

While the management of these foundations becomes very difficult for the communities because of their diminished populations, the state's will to prevent religious authorities from

controlling these communities and their economic resources could be observed in the policies and regulations regarding the foundation election laws. Moreover, in order to sustain their power, it has also been realized that for many years minority parliamentarians and senior religious institutions like the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Patriarchates avoided any public statements or activities that could be interpreted as anti-government. This silence was finally challenged during political reforms that reshaped Turkey's public sphere after December 1999, when Turkey was named as an EU candidate state. Through new legislation, it became possible to lift some obstacles that the minority pious foundations had and it again became possible to acquire immovable property. However, EU harmonization could not deter long-term emigration by non-Muslim communities due to political and economic turmoil in Turkey starting in 2013 and the jeopardizing of EU-Turkey relations (Bali, 2018).

2. The impact of EU harmonization: Liberal multiculturalism and the JDP's reforms

At the EU's 1999 Helsinki Summit, Turkey was declared a "candidate state destined to join the Union on the basis of the same criteria as applied to the other candidate states" (European Parliament, 1999). By offering a clear membership prospect, the EU increased its impact on Turkey's political Europeanization since the government now had a strong incentive for democratization and political reforms in order to gain full EU membership by fulfilling the latter's political conditions, the Copenhagen criteria. Accordingly, several political reform packages were introduced between 2001 and 2004, focusing on the increased legal protection of social, cultural, and political rights for all Turkish citizens, irrespective of religious and ethnic origin, freedom of expression in Turkey, and reducing the role of the military in Turkish politics (Gürsoy, 2008, pp. 304-307).

Reforms regarding non-Muslims were not based on new guarantees and rights, but on trying to abolish previous injustices (Karaosmanoğlu, 2010). In late 2009, for example, a non-Muslim citizen almost became the first to gain a civil service position in Republican history (Kaplan, 2009). One significant reform was the new Code of Foundations, introduced in February 2008 as part of EU integration, which gave foundations rights to buy new property, use their property, and register their existing property (Kurban and Hatemi, 2009, p. 9) which were constrained in 1974. In 2019, the JDP began constructing the first Christian (Syrian-Orthodox) church in modern Turkey, in Istanbul (Daily Subah, 2019). However, while the civil code restricted community foundations, other serious drawbacks remained. Moreover, there were no new regulations to return confiscated property and pay compensation. Although

Turkey guarantees freedom of worship, freedom of religion has been violated on various occasions.

2.1. Minorities' satisfaction with the JDP's reforms

In our interviews, we asked Armenian Christian MPs (Garo Paylan from the PDP and Selina Doğan from the RPP) and other prominent minority community figures³ to explain how much the JDP's reforms satisfied the demands of non-Muslim citizens and addressed the problem of democracy. We also scanned the public statements of minority representatives and newspapers to reveal state-minority relations during the early 2000s. The JDP took power in 2002 with a pluralist and democratic discourse, presenting themselves as victims of previous governments. As victims of these governments, the minority communities sympathized with the JDP; as Paylan describes it, "the victims heard each other" (Interview with Garo Paylan, Ankara, 14.04.2021). Selina Doğan also noted that minority communities initially supported the JDP particularly because of its freedom of belief discourse. However, according to Doğan, the JDP never approached the issue in terms of rights or pluralism, but instead in terms of freedom of belief and religion. Yet even this discourse was important and meaningful for non-Muslim communities (Interview with Selina Dogan, Istanbul, 01.03.2021).

According to Bali, while the support of minority communities was mostly related to favourable JDP policies, such as revising the Foundations Law and returning foundation properties, economic concerns were also involved. As Bali explains, many members of these communities are self-employed or merchants so they support whoever maintains a liberal economy (Interview with Rifat Bali, Istanbul, 26.02.2021). Ivo Molinas argues that the JDP government made some improvements that no other government had done and started returning confiscated foundations and assets (Çakır, 2015). The Patriarchate of Armenians of Turkey's statement, which was made after the HRAP was announced, summarizes this support and its reasons: "the non-Muslim minorities of this country were relieved by the vital initiatives brought by the JDP government and had the opportunity to continue their journey in history with more confidence and peace" (Agos, 5 March 2021). Istefanopulos mentions that minority communities initially supported the JDP regarding relations with the EU, which the Ecumenical Patriarchate supports (Interview with Yorgo Istefanopulos, 27.03.2021).

Mihail Vasiliadis says he came to Turkey on 2 November specifically to vote JDP at the 2002 elections, having lived in Greece from 1975 to 2002: "My thought while doing this was that the JDP needed the protection of the European Union at least as much as I did. Indeed, it was so. The JDP's rhetoric embracing minorities was accompanied by appropriate cadres.

But now I see that both the JDP's rhetoric and cadres that caused me to vote have disappeared" (Birgün, 2017, February 27). Along with solving problems about the foundations and properties, Koptaş lists several other reasons for this support: the opening of new channels of communication, better dialogue with the elected representatives of non-Muslim foundations, and notices sent to ministries to help non-Muslims with their problems they face. However, he also acknowledges that despite being important for these communities, they were done more as favours than from a democratic citizenship perspective (Interview with Rober Koptaş, Istanbul, 04.04.2021).

According to Parkar Estukyan, very few Armenians or citizens from other minorities voted JDP in the 2002 elections. "Afterwards, however, the enthusiastic attitude in the membership negotiations with the EU, the increase in the quality of services in areas such as health services or transportation, the uncompromising and brute resistance of the army and bureaucracy, which represents the traditional statist tutelage, encouraged the support of minorities for this movement in the next election." He notes that the JDP's rhetoric rejected nationalism, with President Erdoğan repeatedly declaring: "We [JDP] have trampled all kinds of nationalism under our feet" (Birgün, 27 Feb. 2017).

The statements of members of the non-Muslim communities reflect that during its first two terms, the JDP administration appeared willing to undo some past injustices and restore some non-Muslim minority rights. It also promoted a more inclusive definition of Turkish national identity that allowed religious and ethnic diversity by discussing a civic definition of Turkishness. It is therefore commonly accepted that the status of non-Muslim minorities improved during the early JDP years.

2.2 From pluralist to majoritarian government: Political polarization and systematic negation

As Turkey's EU membership hopes faded, its liberalization wave receded with discernible democratic backsliding in the early 2010s, although there was no sharp deterioration in the status of Alevis or Kurds (Grigoriadis, 2021). However, religious minorities became silent again, especially following increased polarization after the 2013 Gezi Park events. HDP's Armenian MP Garo Paylan claims there was still pluralist discourse in 2015 as reflected in the election of three Armenian parliamentarians. However, as the atmosphere changed, minority communities began turning to other parties, although many continued voting JDP and supporting its governments. Indeed, in 2018 the President of the Armenian Foundations Union,

Bedros Şirinoğlu, expressed satisfaction with the presidential system. Nevertheless, the JDP's vote share from these communities declined drastically, primarily because of the new polarization dominating Turkish politics.

According to Paylan, this polarization emerged from the JDP's partnership with the MHP and the resulting People's Alliance (Cumhur Ittifaki). As he puts it, once one "owns" this ideology, nationalism, one becomes a slave of this ideology (Haftanın Hayı Huyu, 26 May 2019). Yorgo Istefanopulos sees polarization as the most important problem, both for Turkey and non-Muslim communities. While he acknowledges that Turkey has always been polarized by different issues, he considers the latest polarization as more dangerous as it is based on religion (Interview with Yorgo Istefanopulos, 27.03.2021). With society divided between "us" and "them", people are forced to take sides while minorities are otherized and discriminated against. Similarly, Parkar Estukyan says that polarization and efforts to create the "other" are doubly anxiety-provoking for minorities who are always the "natural and potential other" (Birgün, 27.Feb. 2017). Doğan also says that polarization always needs enemies; these are always very clear in Turkey as minorities can never eliminate the stigma that inevitably makes them victims of polarization (Interview with Selina Dogan, Istanbul, 01.03.2021). Koptaş agrees by stating the ever-present difficulties of living as a non-Muslim minority in Turkey intensify in complicated times. Thus, for Koptaş, polarization is closely related to democracy, and being among the most vulnerable social groups, it automatically and directly affects non-Muslims (Interview with Rober Koptaş, Istanbul, 04.04.2021).

Majority-minority relations in today's Turkey are generally characterized by five key factors. First, most minority members currently live in Istanbul or Izmir. Because of their small numbers (around 100,000), it is hard to express their problems and demands. Second, because Turkey's non-Muslim population has diminished drastically due to emigration, pressure, etc., too few remain to preserve their culture and traditions. For example, the Jewish community's Ladino language is now almost extinct while the Western Armenian and Istanbul Greek dialects are endangered. Third, because most Turkish citizens never encounter non-Muslim community members in their daily lives, they are uninformed about their customs and unaware of their problems and demands. Fourth, Turkey's general economic, political, and social problems overshadow minority problems or deprioritize minority demands. Fifth, increased political and social polarization, strong presidentialism, and weakened representative institutions since the 2010s makes it even more difficult for minority groups to remain visible and participate in decision-making.

Therefore, the announcement of the HRAP in 2021 was well-timed to revive democratization, re-establish justice and the rule of law, institutionalize minority rights, and address systematic discrimination. In particular, the HRAP declared that “harmonization with the European Union *acquis* will be accelerated” (Ministry of Justice, 2021 Report), which encouraged hopes that the government was willing to revitalize EU-Turkey relations by emphasizing democracy and human rights.

3. The 2021 Human Rights Action Plan

The HRAP, announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 2 March 2021, includes several aims that directly or indirectly concern minority communities. One of its main principles is that everyone is equal before the law without any discrimination based on language, race, colour, sex, political view, philosophical belief, religion, sect, etc. It explicitly proposes permanent regular meetings with Muslim community representatives “in order to identify problems and develop solutions” (Ministry of Justice, 2021 Report). Within one year, the Regulation on Foundations was supposed to be “amended in so far as relevant to the issue of the composition of and the elections for executive boards of non-Muslim community foundations” (Ministry of Justice, 2021 Report).

Non-Muslim communities are also addressed more generally through articles about “Ensuring enjoyment of the freedom of religion and conscience at the widest extent” and “Improving the effectiveness of the fight against hate speech and discrimination”. To ensure the greatest freedom of religion and conscience, public and private sector employees and students should be granted leave of absence on the holidays of their respective religions; convicts and detainees in penitentiary institutions should be offered additional contact visits and video calls for their respective holidays; and, depending on demand, suitable environments should be established in public buildings and spaces for believers of different religions to fulfil their religious obligations. To strengthen the fight against hate speech and discrimination based on language, religion, race, colour, gender, political thought, philosophical belief, sect, etc., these should be combated effectively. Given that non-Muslim communities are particularly disturbed by the media and, to a certain extent, by education, the HRAP intends to raise awareness about hate speech and discrimination by preparing training and handbooks for media workers. Similarly, it recommends educational materials which embrace all segments of society while being objective, impartial, and pluralistic.

3.1 Minority community reactions to the HRAP

The HRAP has been widely discussed by minority communities at different levels, with both welcoming and suspicious responses. These discussions particularly concern freedom of belief, minority foundation elections, and hate speech. One Turkish Chief Rabbinate Foundation stated on Twitter that they “welcome the announced Human Rights Action Plan, which is closely related to our society, with satisfaction and hope, and hope it will be implemented as soon as possible” (AA, 3 March 2021) while the Patriarchate of Armenians of Turkey quickly welcomed the plan with a detailed statement. In particular, it welcomed the proposed solutions to the legal personality of the Patriarchate, elections to the boards of directors of the foundations, and actions to combat hate speech. It hoped that the step to allow foundation elections would be implemented without delay (Agos, 5 March 2021).

The most important issue for Turkey’s non-Muslim communities is elections for minority foundations, as these are the only institutions responsible for organizing minority communities which have no other legally recognized personality. Elections have not been held since 2013 due to the cancellation and non-renewal of the regulations. This has been a source of great concern for the communities as these foundations cannot function properly without elections. Minority foundations are critical institutions that manage education, health, religious and social affairs, and also provide income for the communities. Laki Vingas therefore considers them “directly related and linked with the well-being of the future of the societies” that are “struggling to exist” (Vingas, 2021). Indeed, the collapse in the non-Muslim population means these communities face an existential crisis. Doğan (Interview with Selina Dogan, Istanbul, 01.03.2021), for example, considers this the most important problem for Turkey’s non-Muslim minorities. She explains that the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic created an unending challenge for non-Muslim communities, both demographically and by threatening the legal structure and basis for their survival. The issue has also affected Turkey-EU relations. Toros Alcan recalls that, when he was the Minority Foundations Representative between 2014 and 2017, he was asked about elections for the European Union Progress Report, noting that “the fact that these elections cannot be held creates an anti-democratic atmosphere” (Agos, 7 December 2017).

As Selina Doğan notes, minority foundations are the only legal entities in Turkey that require government approval to elect their board members (Interview with Selina Dogan, Istanbul, 01.03.2021). As Laki Vingas puts it, “there is no other legal entity group in our country where the right to elect and be elected is so controversial” (Vingas, 2021). However, these community foundations do not all agree or collaborate with each other. Due to the

communities' fragmented structure, the foundations have not developed a common discourse which, according to Doğan, allows the government to interfere. According to Toros Alcan, the lack of action regarding foundation elections may be due to the many events during his three-year term, which poisoned Turkey's atmosphere (Agos, 7 December 2017).

According to Laki Vingas, the cancellation of the election regulations, which was renewed in 2008, did not bother the communities because they assumed that a new one would be more comprehensive while the old regulation was "open to discussion, insufficient and [could not] meet all needs in practice" and led to complaints and reactions "when the gaps in the election regulation in force caused new troubles, social problems in the society and wrong practices reflected in the law" (Vingas, 2021). Therefore minority foundations were actually demanding a new election regulation, having been unable to meet for nine years since its cancellation and the year since the HRAP was announced. This has led to mistrust among the minority communities, who are already disappointed and suspicious about the new regulations and subsequent elections. As Yetvar Danzikyan wrote shortly after the HRAP was announced, "it is difficult to evaluate the promise made to minorities that the regulation for foundation elections is coming without concrete developments" (Danzikyan, 2021).

Hate speech or the systematic negation of certain groups, which is very common in Turkey's mainstream and social media, is another serious problem for minority communities. Hate speech about Turkey's minorities usually appears during crises with their kin-states, namely Greece, Armenia, and Israel, as Selina Doğan notes (Interview with Selina Dogan, Istanbul, 01.03.2021). Whenever there is an issue between Turkey and Armenia, she says, this is blamed on Armenians in Turkey just as every issue with Israel is blamed on Jews in Turkey. For Mihail Vasiliadis, this is nothing new. According to him, the 6-7 September events⁴, were not only sparked by news of Mustafa Kemal's house in Salonica being bombed but also by newspaper reports and commentary six months earlier. He says the same still happens during discussions about Hagia Sophia or, for Armenians, during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020 (Söz ve Yaşam: İstanbul'da Rum kalmak). Rifat Bali reports that Turkey's media swears at the Jews "morning to evening" (Türkiye'de Genç Yahudi olmak, n.d.). These problems are closely related to misinformation about minority communities as the perceptions and the prejudices of Turkish society are among the most important problems facing them. The media plays an important role in disseminating this misinformation. For example, Ivo Molinas sees massive misinformation in Turkey about Jews, which encourages their demonization (Kaya, 2015, November 21).

Vingas describes these problems as a triangle comprising misinformation and prejudice, being considered foreign, and being used politically for international relations. Thus, whenever there is problem between Turkey and a minority kin-state, the community members are considered the other, becoming the “you” in the “us against you” (Sabah Kahvesi). Vingas questions why these ancient communities cannot be considered within Turkey’s “us”. Parkar Estukyan, for example, claims that he has never considered himself a foreigner in Turkey: “Even though some people consider this [country] their own property, assuming I am a foreigner, I never considered myself foreigner” he says (Söz ve Yaşam: “Müslüman mahallesi”nde Ermeni olmak). There is a great problem about seeing minority communities as foreigners associated with their kin-states rather than as peoples of Turkey because they become the focus of every issue between Turkey and these countries, which encourages hate. Ivo Molinas is concerned that nothing has been done to counter anti-Semitism, especially in the media, while young Jews are losing hope due to intense anti-Semitism (Çakır, 2015, September 1). Yet since the HRAP was announced nothing has been done to prevent such hate speech, while other articles have also not been implemented.

3.2 Parliamentary discussions of the HRAP

This study can provide particularly interesting and reliable findings about the political representation of minorities because it follows the general election of 7 June 2015, in which non-Muslim and non-Turkish background candidates won parliamentary seats for the first time in 50 years. The largest non-Muslim parliamentary group is Armenians, which raises the question of whether 2015 was symbolic as the 100th anniversary of 1915. The 25th Turkish parliament included four minority representatives: Selina Doğan, an Armenian lawyer, and Selin Sayek Böke, an economist with an Arab Orthodox background, who stood for the RPP, the secular-nationalist opposition party; Markar Esayan, a journalist with Armenian roots, who ran on the pro-Islamist AKP ticket; and Garo Paylan, an Istanbul Armenian school manager from the pro-Kurdish secular PDP. Following the 2018 elections, the 27th parliament included four non-Muslim MPs: two Assyrian representatives (Tuma Çelik from the PDP, Erol Dora as an independent); and two Yazidi (*Ezidi*)⁵ MPs (Feleknas Uca and Ali Atalan from the PDP) (see Table 2).

3.2.1 The parliamentary work of non-Muslim MPs regarding minority rights

Regarding their parliamentary performance, the JDP minority MPs are not very active about minority rights. Instead, they usually follow JDP policies, which regard the problem as a

general democratic concern rather than an ethnic or religious issue. Esayan even calls PDP's minority-based discussions a "Trojan Horse" that disguises their real aims under the cover of democracy. In contrast, opposition minority MPs are more active in protecting minority rights in education, worship, the management and election of foundations, the use of churches and synagogues, and preventing hate speech and hate crimes. However, whenever these MPs criticized the government or called for improved human and minority rights, both parliament and the media questioned their contacts with their kin-states or international organizations and their ethnic and religious backgrounds. Indeed, since the early republican period, this has been a common reaction by the Turkish state and can be even considered a continuation of the *millet* system.

Table 2. Non-Muslim minority parliamentary deputies, 2015-2021

Name	Ethnicity	Occupation	Place of birth	Represented district- Political party	Term
Selina Özuzun Doğan (female)	Armenian	Lawyer	Istanbul	Istanbul - RPP	8 June 2015 - 24 June 2018 (25 th - 26 th terms)
Selin Sayek Böke (female)	Arab Orthodox	Economist	New York	Izmir - RPP	8 June 2015 - present (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Markar Esayan	Catholic Armenian	Journalist	Istanbul	Istanbul - JDP	8 June 2015-2020 (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Garo Paylan	Armenian	School manager	Istanbul	Istanbul – PDP Diyarbakır - PDP	8 June 2015 - present (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Erol Dora	Assyrian	Lawyer	Şırnak	Mardin - Independent	2011-2018 (24 th - 25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Tuma Çelik	Assyrian	Journalist	Mardin	Mardin - PDP Independent since July 2020	8 June 2015- present (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Feleknaş Uca	Yazidi	Politician/activist	Celle, Germany	Diyarbakır- PDP	8 June 2015- present (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)
Ali Atalan	Yazidi	Politician/activist	Mardin	Mardin - PDP	8 June 2015- present (25 th - 26 th - 27 th terms)

Source: The data is compiled by the authors using the TGNA Website. JDP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party); RPP: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party/RPP); PDP: Halkların Demokratik Partisi (People's Democrat Party).

Minority MPs had already questioned the issues that take place within the HRAP's articles and on several occasions had demanded their implementation. Selina Doğan proposed a law amendment during the short-lived 25th legislative term⁶ on the "annulment of the

regulation regulating the rights of minority foundations to vote and be elected”. During the 26th term, she worked to protect minority rights and the secular state with interpellations regarding “the preparation of a regulation for minority foundations to make elections”, “the obligatory religious culture and ethics course”, “a statement by the President of Religious Affairs and the granting of legal status to Cemevis (the Alevis’ worship house)”, “the Armenian, Jewish, Greek and Syriac population data who are citizens of the Republic of Turkey”, “studies aimed at enabling convicts belonging to different faith groups to exercise their right to worship”, and “official announcements of minority newspapers.”

Interestingly, government ministers responded more to Doğan’s questions than Paylan’s,⁷ who became twice ‘othered’ as an Armenian Christian elected from the pro-Kurdish and far-leftist PDP. Paylan gave several interpellations in the 25th term “regarding the attacks on the Armenian Orphanage in Tuzla/Istanbul”, “hate speech of the Idealist Hearths (Ülkü Ocakları) at Kars Ani during [the Armenian] Tigran Hamasyan’s concert”, and “regarding not collecting tolls from highway and Bosphorus bridges on all religious holidays”. During the 26th term, he worked both in parliament and at street protests to support non-Muslim and other oppressed groups. His efforts in questioning and obtaining justice in the case of Hrant Dink - the Armenian journalist assassinated on 19 January 2007 - shows how Armenian society was deeply affected by this loss. The other interpellations again concerned stereotyping and hate speech towards the Armenian community (and other non-Muslim groups), the government’s reluctance to investigate attacks on minority communities, churches, institutions, and foundation properties, as well as marginalizing their beliefs. Other interpellations were “concerning the conversion of the historical Hagia Sophia into a mosque in Trabzon”, “expressions [hate speech] used in a text published on the official website of the Istanbul Mufti”, “a letter sent to schools by Istanbul Şişli District National Education Directorate to prevent Christmas and New Year’s events from being held”, “a letter sent from the Governorship of Istanbul to the Patriarchate of Armenians of Turkey”, “the transfer of Assyrian churches, monasteries and other properties to the Treasury in Mardin”, “the attack on the Neve Shalom Synagogue on 20 July 2017”, “a banner hung on Balmumcu underpass, Istanbul”, and “the attacks on the Santa Maria Catholic Church in Trabzon.”

These parliamentary interpellations were either completely ignored, delayed by saying the government was already working on it, or evaded by the responsible authorities by referring to related laws and articles. The *Birgün* newspaper reported that during the 27th legislative term, following the transition to the presidential system, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu answered

only 167 of 5,714 questions addressed to his ministry within the required 15 days, 2,724 after the deadline, and ignored the other 2,813. JDP MPs submitted the fewest questions (two) during the 27th term. The Interior Ministry did not answer 716 of the 2,716 questions submitted by the RPP group while the PDP had the most questions ignored, with only 195 of PDP's 2,061 motions responded to and 866 remaining unanswered (Birgün, 2022, May 2).

These figures provide another indication of stronger executive power and weakened institutions (Çillier, 2021). It also explains why minority MPs, media, communities, and other opposition groups found the HRAP insincere. We should note that even in the early republican period, which allowed controlled political representation of minorities, the government responded more responsibly to MPs' parliamentary speeches (Taşkın, 2019). Since the JDP government ignored the opposition, especially HDP, these interpellations and investigation proposals were made to raise awareness, remind people, and record history, rather than produce a result. In contrast, having being mostly ignored, Paylan's proposal on 22 April 2022 to recognize the 1915 events as 'genocide' sparked debate by all parties in both the People's Alliance and Nation Alliance (Hürriyet Daily News, 2022, April 24).

3.2.2 Discussions on the HRAP by opposition and ruling parties

The parliamentary work of the opposition and governing MPs show that the JDP and its alliance partner the NMP used the HRAP to justify the government's positive steps about human rights, whereas opposition MPs mentioned it to reveal the JDP's inconsistency regarding domestic human rights conditions. For example, the main opposition RPP's Denizli MP, Gülizar Biçer Karaca, gave a written interpellation on 15 September 2020 to ask whether "NGOs and academics were consulted in the human rights action plan".⁸ Similarly, on 3 March 2021, just after the announcement of the HRAP, the RPP's Istanbul deputy, Ali Şeker, stated "while this plan you put forward with the funding of the European Union is on the one side, Osman Kavala is still inside" while another Istanbul RPP MP, İbrahim Özden Kaboğlu, claimed on 24 November 2021 that "a Strategy Document and Human Rights Action Plan regarding the judiciary, covering a total of 18 goals, 113 targets and 649 activities in 2019 and 2021, were announced by the President of the JDP. What is the latest situation, what has been done, no one knows ... For this reason, while the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights and the Constitutional Court are not implemented, the right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence are violated in almost every speech of the Alliance Party presidents, and the police beat the head of those who speak out in the country, 'Which reform are you talking about?' ... the president is defending the mafia leaders and siding with the crime and the criminal,

targeting their political opponents with insults and slanders such as ‘terrorists’ [and] ‘traitors’, and trying to intimidate democratic society with fear and threats” (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (2021a). On the same day, PDP’s İzmir MP, Serpil Kemalbay Pekgözegü, criticized the “Human Rights Action Plan ‘comedy’ regarding the state’s attitude in the Kurdish region” (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2021b). Finally, PDP’s Adana MP, Meral Danış Bektaş, also criticized the government for being two-faced as it “does not recognize the ECtHR decision and the Constitutional Court” (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2021c).

In contrast, on 2 March 2021, JDP’s Denizli MP, Cahit Özkan, praised the HRAP by saying “the Human Rights Action Plan which was initiated in 2019 and announced by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is a new reform that will bring into effect the constitutional and legal reforms they have carried out for eighteen years and increase confidence in the law, judiciary and brotherhood law among citizens. He added he believes that it will be implemented soon and that he believes that 2021 will be a year when they will sign many reforms in the fields of economy, law, human rights, environmental and animal protection” (ibid.). Muhammed Bülbül from JDP’s alliance partner NMP supported the government’s effective human rights reforms: “In line with the Human Rights Action Plan announced on March 2, 2021 and planned to be implemented until 2023, there has been a 35 percent implementation”. On World Human Rights Day on 10 December 2021, Minister of Justice, Abdülhamit Gül, returned the HRAP to parliament’s agenda by referring to Erdoğan’s book, *A Fairer World is Possible*. “With the slogan of ‘A fairer world is possible’ I hope that this meaningful day will lead to awareness and a new understanding about racism, oppression and discrimination all over the world. The Human Rights Action Plan and the Judicial Reform Strategy Document are our roadmap in this sense. We prepared these documents from different views and opinions, with a participatory approach and listening to all segments. Therefore, we have determined this roadmap with a common mind, common goal and consultation” (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2021d).

4. “We are here”: The new foundations law based on the HRAP and community-level elections

More than a year after the announcement of the HRAP, while hate speech and violence against minorities remain unpunished, minority foundation elections were implemented in June 2022. With the amendment of the regulation made in 2013, the 29th, 30th, 31st, 32nd, and 33rd articles of the foundations regulation were cancelled on the pretext that better ones would be made, and the elections for the Community Foundations could not be held since that time. In

line with the demands of both minority representatives and community foundations representatives to make a new Community Foundations Election Regulation in order to carry out both the management processes of community foundations and their representation in a more democratic way, the HRAP article titled Ensuring Freedom of Religion and Conscience in the Broadest Sense (4.3.f), “A regulation will be made in the Foundations Regulation regarding the establishment and election of non-Muslim community foundation boards of directors” item has been approved. The preparation of the new regulation took nine years and within this time the foundations (churches/synagogues, schools, and hospitals) were not able to elect their boards of directors. The new regulation was published in the Official Gazette on 18 June 2022. While the new law was largely welcomed because it opened the way for democratic elections of the foundation boards, it also damaged the community's faith in democracy as contrary to expectations; this new regulation was more restrictive than the old one in terms of electoral districts, numbers of board members and submission of the voter lists.

According to the new regulation, the electoral district is the province where the community foundation is located but for Istanbul, the ‘regional’ election system was introduced, as in the parliamentary elections,⁹ and it was foreseen that these elections would be held every 5 years. Then, as a result of reactions to this (Kalaycı, 2022),¹⁰ a five-item amendment was made to the regulation in September 2022; societies with fewer than 15 foundations were given the opportunity to have elections throughout the province. In addition, foundations were required to submit their voter lists to the General Directorate of Foundations, covering all voters in their constituency. It is obligatory to elect at least seven regular and four alternate members for the foundation management. Also, a person cannot be a director of more than three foundations. The demands of the Romioi (Greek Orthodox) and Armenian communities, which have the highest number of foundations in Turkey, to hold elections throughout the province were not accepted.

Among the minority communities, the reasons and benefits of the regulation of parliamentary constituencies – which had never been implemented before – could not be understood. First of all, a single type election regulation was put into effect for the Romioi, Armenian, Assyrian, Jewish, and Chaldean communities in the Republic of Turkey, which have different realities. Those with a small number of congregations (Romioi, Bulgarian, Assyrian etc.), would be in a difficult situation with the implementation of these electoral circles. Also, since it is obligatory to elect at least seven regular and four alternate members for the management of the foundations, and a person cannot be a manager of more than three foundations, it was clearly difficult to submit the electoral lists, especially for the Romioi

community which has the highest number of foundations but the lowest population. The second criticism was about the election process, which was supposed to be completed by 31 December 2022,¹¹ and the very short time for the necessary preparations to be completed on time; there were provisions in various parts of the regulation such as obtaining permission for the regional directorates of foundations for a period of one or two days to hold elections, notification of candidate lists, and newspaper advertisements. The third criticism was that foundation elections have to be held every five years, which is a very long time (Bianet, 2022b).

Yet, despite the shortcomings, the minority communities held their foundation elections from June until the end of December according to the new regulation. The ballots were in Turkish language, as young people especially often have a better command of Turkish than their community language. For most of the elections, there was only one list nominated due to the time limitations, the constraints on board members and small community size, which decreased the excitement around the election and damaged faith in democracy. For the Romioi community, which held its elections in the first region on 4 December, 14 of the 15 foundation elections had only one list. Considering that the community has a total number of 1600 voters in the whole of Istanbul, and only 374 voters in the first region, this result could be expected. Interestingly, when there was a second list, this competition was also likely to increase tension between the nominated community members. The Arab Orthodox community (affiliated to the Romioi minority) in Antakya province also held its own elections for the foundation management (Nehna.org, 3 December 2022). Similarly, for the Armenian community (which among the non-Muslim groups in Istanbul has the highest population of around 70,000),¹² once again six of the eight foundations in the second region entered the elections with a single list; that is, with a single group of candidates. The elections for the second and third districts were held on 20 November for ten foundations. According to the new system, eight of the ten foundations where elections took place are located in the second region, whereas in the third region (where the community is most numerous) the Armenian community's expectations from the foundation elections was "change" (Kısadalga.Net, 21.11.2022). A total of 3,411 people participated in the elections, where 18,000 people had been expected to cast their votes. While 1,136 voters in the first district participated in the foundation elections on 4 December to elect the boards of seven foundations, only two of these had more than one list. An election was held on 18 December for the management of the Pangaltı Armenian Catholic Mihitaryan Monastery and School Foundation. In December, elections were held for the Armenian community foundations in Iskenderun (Antakya) and Diyarbakır in the south and southeast part of Turkey (Ermeni Haber, 13 December 2022).

In contrast to the Romioi and Armenian communities, because the Jewish minority has a total of 14 foundations in Istanbul, elections were able to be done on a provincial basis (Avlaremöz, 11 December 2022) and were held on 25 December. While 13 of the 14 foundations that participated in the elections submitted a single block list candidate, only the Çanakkale Mekor Hayim Jewish Synagogue Foundation competed with two block lists. Voters registered in other cities (İzmir, Bursa, Çanakkale) voted for five foundations. Also differently to other religious minority leaders, the Jewish community, foundation administrators, and the press preferred to remain silent about the regulation.

Although participating in the elections with a single list decreased the excitement, the minority groups highlighted that the number of votes cast are very significant, as it shows community support for the foundations. New names and young community members were nominated even though it was a single list, and voting was a sign of saying that “as a society, we stand by the rights given to us”; in other words it means “we are here” (Selina Doğan, in Kısadalga.net interview). The HDP’s Armenian deputy also expressed his concerns about the new regulation and criticized the direct intervention of the state in the board elections, by reminding that minority foundations are affiliated to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism: “for some reason, the Minister of Interior Affairs Süleyman Soylu is very interested in this issue because these foundations have goods and properties. Presumably, there are certain accounts related to the properties of these foundations” (Duvar, 17 September 2022). The involvement of Soylu in this issue signifies the Turkish state’s strict policy on monitoring its minorities, their foundations, and their leaders.

Conclusion

Following the prospect of EU membership and the JDP’s pluralist discourse, Turkey’s socio-political and democratic transformation in the early 2000s redefined its minorities within a civil rights and liberties perspective. Following the 2004-2008 reforms, however, the status of non-Muslim minorities still violates the Treaty of Lausanne, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and the constitution. Turkey’s non-Muslim communities addressed the flaws in the new reform program and stated their further expectations. At this point, the HRAP became very important because in contrast to the previous regulations about minority rights which had been initiated through foreign pressure, this one appeared at a period when EU-Turkey and Greek-Turkish relations were perhaps at their most distant.

This study analysed why the HRAP, which was prepared with the vision of “freer individuals, stronger communities, a more democratic Turkey”, has failed to satisfy the

demands and expectations of Turkish society generally and religious minorities specifically. Following Todorova (1997) and Mylonas (2012), we argued that the fundamental determinants of minority-majority relations in Turkey depend on cultural factors and the historical perceptions of the public or new nation-states regarding ethnic and religious minorities. The new regulation was criticized for bringing new constraints on the foundation elections, ignoring the differences between the minority groups, and – with the involvement of the Ministry of Interior – showing the reflex of the state in monitoring its national minorities. While Turkey's Romioi, Armenian, and Jewish communities have received legal recognition, historically they have suffered from being considered as a foreign element rather than part of a multicultural society. Initiatives to improve their rights only began with international pressure, rewards, or short-term gains for ruling parties, without the institutionalization or internalization of these rights. Despite being a small percentage of the population, Turkey's minorities gained political representation through national parties to become visible in the political and social spheres, in contrast to the literature (Bird, 2003). Their opportunities for representation depended on domestic institutional factors rather than bilateral relations between home-state and kin-state, as suggested by Brubaker (1996). In addition to the observations on the community-level elections for foundation boards, the analysis of minority MPs' parliamentary work showed that opposition MPs were very active in voicing both individual and collective minority rights; however, this representational achievement had very limited effect given Turkey's extreme political polarization.

Under this extreme polarization, the announcement of the HRAP also caused various and even contrasting reactions among the minority communities. The official representatives welcomed the initiative, referring to the early days of the JDP rule when the Party took actions favouring these communities in terms of freedom of belief. On the other hand, prominent figures were more suspicious of the HRAP. Their suspicion was well-founded, since the articles that were included in the document were issues they had been voicing for years without getting any response. Indeed a whole year passed after the announcement of the HRAP without any action towards its implementation. The biggest concern and demand of the minority communities during that year and the eight years preceding it was the elections for the community foundations. To everyone's surprise, the regulation concerning the elections was released on 18 June 2022. Although this was an important development that proved that the elections could finally be held, it raised new concerns for members of the minority communities. One of these concerns was that there were not enough people to participate in the administration of the foundations, and the new regulations restrict the number of

foundations that a person can be a director of. In this case, some foundations will inevitably lack directors and members that would enable them to function properly. In practice, this could mean that the communities could even be deprived of some of the foundations. This directly leads to another concern as the foundations own many valuable properties. For this reason, the communities are also suspicious about the involvement of the state in the elections and see the regulation as being imposed on them. The fact that the elections had to be held less than six months after the regulation was released made the minority communities question the intentions of the government even further.

Still, the elections were held in time with significant participation of the communities. On the other hand, the other articles of the HRAP have not yet been put in motion. Among them, the one concerning the minorities is the hate speech they face on a daily basis. The government has not done anything to stop hate speech and even the attacks that target minority members and their properties. The threat that minorities perceive as a result of this kind of behaviour has led many members of the communities to leave Turkey. This constantly decreases the already small number of minorities, which as seen in the case of the foundation elections, deepens their problems.

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Notes

¹ In Turkey, ‘minorities’ generally refers to non-Muslim communities legally recognized by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). Although this treaty barely mentioned specific communities, the Turkish state selectively recognized the Romioi (Greek Orthodox), Armenian, and Jewish communities as non-Muslim while ignoring Catholics, Protestants, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Yezidis, etc. Within a few years, the single-party regime persuaded these so-called Lausanne communities to abandon some of their newly gained rights. However, as legally equal Turkish citizens, they retained the right to attend their own schools operating under the Ministry of Education while synagogues and churches remained open, although their income sources were severely restricted.

² In the early years of the republic, there were ninety-six Greek, fifty-eight Armenian and forty-two Jewish minority foundations (Kurban and Tsitselikis, 2010, pp. 30-32).

³ This study of non-Muslim minorities is limited to the Romioi, Armenian, and Jewish communities to enable a meaningful analysis and historical comparison. The following were interviewed between February and October 2021: from the Jewish community – Rıfat Bali, independent researcher, writer, and publisher, and Moris Levi, former Representative of Community Foundations; from the Greek community – Yorgo I Stefanopulos, the head of the Kadıköy Greek Orthodox community and professor of electrical and electronics engineering at Işık University; and from the Armenian community – Rober Koptaş, journalist and editor.

⁴ Also known as 6-7 Pogrom, includes riots against the non-Muslims in Turkey, primarily in Istanbul, initiated when at the period of tense relations between Greece and Turkey due to ethnic and religious conflict in Cyprus between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Turkish state radio announced that a bomb attack had taken place at the house in Thessalonica where Atatürk was born, turned on the same day, a public demonstration organised in Taksim Square by various student associations, unions and the “Association of Turkish Cyprus” (KTC). For details, see Güven (2011).

⁵ Assyrians are an indigenous Middle Eastern ethnic group that speak one of the Neo-Aramaic branch of Semitic languages. Modern Assyrians are Syriac Christians who claim descent from Assyria, one of the oldest civilizations, dating back to 2500 BC in ancient Mesopotamia. Yazidis are an endogamous and mostly Kurmanji-speaking (a Kurdish dialect) minority, generally acknowledged as a Kurdish sub-group within areas of Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Their monotheistic religion originated from Zoroastrianism and ancient Mesopotamian religions. Before joining the PDP, Feleknas Uca and Ali Atalan both served in national councils in Germany.

⁶ After 7 June 2015 elections, the political parties failed to form a government and snap elections were held in November 2015.

⁷ We focused on the parliamentary work of the three Armenian MPs: Garo Paylan from the PDP; Selina Doğan from the RPP and Markar Esayan from the ruling party JDP. A first look at their work indicates that Paylan is more active compared to the other two deputies. There are three reasons for this: first, he is also one of the founders of his party, the HDP. Second, therefore there are more interpellations and proposals for laws given by him with his party members’ signature. In the parliament, the pro-Kurdish and leftist HDP is more strongly opposed to the government compared to the other parties. Third, he served a longer period than the other two, as Doğan was not nominated for the 2018 elections (27th parliamentary term) and Esayan passed away in 2020.

⁸ Regarding the stage of the 180-day action program announced on 16 January 2020 and the Human Rights Action Plan. See, Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (2020)

⁹ Istanbul consists of three (3) electoral districts. District 1 covers the whole Anatolian (Asian) side; while the European side is divided into two: District 2 covering the Bosphorus and northern part of Istanbul, and District 3 including the Golden Horn, and the interior and southern regions on the European side.

¹⁰ Some community foundations (for example, a foundation belonging to the Georgian Catholic Community, a foundation belonging to the Bulgarian Community, and two foundations belonging to the Armenian Protestant Community) are located in the second election region of Istanbul; there are no foundations of these communities in the first and third election regions. In this case, according to the new regulation (Article 8: voters should have

resided in the electoral district for at least six months as of the election date), members of the congregation residing in the First and Third Regions would not have the right to vote and be elected.

¹¹ By making an exception in the regulation, the elections for the foundations with hospitals have been postponed to 2023.

¹² The Armenian community in Turkey is not monolithic and is divided into Gregorians, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants.

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