Abstract

Alevis form a heterodox and syncretistic group located mainly in Turkey. An Alevist mobilization has appeared almost simultaneously (end of 1980s) in Turkey and among Turkish migrants abroad. However, it developed quite differently in these distinct, albeit related, political spaces. The differences in discourses, developments and achievements of Alevist movements in Turkey and Germany can best be explained by relating them to the broader institutional, political and discursive contexts within which they are embedded, that provide them with different resources. Spatially bounded institutional contexts and political agendas frame the discourse and strategies of Alevist claim-making, leading to in divergent developments. More recently, the Alevi issue has been integrated into Turkey’s European agenda, resulting in new opportunities, framings, and relationships between these levels. This contribution tries to disentangle the multiple levels of claim- and policy-making involved (local, national and supranational), and to analyze their links and possible articulations. It questions the continuity between mobilizations at different levels, and the export elsewhere of mobilization dynamics specific to a given political space.

Biographical note

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Introduction

Alevis are a heterodox and syncretistic group consisting of Turkish- and Kurdish-speaking, and some Arabic-speaking members. According to the European Commission, they are estimated to 12 to 20 millions in Turkey1. The Alevi cult, a heterodox syncretism, is characterized by influences from Shi’a, Islamic mysticism, as well as practices and institutions which are hardly linked to Islam. Alevis have no status or recognition in Turkey.

An Alevist2 recognition movement developed at the end of the 1980s, almost simultaneously in Turkey and among Turkish migrants in European countries. However, the movement in Europe - its most important being in Germany – is not sponsored from Turkey and therefore remains quite autonomous from the developments in the homeland. As a matter of fact, this mobilization is structured and acts quite differently in these distinct, albeit related, political spaces. The differences in discourses, developments and achievements of Alevist movements in Turkey and Germany can best be explained by relating them to the broader institutional, political and discursive contexts within which they are embedded, that provide them with different resources. Spatially bounded institutional contexts and political agendas frame the discourse and strategies of Alevist claim-making, and result in divergent developments. More recently, the Alevi issue has been integrated into Turkey’s European agenda, resulting in new opportunities and framings. This contribution tries to disentangle the multiple levels of claim- and policy-making involved and to analyze their links and possible articulations. It questions the continuity between mobilizations at different levels, and the export elsewhere of mobilization dynamics specific to a given political space.

I will first present general characteristics of the Alevist movement, and then focus on the divergent developments in Turkey, Germany, and at the European Union level. Finally, I will address the relationships between these entangled levels.

1. Alevist identity politics: mobilization, frames, and environments

The Alevist movement voices demands so that Alevis be recognized as a specific group and obtain equal rights without facing discrimination. In the course of this mobilization, different groups – to some extent identifiable with organizations - have emerged with diverse, or even

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1 Interestingly enough, the report in French estimates them to 12 to 15 million (Commission des communautés européennes 2004:45, note 14), whereas the report in English estimates them to 12 to 20 million (Commission of the European Communities 2004:44, note 14).
2 I distinguish Aleviness, which covers the social fact, from Alevism, which designs the social movement in the name of Aleviness.
opposite representations of Aleviness. Some claim Aleviness is a purely religious matter – the ‘real religion’ of Turks or even Kurds. For others, it is a political philosophy of liberation, resistance and democracy. For yet another group, Aleviness is mainly a culture, a way of life characterized by critical-mindedness. It is not my aim here to describe this diversity of positions, which has been discussed solidly in various works (Väth 1993: 216-217; Vorhoff 1995). Suffice it to say that the struggle over the meaning of Aleviness, and even the level on which such an identity should be defined (religious, social, political, or cultural?) is a striking feature of the movement, giving it a highly competitive character. Even after more than fifteen years of mobilization, this debate over the definition of Alevi identity and its boundaries is not settled. Depending on the political situation and events, various interpretations become more or less influential. However, until now, no group has managed to gain control over the definition of Aleviness nor to establish a monopoly over the right to represent it.

Social movement scholars conceptualize this signifying work or meaning construction by employing the term ‘framing’. The concept of frame, when used in the study of social movements, is derived from the work of Goffman, for whom frames denote ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences and events (1974, p. 21). At a social movement level, what mobilization theories call ‘collective action frames’ also perform this interpretive function by simplifying and condensing reality. Collective action frames are action-oriented, since they define some problematical situation as being in need of change, identify who or what is to blame, and suggest alternative sets of arrangements. For instance, for secular-minded Alevists, Alevis’ problems stem from Islamists having taken power, destroyed Turkey’s secular heritage and introduced discrimination against Alevis; thus, secularism and the impartiality of the state should be restored. But for more religious-minded Alevists, the problem is elsewhere: the secular state has been oppressing religion, and this is what should be changed in a liberal manner, so that Alevis, as well as other Muslims, can practice their religion freely. Thus, Alevist groups differ first of all in terms of issues they address and the corresponding direction of attribution. For example, those who claim Aleviness is a religion and should be recognized as such demand the inclusion of Aleviness in those state institutions dealing with religion, while for other Alevists, these institutions should simply be abolished.

Since they are the outcome of negotiating meanings, collective action frames are not static entities, but are continuously being constituted, reproduced, contested, transformed, and replaced in the course of social movement activity in interaction with others. Claim-makers do not bring about claims isolated from the surrounding institutional framework and political actors (Benford and Snow 2000: 614). Not only activists and Alevis, but also the media, different political
groups, and institutions take an active part in these ‘framing contests’ (Ryan 1991). Among external actors involved, one should mention political actors (like Turkish and Kurdish nationalists, Islamists, and secularists), who produce and spread influential views on Aleviness, and sometimes ally with some Alevists against others. Another major role is played by institutions. Institutions provide opportunities, manage important political and economic resources, distribute (or withhold) subsidies, award (or deny) state aid to organizations. In the end, institutions define legitimate categories to be claimed, and criteria to be fulfilled. Thus, there are constant interactions between institutions and claim-makers. Thus, the state is an active partner – even if indirectly – in claim-making and therefore in framing processes. Institutional frameworks also shape the mobilization by providing certain resources, constraints and models for organizing. They define the availability and relative attractiveness of different options for collective action that one given movement face and perceive. Claims and debates over identity are very much shaped by elements from the socio-political context in which they are embedded. It is therefore crucial to take into account interactions between organizations and their environment.

2. Alevist mobilization in different political contexts

Movements which are active in several political spaces – for example in migration - are confronted with different political environments. Alevism being very contested, with no prevailing organization or interpretation, its framings may vary greatly depending on the institutional and political framework in which it is embedded. The crucial role played by the institutional and political framework in the country of settlement on the migrants’ patterns of organization and on their claim-making process has been mostly analyzed by comparing one migrant mobilization in several receiving countries (Koopmans and Statham 2000). However, I will here deal with the Alevist movement in the country of origin (Turkey) and in the main receiving country (Germany), since my aim is not to compare systematically the political frameworks and their perception as native citizens and as migrants – which is probably impossible -, but to describe the disjunction between movements in different political spaces.

a. Alevism in Turkey: an impossible recognition?

The Turkish State denies any group specific features and often criminalizes particularism as ‘separatism’. The only recognized status as minority concerns non-Muslim groups3. Thus, the

3 The list of recognized religious minorities, all of them non-Muslim, was fixed by the Lausanne Treaty (1923).
Turkish context provides very narrow opportunity for any kind of recognition of particularism, and claims for recognition remain illegitimate (Massicard forthcoming).

Regarding political balances, it is important to make clear that Alevist demands are not supported nor relayed by any political party, not even by those that Alevis most supported (Schüler 2000). As a matter of fact, no party would take the risk of being identified as an 'Alevi party', and thereby risk losing votes of non-Alevis.

This denying of any recognition is especially clear in the religious field. Speaking about a separation of state and religion in contemporary Turkey would be misleading. Religion has been domesticated by the state, mainly through an institution called the Directory of Religious Affairs (DİB, Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), which has the monopoly over official religion. Far from being religiously neutral, the Turkish state has institutionalized the Sunni interpretation of Islam as the official denomination. Consequently, the DİB considers Alevis as being Muslims like others who have somehow been pushed out of the ‘true path’. No different treatment is reserved or even allowed to them: Alevi children must attend compulsory religion courses at school, where exclusively Sunni interpretations are taught. Despite the debates they instigated, the Alevists have obtained neither any recognition of a religious status nor the introduction of Aleviness into the compulsory religious education. They have also failed to obtain the abolition of either the DİB or the compulsory religion classes – all of these being among their most important claims.

The only domain where some official legitimacy is possible is culture. Some cultural elements widely attributed to Alevis, like songs or poems, were integrated into the official culture and encouraged. However, most have been cleaned of any Alevi component and thus ‘neutralized’ (Coşkun 1995, p. 208, 214). In this way, institutions like the Ministry of Culture have attempted to ‘rehabilitate’ Aleviness within the framework of Turkish national culture, whilst denying it any specific character outside this framework and any particularistic recognition.

On the whole, the Alevist movement has failed to obtain any kind of recognition or of specific treatment by the Turkish state. Some minor subsidies have been distributed to mostly state-friendly Alevist organizations for cultural or social activities, especially in times of general mobilization against Islamists and at the local level (for more details see Massicard 2005). Therefore, state institutions don’t favor one particular organization, and do not encourage any of the competitive tendencies within the Alevist movement. By hindering in this way the formation of a unique Alevist interlocutor, they have indirectly contributed to the split of the movement.
b. Alevism in Germany: from Culture to Religion?

In Germany, the Alevis - as migrants - have fewer political rights than native citizens. However, options for claim-making and recognition there strongly differ from Turkey, and have widened in recent years.

In Germany, state and religion cooperate, and institutionalized religions are taught in public schools. Therefore, there are specific legal statuses to be claimed by religious groups. Thus, the main goal for the mobilization of religious groups - be they migrants or not - is to obtain one of these legal statuses. However, this possibility was passed up by Alevists until recently, since they did not perceive it as an opportunity. The first reason is that, as the Alevist movement began in the 1980s and 1990s, multiculturalism was gaining momentum, and the issue of immigration to Germany was treated mainly in terms of cultural difference. Multicultural policies provided many institutional opportunities, resources and space for the institutionalization of ‘cultural’ organizations, and shaped the institutional and discursive framing of migrants’ claim-making (Vertovec 1996). Alevists negotiated with the German society for subsidies or integration, and began to frame their distinctiveness mainly in terms of a culture in need of protection (Kaya 1998). The second reason is that no migrant group had ever been recognized any of these religious statuses.

However, things changed in February 2000, when an administrative court recognized an Islamic organization, the Islamic Federation of Berlin (IFB) as being a religious community⁴. After a few weeks, Berlin's most important Alevist organization (the Anatolian Alevis’ Cultural Center - AAKM) claimed the same status and renounced to its former claims⁵. Noticing the opening of religious opportunity, activists began to frame Alevisness as a religion in need of protection and equal rights with Sunni Islam. Finally, as early as 2000, the AAKM was given the same status, that of a religious community⁶.

This increased emphasis on religion was not so much due to a regained strength of religiosity. It appears rather as a strategic response to changed public discourses and an adjustment to prevailing legal conditions and institutional opportunities. This new framing seems to be deliberate and goal-oriented, since it is developed to achieve a specific purpose, that of linking the claim makers’ framings with those of resource providers. A significant indication for

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⁴ This organization had been claiming this recognition since more than 20 years.
⁵ In Germany, the recognition of one Islamic organization does not imply its monopoly over the representation of Islam. This can best be explained by the German tradition of parity recognized between the two Christian churches. Unlike the Turkish State, German institutions do not have difficulty understanding the duality between Sunnis and Alevis.
⁶ For a more detailed account of this episode, see Massicard 2003.
this ‘strategic’ interpretation is that the organization being granted a religious status is by far not the most religious one – it is headed mainly by secular, or even atheist, former left-wing militants; rather, it is the most orientated towards German institutions and public sphere.

Another argument supporting this interpretation is that Alevists in France – who are ‘sociologically’ similar to those in Germany – have not adopted this religious tone. The French institutions do not recognize any group rights, be they religious or not. The clear-cut separation of religion and state severely limits the possibilities for the recognition of religious groups. There, Alevists adopt more ‘secularist’ and ‘humanist’ framings - stressing, for example, the high value given by the Alevis to human rights -, which is politically and strategically more pertinent. Although there is a European Confederation of Alevi Communities, a quite loose grouping of several national Alevist federations, the developments of the movement in different European countries of settlement seem to remain quite autonomous from each other.

The recognition of the AAKM as a religious community occurred at a local level, because in federal Germany the federate states (Länder) have exclusive competence in religious and educational issues. However, taking advantage of these local dynamics, the federation of Alevi Communities in Germany (AABF, Almanya Alevi Birlikleri Federasyonu), of which AAKM is a member, tried to generalize this recognition to a national German level. It soon started a campaign to apply for recognition as a religious community in all Länder where Alevis are settled. Consequently, these five states, considering that this issue is a national one, decided to give a common answer to this request and finally accepted it. The issue of recognition, local at the beginning, is being nationalized both by activists and institutions. Thus, there is a clear disjunction between Alevi movements in Turkey and Germany, the last one being framed more and more religiously, whereas the Turkish one remains divided.

c. The EU level

A further policy- and claims-making level has recently been added to these local and national developments: the EU level, which mainly concerns Turkey in the framework of its accession to the EU (and not Turkish migrants in Europe). In December 1999, at the Helsinki summit, Turkey was recognized as a candidate to the EU. The Alevi issue has been inscribed in Turkey's European agenda among the points of necessary improvement for EU accession. In November 2000, the first Regular Report from the Commission on Turkey's Progress towards Accession stated that ‘Alevi complaints notably concern compulsory religious instruction in schools and school books, which would not reflect the Alevi identity, as well as the fact that
financial support is only available for the building of Sunni mosques and religious foundations’ (Commission of the European Communities 2000: 18). Interestingly enough, this statement - which is reiterated in later reports - is located in the section concerning freedom of religion, itself included in the chapter on ‘civic and political rights’, and not in the chapter on ‘rights and protection of minorities’, concerning mainly Gypsies and Kurds. The 2003 report defines Alevis as a ‘non Sunni religious community’, and the 2004 report defines them as a ‘non-Sunni Muslim minority’ (Commission of the European Communities 2004: 44). Thus, the European Commission has recognized Aleviness as a religious phenomenon, first implicitly and then more and more explicitly.

It is difficult to know how and why European institutions have adopted this religious conception, since they have no identified Alevist interlocutor. Contacts and lobbying had been pursued by Alevist organizations both in Turkey (directed to the representation of the European Commission in Ankara) and in Europe – mainly by the European Confederation of Alevi Communities (AABK, Avrupa Alevi Birlikleri Konfederasyonu), itself dominated by the German federation; however, it is hard to know if they were coordinated for such a purpose. I would argue nevertheless that this qualification by the EU is not an outcome of activism, since all Alevist organizations deny the qualification of Aleviness as being a minority.

3. Local, national and elsewhere: multiple mobilization levels and their links

These divergent developments lead me to address the links between these political spaces, which are distinct, but related. As a matter of fact, the location of organizations, the spaces in which they mobilize, and the goals they try to reach, may well be distinct. For example, when Alevist organizations in Europe lobby the European Commission, they do so mainly on the issue of Aleviness in Turkey. But the same organizations also work in European countries of settlement for Alevi migrants, and may defend the claims in these different spaces and link these issues, or not. Therefore, it seems important to disentangle the multilevel institutional environment, as well as the different levels of claim- and of policy-making.

Some Alevists in Germany and Turkey have attempted to export the recognition they obtained in Berlin and from the European Commission to Turkey itself, putting transnational linkages into practice. More generally, many Alevists in Turkey think that Europe is the only space where things may change. However, until now, these attempts have hardly been successful. The fact that religious recognition is the most difficult to achieve in Turkey has probably

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7 No Alevist organization has an accreditation by the European institutions.
hindered its ‘exporting’. As a matter of fact, Turkish media and authorities reacted very negatively to the recognition of the AAKM, considering it as a threat to the Turkish nation and its unity. As the Alevi issue was placed on Turkey’s European agenda without the Turkish government’s awareness and approval, Turkish institutions were again bypassed. Therefore, this recognition abroad may well have hardened the attitude of the Turkish authorities and of many political actors against Alevism, making its claims even more illegitimate in their eyes (Massicard 2005: 301-309).

Although there have always been links between Alevist organizations in Turkey and Europe, these were very loose until recently. As a matter of fact, there was hardly any integrated Alevist mobilization activity across national spaces (beyond the transfer of quite limited financial means from Europe to Turkey). However, when the crucial 2004 European summit approached - at which the opening of the negotiation process with Turkey had to be decided -, the AABK and an important Alevist organization in Turkey launched a common campaign stressing their support for Turkey’s accession into the EU and launching a petition for the abolition of compulsory religious education and the recognition of Alevi cult places in Turkey. Therefore, it is Turkey’s European political agenda which lead the first coordinated, trans-European campaign across both Turkey and different countries of settlement. This ‘common’ character should be nuanced, however, since the petition does not explicitly define the relationship of Aleviness to Islam – the AABK defending the view the Aleviness is an interpretation of Islam, whereas the Turkish organization refuses this view. Therefore, they have agreed only on the religious dimension, but not on its content (Massicard 2005: 310-313).

Conclusion

The relatively independent trajectories of one and the same movement in different political spaces show how much institutional frameworks, as well as contextual balances of power influence possibilities of action, pertinent categories, and thus ways in which activists frame their claims and act. Therefore, these contexts lead to divergent strategies by the situated organizations and to the disjunction of the movements in different spaces. The divergent trajectories of Alevism indicate that the continuity between mobilizations at home and abroad is often overestimated, by abstracting movements from their concrete contexts and the constraints they involve.

But these different state practices, legal frames and supranational institutions are related and intertwined. It is even more so the case for Turkey, which is at the same time the country of
origin of the most numerous migrant group in the EU and a candidate country. Some actors – activists, but also state institutions – try to nationalize or even transnationalize claims and recognitions; but they come up against the obstacle of different existing conditions elsewhere, and against other actors – here again state institutions, media as well as activists - attempting to limit these generalizing efforts. Until now, Turkey’s European agenda has more contributed to the convergence of the Alevist movement across national spaces than have ‘classical’ transnational links. The theoretical challenge remains to analyze these multilevel processes, complex actors and entangled spaces.

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