

AN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF DIGITALIZATION ON THE ALEVI COMMUNITY

*Uluslararası İnsan Hakları Hukuku Perspektifinden Dijitalleşmenin Alevi Toplumu
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Die Auswirkungen der Digitalisierung auf die Alevitische Gemeinschaft aus der Perspektive der internationalen Menschenrechtsgesetzgebung

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ABSTRACT

The digitalization of law is occurring at an accelerated pace due to advancements in technology and the influence of the internet. This digitalization has brought about a significant transformation in the acquisition and diffusion of legal information and instruments, presenting both benefits and obstacles, particularly in the field of international human rights law. Comprehending the impact of digitalization on human rights is of utmost importance for populations such as the Alevis in Turkey, who are currently enduring violations of their fundamental rights. This is because technological advancements and their implications for human rights law play a vital role in ensuring the safeguarding and implementation of human rights while also potentially enabling tangible breaches of these rights. The European Court of Human Rights has often ruled in favor of Alevis in cases involving human rights breaches. However, the advent of digitalization brings up a new realm for Alevis' human rights issues, since they may face distinct challenges arising from the digitalization of human rights. There are advantages to the digitalization of human rights

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law for Alevis, particularly in terms of enhanced accessibility to legal materials, while also having disadvantages, e.g., online hate speeches and low digital literacy, and facing potential obstacles such as bias in artificial intelligence (AI) systems. Digital platforms are also significant in safeguarding Alevi cultural rights and enabling the establishment of an understanding of being a community among Alevis via the use of internet platforms. In the era of digitalization of law, while Alevis comprehend their human rights and freedoms, they also use online platforms for activism. This article offers a thorough examination of the consequences of the digitalization of international human rights law for the Alevi population. It specifically focuses on the advantages and disadvantages associated with this phenomenon.

Keywords: Digitalization, Alevis, Human Rights Law, Turkey.

ÖZ

Teknolojideki gelişmelerin ve internetin etkisinin bir sonucu olarak, hukuk sisteminin dijitalleşmesi süreci büyük bir hızla ilerlemektedir. Uluslararası insan hakları hukuku alanında bu dijitalleşme, hukuki bilgi ve araçların edinilmesi ve yayılmasında önemli bir devrim yaratmış hem faydalar hem de engeller ortaya çıkarmıştır. Türkiye'deki Aleviler gibi temel hak ihlallerine maruz kalan grupların dijitalleşmenin insan hakları üzerindeki etkisini kapsamlı bir şekilde anlamaları büyük önem taşımaktadır. Zira teknolojik yenilikler ve bunların insan hakları hukuku açısından doğurduğu sonuçlar, bir yandan insan haklarının korunması ve uygulanmasında önemli bir rol oynarken diğer yandan da bu hakların gerçek anlamda ihlal edilmesini mümkün kılacak kapasiteye sahiptir. Avrupa İnsan Hakları Mahkemesi, insan hakları ihlallerini içeren davalarda sıklıkla Alevilerin lehinde kararlar vermiştir. Bununla birlikte dijitalleşmenin hızla ilerlemesi, Alevilerin insan hakları konusundaki sorunları için yeni alanlar açmaktadır çünkü Aleviler, insan haklarının dijitalleşmesinden kaynaklanan belirli engellerle karşılaşabileceklerdir. Nitekim, dijitalleşme pek çok yeni meseleyi de beraberinde getirmektedir. İnsan hakları hukukunun dijitalleşmesi Alevilere, özellikle hukuki materyallere erişimin artması açısından bir dizi fayda sunmaktadır. Ancak çevrimiçi nefret söyleminin varlığı ve düşük dijital okuryazarlık seviyesinin yanı sıra yapay zekâ (AI) sistemlerindeki önyargılar gibi potansiyel engellerle karşılaşma olasılıkları ise bir dizi dezavantajı beraberinde getirmektedir. Alevilerin kültürel haklarının korunması ve çevrimiçi platformların kullanımı yoluyla Aleviler arasında topluluk olmanın ne anlama geldiğine dair bir fikrin oluşmasının kolaylaştırılması, dijital platformların önemli etkilerinden bir diğeridir. Ayrıca Aleviler, hukuk sisteminin dijitalleştiği bu çağda insan hak ve özgürlüklerinin neler olduğunun daha fazla farkında olmakla birlikte, siyasi aktivizm için de çevrimiçi kanalları kullanmaktadır. Bu makalede, uluslararası insan hakları hukukunun dijitalleşmesinin Alevi nüfusu üzerindeki etkilerinin kapsamlı bir analizi sunulmaktadır. Bu olguyla ilişkili avantaj ve dezavantajlar bu makalenin temel odak noktasını oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijitalleşme, Aleviler, İnsan Hakları Hukuku, Türkiye.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Infolge des technologischen Fortschritts und des Einflusses des Internets schreitet die Digitalisierung des Rechtssystems mit großer Geschwindigkeit voran. Im Bereich des internationalen Menschenrechts hat die Digitalisierung den Erwerb und die Verbreitung von juristischen Kenntnissen und Instrumenten revolutioniert, was sowohl Vorteile als auch Hindernisse mit sich bringt. Es ist von entscheidender Bedeutung, dass Gruppen wie die Aleviten in der Türkei, die von Grundrechtsverletzungen betroffen sind, ein umfassendes Verständnis der Auswirkungen der Digitalisierung auf die Menschenrechte haben. Während technologische Innovationen und ihre Auswirkungen auf die Menschenrechte eine wichtige Rolle für den Schutz und die Durchsetzung der Menschenrechte spielen, können sie umgekehrt auch Verstöße gegen diese Rechte ermöglichen. Der Europäische Gerichtshof für Menschenrechte hat in Fällen von Menschenrechtsverletzungen häufig zu Gunsten von Aleviten entschieden. Die rasch voranschreitende Digitalisierung eröffnet jedoch neue Problembereiche hinsichtlich der Menschenrechtsbelange von Aleviten, da diese sich mit bestimmten, gerade aus der Digitalisierung der Menschenrechte resultierenden Hindernissen konfrontiert sehen können. In der Tat wirft die Digitalisierung viele neue Fragen auf. Die Digitalisierung der Menschenrechte bietet Aleviten eine Reihe von Vorteilen, vor allem in Bezug auf einen besseren Zugang zu rechtlichen Materialien. Jedoch bringen neben der weiten Verbreitung von Hassrede im Internet und unzureichender digitaler Kompetenz potenzielle Hindernisse wie z. B. Vorurteile in Systemen der künstlichen Intelligenz (KI) eine Reihe von Nachteilen mit sich. Eine weitere wichtige Auswirkung digitaler Plattformen ist der Schutz der kulturellen Rechte von Aleviten und die Förderung eines Gefühls dafür, was es bedeutet, Teil der alevitischen Gemeinschaft zu sein, mittels Online-Plattformen. Außerdem sind sich die Aleviten im Zeitalter der Digitalisierung des Rechtssystems ihrer Menschenrechte und Freiheiten stärker bewusst und nutzen Online-Kanäle für politischen Aktivismus. In diesem Artikel wird eine umfassende Analyse der Auswirkungen der Digitalisierung der internationalen Menschenrechtsgesetzgebung auf die alevitische Bevölkerung vorgestellt. Im Mittelpunkt stehen dabei die Vor- und Nachteile, die mit diesem Phänomen einhergehen.

Schlüsselwörter: Digitalisierung, Aleviten, Menschenrechtsgesetzgebung, Türkei.

Introduction

In an era characterized by technological progress, the process of digitalization has permeated virtually all aspects of our daily existence; even social relations are shaped by technology. The scope of the digital transformation extends beyond the boundaries of personal electronic devices and permeates various aspects of our societal frameworks, encompassing domains such as law. In light of the global adoption of digital technologies within legal systems, it is imperative to analyse the implications of technological advancement on diverse communities, religious communities, particularly those historically subjected to marginalisation and prejudice. Members of religious communities, religious people, must not be groups as opposed to technology; instead, their attitudes and actions towards modern and new media, e.g., Internet media, are shaped by a combination of societal and faith-related influences (Heidi, 2010)

There are complex consequences that arise from the digitalization of the law in relation to the Alevi population. Through an in-depth exploration of the intricacies of the digitalization of law and their intersection with Alevi culture and rights, it is obvious that the complex and multidimensional consequences of this process are ongoing. Alevis effectively engages with the dynamic legal environment in the digital age through various aspects such as digital legal resources, online activism, and the larger influence of technology on Alevi culture. In light of this context, the emergence of digitalization presents both opportunities and possible challenges (Gregory, 2019) for Alevis.

There is a current dispute on the level of protection or susceptibility to violation of human rights when they transition into the digital realm. Given the increasing integration of law and digitalization, it is imperative to comprehend the impact of this process on human rights, particularly for certain groups. Such a study is crucial for Alevis, a group whose human rights concerns are perpetual, as it allows for a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate interconnections among human rights, digitalization and Alevis. By examining the intersection of Alevis' human rights struggles with the expanding realm of digitalization, this research seeks to enhance our understanding of how these concerns might be influenced and formed.

This article makes a brief introduction to the Alevis before mentioning the difficulties they faced in Turkey. The article then goes into detail about how law is being brought into the world of digital technology and the importance, effects, advantages and challenges of the digitalization of law for the Alevi community. This article continues by examining how online hate speeches, as a human rights violation, influence Alevis, the use of digital platforms by the Alevi community in order to save their cultural legacy, as well as the significance of online communities in facilitating global connections among Alevis and reinforcing their cultural rights. The subsequent chapters of the article elucidate the implications of online activism for the Alevi community and how digitalization, human rights violations in digital realm, and building an online community are interrelated for Alevis.

Alevis and Their Human Rights Challenges in Turkey

While the Alevis themselves must determine the definitions of Alevism, a short analysis of Alevism is necessary for the academic work. Hence, this section only highlights certain themes that pertain to Alevi beliefs and culture. The enduring influence of ancient Turkish beliefs and practices, notably Shamanism, is observable throughout Alevi culture and belief systems, as shown by Alevis' nocturnal rituals (Winkelman, 2016). There are notable distinctions between the religious rites, ceremonies, and beliefs observed by the Alevis and those practiced by the Sunnis. The Alevis use the Turkish language in their religious ceremonies and literary works, as opposed to Arabic, and their interpretation of the Quran diverges from that of the Sunni tradition. "*Alevis interpret the Quran in an esoteric, allegoric and symbolic matter and repudiate the external forms of Islam and its five pillars*" (Zeidan, 1999: 79). In brief, Alevism may be understood as:

A religious phenomenon—as the true Islam, or a branch of Islam tinged with Shi'a elements and Turkishness, as a religion in its own right, or even as the essence of secularism. Others see it as a primarily political phenomenon—which can range from a philosophy of struggle and resistance against injustice, to a tolerant way of living or even as the epitome of democracy... Aleviness would seem to be an overarching way of life of groups who were rural for a long time: a religion, culture and affiliation to a group with its own rules, all at the same time (Massicard, 2013: 4).

The primary challenges encountered by Alevis residing in the Republic of Turkey with regard to their religious beliefs and cultural practices include discriminatory treatment due to the policies implemented by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyânet*) and the compulsory religious culture and ethics courses. The *Diyânet* is a state institution that formalises and regulates the practice of Islam, recognising it as the only and authoritative source. During the first years of the establishment of the Turkish Republic until the 1950s, the *Diyânet* was entrusted with the responsibility of facilitating the formation of a modern, unified, and secular nation-state. Subsequently, the policies of the *Diyânet* have undergone a transformation in favor of the Sunni sect, and this shift has persisted up to the present day (Koca, 2014). The *Diyânet* offers services that are exclusively aligned with the Sunni interpretation of Islam, and its financial resources are derived from the overall Turkish state budget. Its substantial budget of 36 billion, 468 million, and 836 thousand Turkish Liras for the year 2023 is funded by tax revenues contributed by the whole population. This situation elicits a feeling of injustice among Alevis, who assert that they are not being provided any kind of support by *Diyânet*. In addition, it should be noted that Alevis rely on their own resources to meet their own requirements, while the provision of financial support for Sunni religious activities is derived from the taxes they provide (Demir & İpek, 2015). Within this particular context, it is worth noting that the *Diyânet* does not acknowledge *cemevis* as establishments of worship, hence impeding their legal recognition. Thus, Alevis and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) have the perception that the *Diyânet* is engaged in a state of discord with regards to the fundamental rights of non-discrimination and the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (İzzettin Doğan v. Turkey, 2016).

Religious education for pupils in Turkey is mandatory as a constitutional rule. The state is responsible for overseeing and regulating religious culture and ethics education and teaching, according to Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution. Mandatory inclusion of religious culture and ethics education should be included in the elementary and secondary school curricula. However, the mandatory character and content of the curriculum and textbooks are subjects of concern (Mansur Yalçın et al. v. Turkey, 2014). The central issue in discussions pertains to the potential conflict between the state's mandatory religious instruction policy, the right to education, and the freedom of religion and conscience, particularly when religious teachings are presented from the perspective of a specific sect. Alevis and ECtHR consider that the obligatory religious culture and ethics lessons are founded upon the

tenets of the Sunni branch of Islam and that the courses infringe upon their human rights and liberties while disregarding their unique beliefs. The ECtHR rendered decisions stating that the curriculum and instructional setting of religious culture and ethical education were found to be inconsistent with the values of objectivity and plurality (*Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey*, 2007; *Mansur Yalçın and Other v. Turkey*, 2014). In conclusion, in both cases, the ECtHR rendered a decision concluding that the compulsory religious culture and ethics lessons in Turkey violate the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The ECtHR states that the current lessons consist of an infringement of the second provision of Article 2 of Additional Protocol No. 1 to the ECHR, the right to education, which asserts that children possess the entitlement to receive an education in accordance with their parents' religious and philosophical convictions, which the state is obligated to respect.

Alevis in Turkey have significant challenges, primarily stemming from discriminatory practices resulting from the policies enforced by the Diyanet over places of worship and compulsory religious culture and ethics courses. While these tenders persist, the human rights of Alevis are also influenced by digitization, resulting in the shaping of Alevi issues and the benefits of digitalization in various dimensions.

A Short Overview of the Digitalization of Law

Digital technologies have a profound impact on the field of law, leading to its continuous evolution and transformation. In this regard, “the application of a wide range of digital tools and technologies to the government, business and consumer [as well as civic] economic and social activities that result in new working arrangements for each” (Ure, 2021: 12) is digitalization. The digitalization of law refers to the use of legal instruments and opportunities within the digital world, as represented in legal terminology. In the context of human rights, it becomes evident that “*human rights in the context of the use of digital technology and networked spaces*” (UNDP, 2023: 3) is the digitalization of human rights law.

Within the age of technology and the Internet, the human rights aspect encompasses the acknowledgment of the Internet's role in enabling the exercise of freedom of thought and expression. However, it also gives rise to apprehensions over potential infringements on the right to privacy. However, the emergence of technology brings forth a range of new human rights that warrant attention; “the most frequent

among such rights are a right to internet access, right to personal data protection and right to be forgotten (right to erasure)” (Varlamova, 2019: 9). Furthermore, people who have convenient access to information through the Internet will experience an augmentation in their awareness, leading to a corresponding enhancement in their educational attainment (Wheeler, 2006: 12, 14, 18). This observation holds true in the context of human rights as well. Nevertheless, although a new generation of rights has been included in the discourse on human rights, “the implementation of digital technologies weakens the protection of private life at the mass level” (Talapina, 2019: 122). Hence, in the discourse around digital human rights, the safeguarding of individual rights also has paramount significance. The establishment of a balance in this regard holds significant importance, particularly for disadvantaged communities.

In light of the phenomenon of digitalization of law, the obligations of governments in relation to human rights are evolving. In this regard, it is imperative for states to guarantee certain fundamental rights in the context of emerging new human rights concerns (Andrew & Bernard, 2021). These rights encompass unrestricted access to the Internet, unhindered access to information, safeguarding of personal data, prevention of online discrimination, assurance of individual security in digital domains, and provision of protection against various forms of cyber threats.

Benefits and Challenges of the Digitalization of Law for Alevis

First of all, it has been argued that digitalization offers enhanced protection for information sources, facilitates ease of access, and enables quicker dissemination of information (Davis, Hirschil, & Stack, 1997). The current range of opportunities demonstrates the efficient safeguarding and swift dissemination of information resources in the online realm. The digitalization of law has facilitated the transmission of human rights legislation, enhancing the accessibility of human rights legal resources for Alevis. This phenomenon may be attributed to the advent of digitalization, which has been extensively discussed in the literature. Currently, especially on the internet, where there are many human rights databases like the UN Database or ECtHR Data Base, it is much easier for Alevis to get legal information about their rights and freedoms.

Secondly, the issue of digital awareness and collective memory is important in the benefits of digitalization of law. Digital awareness refers to the ability to effectively utilize digital technologies and navigate digital environments in many domains

(Karakuş & Kılıç, 2022). Due to the current era of digitalization “*digital, media, and information literacy empowers individuals, as it allows the effective exercise of a wide range of human rights, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas*” (OHRC, 2023). The United Nations (UN) places significant importance on promoting “*digital literacy among children and youth so that they can fully enjoy their right to freedom of opinion and expression and their right to education*” (UN, Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on July 8, 2022: 2). Cyber libraries provide several advantages, such as continuous accessibility and unrestricted availability (Sulaksono & Efendi, 2022) of resources and information. Internet platforms provide a diverse array of resources pertaining to Alevism and Alevis, facilitating persons in augmenting their comprehension of their religious convictions, cultural legacy, liberties, and entitlements. Online platforms have a crucial role as educational resources for those identifying as Alevis, facilitating the expansion of their knowledge and fostering active involvement in their rights, freedoms, belief system, culture and lifestyle. Alevis maintain their collective memory of the injustice and violence they have endured through the use of social media platforms and websites that have evolved with the advent of the Internet. The Internet offers a range of materials that specifically address the educational requirements of Alevis, including initiatives like the Madımak Massacre Library Project (<https://kutuphane.madimak.org/en/mainpage>) and also the other project, namely, the Alevi Library Project (<https://www.turkalevi.com/p/pdf-dosyalar.html>). As an example, the Madımak Massacre Library Project aims to provide a comprehensive collection of academic resources pertaining to Alevism and Alevis, as well as archival records, with the intention of preserving the memory of the Sivas Massacre¹. The Alevi Library Project gives accessible copies of literary works relevant to Alevi beliefs and the practice of Alevism. Consequently, an increase in digital awareness and literacy will have a beneficial impact on the level of awareness among Alevis about their beliefs, culture, and human rights, including the freedom to assert their rights and the freedom of thought and expression.

1 The Madımak Hotel saw a tragic incident on July 2, 1993, where a group of extreme Islamists deliberately ignited a fire, resulting in the loss of lives. Among the victims were 33 Alevi intellectuals who had gathered at the Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Festival, along with two hotel staff. The series of events started with demonstrations initiated by individuals subscribing to extremist Islamic ideologies.

Thirdly, the relation between culture and digitalization also influences Alevis. Facebook pages and groups have been created in the name of Hacı Bektaş Veli to highlight the religious and ritualistic framework of Alevism. These pages and groups disseminate the cult-like religious and charismatic persona of Hacı Bektaş Veli, along with his teachings, aphorisms, and the rites conducted at his tomb. These resources are accessible to all individuals who are currently connected to the virtual environment, and anyone who has an interest in them is able to utilize them (Akın, 2021). In the virtual world, this guarantees the preservation of the cultural elements of Alevism. To summarize, in this example, the virtual world fulfils a practical role within the framework of the culture of faith by safeguarding and transmitting ritual consistency (Akın, 2021). The use of freedom of thought and expression within the realm of the Internet enables Alevis to articulate their perspectives across a multitude of venues, e.g., Alevi Forum (<https://www.aleviforum.net/>). The convergence of law and digital technology has the effect of enhancing the accessibility of freedom of thought and expression. Hence, positive correlation exists between the level of digital awareness, online media literacy and among Alevis and their information literacy. Internet settings, such as online forums, provide digital platforms that facilitate comfortable engagement, communication and information sharing (see Akın, 2021. Akın, 2022). Moreover, a collective identity is formed as a result of all of these shares on digital platforms.

Fourthly, the digitalization has facilitated the integration of several human rights law concerns into the digital realm. Prejudice and discrimination may present additional challenges for Alevis in the context of digitalization. For instance, in a social media post, a journalist stated that Alevis should be kept away from state administration (“Kılıçdaroğlu’nun ‘Alevi’ videosunun ardından TRT World yazarından nefret söylemi”, 2023), while another citizen, during a live broadcast on a different social media platform, insulted Alevis and accused them of being infidels (“Sosyal medya’da Alevilere hakaret eden kişi tutuklandı”, 2022). Taking into account the longstanding challenges faced by the Alevi community, it is pertinent to examine the potential ramifications of prejudice and discrimination in the context of emerging technologies, particularly in areas where AI systems are used, such as employment and task allocation. In this respect, the legal reflection of digitalization may arise in fair treatment in the context of the right to work, which may be jeopardised. This phenomenon arises from the potential of designing an application that has the capability to classify individuals into certain groups and categories. This application

can be designed as a system that categorises individuals into specific groups, and it may “only reinforces the currently existing forms of social, cultural, religious, legal, and economic segregation” (Petryshyn & Hyliaka, 2021: 19) that is also applicable for Alevis.

Lastly, Technological development also raises apprehensions, including those related to digital divides and the potential infringement of personal rights (UN, Resolution approved by the Human Rights Council on July 8, 2022) also for Alevis. For instance, safeguarding the right to preserve one’s geographical place is vital (Ivanova, 2020) within the framework of Alevis’ personal rights.

In summary, the process of digitalization enables access to information, increases the chances of raising awareness about human rights and freedoms, facilitates the exercise of freedom of expression, and provides positive developments in terms of cultural rights, while on the other hand, concerns such as prejudice and discrimination exist for Alevis.

Online Hate Speeches Towards Alevis as a Human Rights Law Violation

The digital era also has the potential to complicate individuals’ lives and facilitate the dissemination of hate speech, a critical concern that can undermine human rights. Hate speech, which encompasses the promotion of discrimination, violence, and animosity against a specific group, poses a significant danger to the fundamental principles of human rights (“What Is Hate Speech? | Rights for Peace,” n.d.). As articulated in the definition promulgated by the United Nations in 2019, hate speeches are “*attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender, or other identity factor*” (UNSPAH, 2019: 2). In the contemporary era characterized by technological advancements, the proliferation of technology and the Internet, notably through the medium of social media, has facilitated the rapid dissemination of hate speech, reaching a broader spectrum of individuals. (“UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect,” n.d.). It is important to acknowledge that hate speech, whether expressed through digital platforms or in physical spaces, is a violation of human rights legislation and poses a significant challenge to the concepts of freedom of speech, democratic values, and the acknowledgment of fundamental human rights. (“Online Hate Speech and Hate Crime - Cyberviolence - www.coe.int,” n.d.). Online “*hate speech is one of the most*

resilient manifestations of cyberviolence, and is not to be equalled with free speech” (Gorenc, 2022: 413). Specifically, social media platforms facilitate the generation and dissemination of online hate speech by affording individuals the means to openly express animosity and hostility against others seen as different without any discernible constraints (see Siphaoğlu, 2023).

At this juncture, the prevalence of online hate speech targeting groups with divergent beliefs, religious beliefs, or values from the prevailing majority, such as Alevis, is of utmost significance. When viewed through the lens of Alevis, it becomes clear that the online hate speech mentioned in the 2014 study by the Alevi Rights Violations Research and Youth Association Formation (Alevi Hak İhlallerini Araştırma ve Gençlik Derneği Oluşumu). The analysis exposed the use of hate speech by the media against Alevis, as seen in news coverage highlighting the prejudice and oppression Alevis experienced, particularly in instances of internet journalism. Conversations in the media consistently result in the marginalization of Alevis and a rise in hate crimes. In contemporary times, partisan columnists are specifically focusing their attention on Alevis. An instance of hate speech can be observed in the online publication of a newspaper that juxtaposes terrorist organizations with Alevis. The story headed “German Racists and Marginal Alevis to Protest Arm in Arm!” reported that certain marginalized groups, including those identifying as “Alevis,” are expressing support for terrorist organizations. The prevalence of these attacks, combined with the aggressive and politically motivated rhetoric spread by biased media outlets to advance their own agendas, has led to an increase in hate crimes and the development of unjustified prejudices against various groups among the general public (“AHİGED, Medyadaki Alevilere Yönelik Nefret Söylemlerini Yayınladı”, n.d). Indeed, it is evident that sentiments involving insults and hate speech against persons of the Alevi faith persistently endure, mostly through many forms of communication, with a particular emphasis on social media platforms (Human Rights and Equality Institution of Türkiye, 2022). Another hate speech against Alevis was a social media sharing stating that “we have become disgusted with Alevis from seeing Alevi folk lyrics on social media! You turn people into Alevi enemies!” (Erdem, 2021). In the year 2022, it was noted that the use of the Internet and technology persisted as a means of propagating online hate speech towards the Alevi community.

Currently, the primary concern for Alevis is the potential ramifications of hate speech propagated through digital platforms, namely discrimination and social

marginalisation (Irak, 2022). The proliferation of polarising content, racism, human rights violations, radical hate-driven beliefs, and online hate speech may be attributed to the malicious use of social media platforms and the internet (Gorenc, 2021; Chan, Ghose, Seamans, 2016) against Alevis. Unfortunately, the malicious use of technology and the Internet for aggressive and undemocratic endeavours, usually known as cybercrime, undermines the protection of disadvantaged communities, thus violating the principle of non-discrimination (Land & Aronson, 2018), as in the case of Alevis. The phenomenon of online hate speech directed at Alevis serves as a pertinent illustration of how the advent of digitalization may facilitate the rapid and widespread violation of both human dignity and human rights law.

Alevis Preserves their Cultural Rights via Digitalization

The concept of cultural rights, while firmly anchored in the principles of human rights, has evolved over time as our understanding of culture and its significance in human rights law has deepened. Cultural rights cover a wide range of entitlements, which include, but are not limited to, the entitlement to engage in cultural activities, exercise cultural identity, and manifest cultural heritage. Intangible cultural heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, celebrations, customs, and activities (Oğuz, 2013). The origins of their development may be linked to fundamental international human rights agreements, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), ratified in 1948. The UN General Assembly approved the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which is a well-known international human rights treaty. Cultural rights aim “to develop and express their humanity, their world view, and the meanings they give to their existence and their development through, inter alia, values, beliefs, convictions, languages, knowledge and the arts, institutions and ways of life” (“Digital, Media and Information Literacy Are Key to Freedoms”, n.d). Cultural rights may be exercised both at an individual level and within a communal context. States have a responsibility to refrain from engaging in discriminatory practices when individuals exercise their rights.

The development of the Internet has expedited the implementation of cultural rights in the digital realm. “Digital culture is understood to mean cultural content which is made available through digital technology or in digital form” (Higgins, Ferri & Donnellan, 2022: 2094). As outlined in the comprehensive analysis of digital religiosity typology, the acts of capturing photographs in sacred locations,

recording videos, sharing these images on specific social media platforms, and expressing intentions of prayer for those in need are practices that persist as a result of modernization and advancements in technology (Akin, 2022: 86). The influence of digitalization on the Alevi culture and the preservation of cultural rights has significant importance in terms of the spread and sustainability of the digital culture of Alevis. In August 2023, a significant milestone was achieved in the efforts of the Alevi community to save and enhance their cultural heritage in the digital realm. The primary objective of the Alevi-Bektashi Digital Archive Project is to establish a comprehensive digital platform that encompasses 5,000 Alevi villages. This initiative is driven by the need to save and preserve the cultural legacy and religious beliefs of the Alevi group, hence preventing their potential erasure (“Alevi Kültürü Dijital Arşive Taşınıyor: Proje Kapsamında 5 Bin Alevi Köyüne Ulaşılacak”, 2023). Consequently, the digital environment will serve as a means to save the Alevi cultural rights, as well as to uphold the Alevi worldview and the significance they attribute to their existence and progress. By adopting this approach, Alevis will have the opportunity to exercise their cultural rights in terms of digital cultural rights.

In addition, the preservation and promotion of cultural values, including the cultural rights associated with Alevism, may be facilitated via the use of Internet-sharing platforms, such as YouTube. The significance of this matter is particularly pronounced in the context of recordings that include Alevi religious ceremonies and cultural practices, including those pertaining to the documentation of *semahs*, “which can be described as a set of mystical and aesthetic body movements in rhythmic harmony performed by *semahçı* (*semah* dancers), accompanied by the *Zakir* (musical performers in *cem* rituals) playing the *saz* in order to be unified with God and purified from the material world” (Doğanyılmaz, 2013: 197). The recordings, “including diverse expressions of the Alevi-Bektashi religion memory in verbal, musical, visual, and written forms, may be regarded as a pertinent domain for comprehending the representation, transmission, and reproduction of the memory within the associated community via social media” (Gülüm, 2020: 1390). So, social media allows the community to understand Alevi-Bektashi religion memory’s verbal, musical, visual, and written expression, transmission, and replication.

Accessing academic journals about Alevi culture and beliefs through the Internet is highly convenient. The scholarly publication that you are currently perusing, the Journal of Alevim-Bektashim Studies, is one of the examples. Another instance is

the ability to utilize a mobile application to access a journal that specializes in doing studies on Alevism. The mobile application of Serçeşme, the digital Alevi-Bektashi-Kızılbaş magazine, can be obtained by downloading it from the Google Play Store and Apple Store. Moreover, websites such as <http://www.alevifederasyonu.org.tr/> and <https://alevi-portal.net/> play a crucial role in spreading and preserving Alevi culture.

The emergence of digital cultural rights, which may be seen as a new generation of human rights, holds significant importance for the Alevi. The documentation of the Alevi culture and beliefs, which have traditionally been transmitted orally, holds significant value in terms of its preservation and availability in the age of technology. So, the use of the internet and technology plays a significant role in activist endeavours aimed at safeguarding Alevi cultural rights as well as other fundamental human rights and freedoms.

The Online Activism of Alevi in Promoting Human Rights

Digital activism refers to the use of digital media as a means to advocate for and effect social change. Online activism, often known as internet activism, refers to the use of digital technology as a means to advocate for social and political transformation (Joyce, 2010). From this perspective, digital activism demonstrates greater efficacy due to its rapid and decentralised framework. Furthermore, the efficacy of technical and online activism is enhanced in societies characterized by widespread access to technological advancements, allowing individuals to readily avail themselves of the benefits offered by these technologies (see Özkula, 2021). Digital activism is a framework that encompasses those who engage in observation and citizen journalism. The Internet's capacity to foster social cohesion, cultivate a sense of community, and enable digital venues to amplify intellectual prowess is propelling the advancement of activism (Segeberg & Bennett, 2011). One further benefit of online activism is not being exposed to political dynamics, power dynamics, and policies of ignorance as conventional media. It is imperative to underscore that *“online spheres are increasingly becoming a place that hosts communications struggles, where social movement actors compete and interact with institutional political actors, online mass media, and communications and web professionals”* (Cernison, 2019: 47). However, an additional issue that arises in the realm of online activism is the existence of censorship on digital platforms or the implementation of authoritarian measures by governmental entities. So, *“yet social media and technological changes have made activism easier by providing (especially for those living*

under autocratic regimes) platforms for debate and knowledge-sharing while also enabling a message to reach its targeted audience in unprecedented fashion, within seconds” (Mutsvauro, 2023: 6).

The significance of Alevi civil society organizations (CSOs) in Alevi activism and institutionalization cannot be overstated. The process of institutionalizing Alevism may be seen as the endeavour of Alevi individuals to establish themselves as a contemporary identity movement via the establishment of CSOs, political parties, and religious sites (Yeler, 2019: 21). Due to the process of institutionalization, Alevi activists are advocating for their rights and freedoms through CSO while also calling for legal and political reforms. Within this particular framework, the Alevi CSOs are garnering attention via their campaigns aimed at combating prejudice in a broader sense, particularly to religious culture and ethical education, as a means to address the issue surrounding places of worship (*Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı v. Turkey*, 2014). Alevi CSOs are structured to address the religious requirements of the Alevi community while also actively advocating for their rights and entitlements.

Over an extended period, the Alevi community has strived to secure their rights in conventional interpersonal settings; however, they have now shifted their focus towards pursuing legal rights and freedoms within digital contexts as well as engaging in online activism. The Internet, CSOs, and social networking platforms provide a conducive atmosphere for Alevis to acquire knowledge pertaining to their human rights and freedoms. Moreover, these platforms serve as a means for Alevis to express their grievances and raise awareness about the injustices and hardships they encounter. In this regard, these online activists function as a medium and translator (Merry, 2006), in other words, facilitating Alevis’ comprehension of human rights and specifically enabling them to use the discourse of human rights. For example, the Instagram account affiliated with the University Alevi Youth Association (<https://www.instagram.com/unialevigencder/>) serves as a noteworthy illustration of digital activism in the pursuit of safeguarding the rights of Alevi youth against assimilation by using the Internet-based social networking platform. In a similar vein, the Alevi Federation Germany, an organization involved in digital activism, is actively striving to bring about change via its initiative titled *“Together for Diversity”* (Alevitische Gemeinde Deutschland e.V., 2021). This initiative also aims to raise awareness about the infringements on the rights and freedoms of the Alevi community. This exemplifies a kind of digital activism that is actively present throughout a dedicated website. Furthermore, the Madımak Massacre Library Project serves as a noteworthy

illustration of digital activism, functioning across many social networks alongside its website. “*Digital library platforms, which are places where social struggle actors collect, present, store and reproduce the struggle outputs that are the product of their own actions, have now become an inseparable part of political and legal action*” (Madımak Massacre Library, n.d.), so the Madımak Massacre Library Project serves as a noteworthy illustration of online activism in promoting human rights and freedoms.

In summary, the digital landscape and digital activism present Alevis with a range of options to surmount the challenges they encounter on traditional media platforms. Moreover, social media platforms have emerged as contested arenas for various social movement actors and stakeholders within the Alevi community. Nevertheless, the online activism of Alevis may be viewed as a multifaceted endeavour, including the pursuit of human rights and freedoms while also fostering the development of a cohesive Alevi community in the virtual world.

Digital Community Building of Alevis: A Result of Human Rights Violations

The obvious influence of digital technology on society is particularly powerful in understanding the concept of community. The development of virtual personas (Rheingold, 2000) has coincided with the emergence of virtual society and electronic society (Bakardjieva, 2005). The phenomenon that serves as the precursor to these encounters is the imagined community, as discussed by Anderson (2006/1983). The concept of an imagined community is predicated on the idea that people who lack face-to-face interaction construct their national identity through the medium of written media (Anderson, 2006). At present, the new imagined community is the virtual community (Fox, 2004) or the networked society (van Dijk, 2020). It is essential to acknowledge that the contemporary era is characterized by extensive reliance on networks, which operate within the framework of the digital age. In the present, with the inexorable influence of the Internet, “*contemporary developed and modern societies marked by a high level of information exchange and use of information and communication technologies*” (van Dijk, 2020: 19).

Providing a comprehensive explanation of the Alevi population is a challenging task. However, a considerable number of Alevis can be found globally, particularly in European Union member states. The Alevis are not concentrated in a specific country or confined to a narrow geographical region. There are numerous associations that

represent Alevis all over the world, including in Australia, the United States of America, Canada, and Europe. It is noteworthy that the Alevis, who are dispersed across a vast geographic expanse, have successfully coalesced into a cohesive entity known as the Alevi community. Alevis, while lacking physical proximity, serves as an illustrative instance of a vast community comprising millions of individuals who share common cultural practices, a collective identity, and shared human rights challenges. In order to provide an explanation, it is important to acknowledge that during the 1980 conflict, Alevis underwent significant migration to various countries, with a primary focus on Europe. Through the process of migration, the Alevi population has dispersed globally, resulting in increased awareness among individuals through the establishment of different CSOs. Alevis have come together through online platforms, use voluntary-based affiliations, and showcase their identity references through virtual performances (Yüce, 2019: 167). Furthermore, the extensive use of digital technologies and social media has facilitated the recognition of shared human rights challenges experienced by these people (Erol, 2023). Indeed, the use of the Internet, a contemporary technological medium, facilitates the establishment of a collective entity wherein Alevis engage in the exchange of knowledge and cultivate a mutual understanding of their convictions, customs, challenges, and aspirations (Şahin, 2013). The Alevi community has embraced digitalization as a means of fostering a sense of community by learning more about each other and common human rights violations via the Internet. In this regard, it may be posited that digital platforms, including social media, function as a cohesive force for Alevis, fostering solidarity and engendering a collective identity that results from common human rights and freedoms concerns.

Conclusion

One of the key benefits of the digitalization of law is its ability to acknowledge the Internet's role in promoting and enabling some human rights. A new category of human rights is presently emerging as a result of the digitalization of human rights law. The evolving landscape of digitalization of law has led to an expanded range of duties for governments in safeguarding human rights. This necessitates the assurance of fundamental rights in the context of digitalization.

The ongoing intersection of technology, the internet, and religion has resulted in the amalgamation of several concepts. Despite the existence of the term “digital

religion,” which refers to religious activities conducted online, the relationship between religion and digital media remains ongoing (see Campbell & Tsuria, 2022).

The Alevis are undoubtedly the group that the interaction of religion, digitalization, and human rights law will inevitably affect. The advent of the Internet and digital technology has played a pivotal role in enhancing the understanding of human rights law, hence enabling the Alevis to effectively promote awareness of their fundamental rights and liberties. The Internet has emerged as a prominent venue for Alevis, facilitating the promotion of their rights and fostering engagement with a wide range of people. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of digital awareness and information literacy as well as the obstacles posed by bias and discrimination that need to be confronted. The utilization of digital media by the Alevis is undergoing a transformative process, impacting their collective identity. The digital era has brought numerous opportunities and advancements, but it also poses a threat to human rights and democratic values. Hate speech, particularly on online platforms, violates fundamental human rights and fosters discrimination, violence, and division for Alevis. This issue is crucial to counteracting the negative impact of technology on Alevi human rights and human dignity. The Alevis have been using the Internet as a means to safeguard their cultural rights and cultural heritages. Digital libraries and forums play a significant role in the promotion of cultural expression. Digital activism provides Alevis with a diverse array of opportunities to address the obstacles encountered on conventional media channels. Alevi online activism is a complex undertaking that includes both the development of a cohesive Alevi community online and advocacy for human rights and liberties. The use of digital technology, the Internet and social media platforms has played an essential role in enabling the identification and acknowledgement of common human rights violations, as well as cultivating a collective feeling of belonging within the Alevi community.

Analyzing the condition of Alevis, who are currently experiencing numerous human rights violations and challenges, in relation to digital human rights has been crucial. The process of digitalization is likely to have an impact on the future of Alevi human rights conditions. The various obstacles that Alevis may encounter regarding their human rights in the digital realm necessitate proactive measures to prevent future violations of their rights. The digitalization of the law has the potential to enhance Alevi consciousness regarding their human rights and freedoms while

simultaneously augmenting their vulnerability to partiality and prejudice. A future centred on the primary advancement of the positive aspects of digitalization presents significant opportunities for Alevis. The process of digitalizing human rights law has the potential to offer valuable insights into the future of Alevi rights campaigning and the development of legislative reforms in the digital era. The advancement of technology, particularly in the areas of digital human rights law as well as Turkey's policies, will determine the influence on the future of Alevis' human rights conditions in the digital realm. It is essential for Alevis to have a thorough understanding of the requirements of the digital age. This is because the near future will see the development of digital human rights law, which will have a significant influence on people's lives.

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