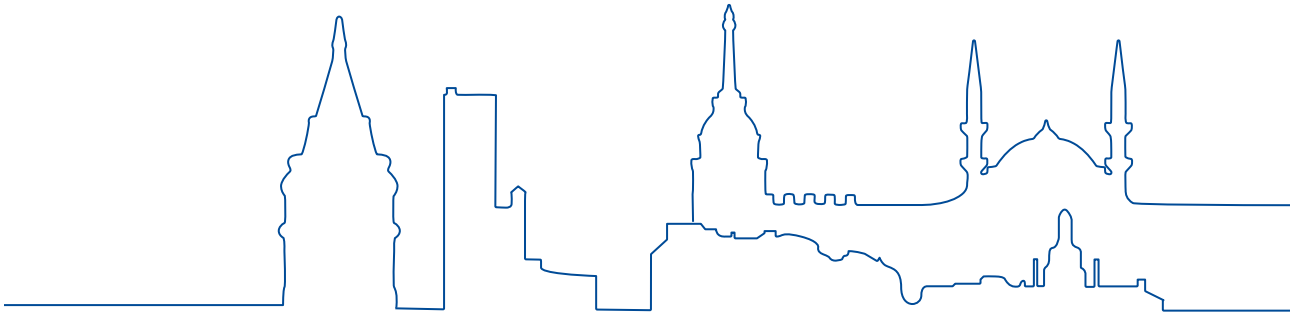


**IPC-MERCATOR COMMENTARY** June 2026

# ALEVI RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN GERMANY: INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION AND ITS LESSONS FOR TURKEY

Burcu Karakaş, 2025/26 Mercator-IPC Fellow at IPC

In Turkey, "Religious Culture and Ethics" is a compulsory course throughout primary and secondary education. While officially framed as neutral and inclusive, its content has long been criticized for reflecting a predominantly Sunni Islamic perspective. In practice, exemption rights are limited to recognized non-Muslim minorities, primarily Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Jewish students, leaving no comparable opt-out mechanism for Alevis, atheists, or other non-Sunni groups.

In contrast, Germany follows a markedly different model of religious education. Religious education is constitutionally grounded but organized at the level of the federal states. It is typically offered as a regular school subject, although students can opt out on the basis of religious freedom and instead attend ethics classes. The range of confessional options, including Catholic, Protestant, and in some states, Islamic or Alevi instruction, reflects a relatively institutionalized form of pluralism.

The institutionalization of Alevi religious education in Germany in particular serves as a prominent case study in constitutional recognition. Since August 2002, the Berlin Alevi community has provided elective religious education in public schools, a right predicated on the legal determination that Alevism is a distinct and independent faith.

The German state's recognition was based on two expert reports, one legal and one theological, which concluded that, although Alevism shares certain concepts and terminology with Islam, it constitutes an independent faith tradition with its own distinct religious practices, forms of worship, ethical principles, and values.

The Federation of Alevi Communities in Germany (AABF) secured this legal status across key federal states, first receiving it in North Rhine-Westphalia in December 2020, and then in Berlin in December 2022, ensuring its role as a permanent stakeholder in the German educational landscape.

The curriculum developed for these lessons aims to reflect the lived reality and ethical framework of the Alevi faith. Instruction covers central theological concepts such as the *Hak-Muhammet-Ali* trinity, the role of spiritual leaders, and the observance of specific fasts like *Hızır* and *Muharrem*. Cultural and ritual elements are also emphasized, including the *Cem* ritual, the 12 services, and the significance of the *bağlama* and *semah*. Beyond ritual, the curriculum teaches core ethical principles like *Can* (soul), *Rızalık* (consent), and *Lokma* (sharing), alongside values of justice and equality. A significant pedagogical choice is the inclusion of modern Alevi history and historical traumas, where events such as

IPC | ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER
SABANCI UNIVERSITY
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

The interpretations and conclusions made in this paper belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC's official position.

the Dersim, Sivas, Maraş, and Gazi massacres are taught as part of the community's collective memory.

In terms of practical implementation, the program currently serves approximately 270 students across 21 schools in Berlin, 17 primary schools, and four high schools and is taught by 14 Alevi educators. The *cemevi* (Alevi place of worship) provides a report card to acknowledge their participation.

During an interview with the author in Berlin, Erdal Çağlar, Education Coordinator at the Berlin Cemevi, highlighted a two-year study conducted by the Berlin Cemevi in cooperation with Alice Salomon Hochschule involving students, parents, and teachers. The findings show that Alevi religious education classes have significant and positive effects on students' identity development and sense of social belonging. "These classes strengthen students' self-confidence while also deepening their connection to Alevi music and cultural heritage. Our observations show that schools offering Alevi classes foster a strong sense of belonging and solidarity," Çağlar says. He also adds that the elective courses help raise awareness of exclusion and discrimination against Alevis, contributing to students developing a confident and informed stance grounded in democratic values.

Despite these achievements, structural challenges remain in teacher training and participation. In Berlin, there is still no dedicated university department for training Alevi religious education teachers. However, postgraduate programs that began at the University of Education Weingarten in 2016 were later followed by the establishment of an Alevi Theology program at the University of Hamburg. To address the initial gap, the state allowed the community to train its teachers through its own certification processes for a period of ten years, without requiring formal academic degrees.

"On the basis of the authority granted by the Berlin School Law, we organized Alevi Religious Education Teacher Training Seminars four times over the past three years in Berlin, with the participation of many lecturers, in order to address the teacher shortage," Erdal Çağlar says. "In this way, we also enabled teachers from different disciplines to obtain the qualification to teach Alevi religious education."

Furthermore, student participation remains lower than the estimated Alevi population of 70,000 to 80,000 in Berlin. Nationwide, the number of Alevis in Germany is estimated to range between 800,000 and one million. It is worth noting that the reach of Alevi religious education (*Alevitische Religionsunterricht*) now extends well beyond Berlin. The program operates in eight federal states, making it a genuinely national model.

## Policy Implications for Turkey

The German experience offers several policy implications for the Alevi community in Turkey. Similar to Germany, the Turkish state should grant Alevi organizations full legal recognition as a distinct faith community, allowing them the constitutional right to determine their own religious curriculum instead of being subsumed under Sunni-centric mandatory lessons. Turkey should introduce an autonomous "Alevi Faith and Culture" elective course overseen by Alevi representative bodies rather than the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) or state-appointed theologians. The curriculum in Turkey should acknowledge historical traumas and massacres, as confronting these events is an essential step toward national reconciliation and social peace.

The demand for reform is not without legal teeth. Turkey has lost twice at the European Court of Human Rights on this precise issue, in *Hasan and Eylem Zengin v. Turkey* (2007) and *Mansur Yalçın and Others v. Turkey* (2014), with the Court finding each time that the compulsory "Religious Culture and Ethics" course, introduced after the 1980 military coup, failed the basic standards of objectivity and pluralism. Following the *Zengin* judgment, the government introduced limited revisions to textbooks to include some information on Alevism. However, the curriculum's predominant emphasis on Sunni Islam remains unchanged.

Turkey's ongoing non-compliance with these rulings means that this approach is not simply a best-practice example but also reflects the implementation of binding international human rights obligations that Turkey has thus far failed to fulfill. Implementing such a model would not only satisfy international standards but also serve as a cornerstone for a truly pluralistic and democratic society.