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VALUES, INTERACTIONS, AND ASPIRATIONS: UNDERSTANDING UNIVERSITY-LEVEL YOUTH IN TURKEY AND EUROPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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CFCU
MERKEZİ FİNANS ve İHALE BİRİMİ

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PUBLIC POLICY AND DEMOCRACY STUDIES

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About PODEM

Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi Çalışmaları Derneği, PODEM) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.

At PODEM, our vision is to contribute to the building of an environment in Turkey where the institutional and legal foundations for democracy are established, a democratic mind-set, social peace and justice are embedded, and one that yields greater credibility to Turkey to facilitate regional and global peace and justice. Our mission is to understand and analyse through research the changing dynamics of Turkey's society, its relations with other societies and states and to translate our insights into policy suggestions.

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Life satisfaction

The respondents from Turkey and the chosen European countries were asked to evaluate how much they are satisfied and happy about their current state of life. The findings of the Turkey report suggest that the respondents from Turkey have an average life satisfaction value of 3 points on a 5-point scale. The respondents were further asked to identify the factors shaping their life satisfaction and happiness. Four factors were found to correlate with life satisfaction and happiness in the narratives of the Turkey respondents: 'individualism and freedom to choose what they want'; 'presence of family and friends in their lives'; 'economic situation - especially being able to afford their own living'; and 'being optimistic and forward-looking'. In a similar vein, 'family', 'freedom' and 'friends' dominate the most valued items in life, while 'religion', 'marriage', 'neighborliness' and 'politics' are the least valued items.

The findings of the EU report suggest that EU respondents have an average life satisfaction value of 4.5 points on a 5-point scale, expressed as 'very' to 'complete' levels of life satisfaction. An absolute majority categorized 'friends' as the most important factor towards what they value in life. This was followed by 'further learning', 'fun and entertainment' and 'freedom of movement'. The least important factors towards life satisfaction were 'marriage' and 'religion' across respondents from all four EU countries.

In comparison, it is noticeable that both EU and Turkey respondents value friendship, while the value of freedom to choose appears more present with the respondents from Turkey, whereas EU respondents appear to value continued education and learning over economic security.

Self-perception

To understand and analyze the self-perception of the respondents towards the concepts and identities that would define or describe them best, we asked an open question of "How would you describe yourself?" An overwhelming majority of the respondents in Turkey answered the question with references to their individual characteristics, such as 'being open minded', 'respectful to others', 'free', 'innovative', or 'enjoying helping others'. We observed that students in Turkey have a tendency to describe themselves through their ordinary life experiences and their own social environment, rather than political, ethnic or religious concepts, identities or ideologies. Partly linked to the emphasis on having tolerance and being open minded, there was a tendency among respondents to identify themselves as 'being a world citizen'.

On the other side, only a minority group tended to define themselves by referring to political and religious concepts such as 'nationalist', 'secular', 'conservative', 'libertarian', or 'socialist'. In parallel with the low levels of political affiliations, nationalist tendencies and ethnic identities were also among the least mentioned. A small minority described themselves as Turkish and Kurdish. It was also the case with gender preferences. Only just a couple of students used notions of gender while describing themselves.

Similar to their counterparts from Turkey, a majority of EU respondents described themselves in a non-national or ethnic fashion. Only a minority of the respondents described their national

identities ("Belgian") or background ("Rwandan"), whereas a slightly higher number of respondents did describe themselves as 'European'. Besides, an overwhelming majority of EU respondents defined themselves holistically and progressively, often using words like 'open-minded', 'multi-cultural', and 'tolerant'.

Most and least valued items in life

Being asked about the three things they value most in their lives from a list of items during the in-depth interviews, the findings demonstrate that 'family' is a strong value among the majority of the respondents in Turkey. The family's unconditional support and sense of security appear to strengthen the emotional attachment.

Besides the acknowledged place of the family, the respondents' aspiration to live an independent life is what they value the most next. They care about 'sense of freedom' and 'spending time independently'. The intercultural experience of the respondents with Erasmus experience adds another dimension to this perception with the flexibility and self-sufficiency they gained while they lived in a different country.

'Friends and social environment' are what the respondents from Turkey also value in their lives. This is further manifested when they were asked to identify what they regularly do from a list of activities. The choices of an overwhelming majority of the interviewees include having a night out with friends and meeting friends at a restaurant/café.

While asking the respondents to identify the most important things in their lives, the study also tried to look at what they do not value or attach the least importance to. Four items appear to dominate the answers of the respondents in Turkey - regardless of having Erasmus experience or not - which are 'politics', 'marriage', 'religion' and 'neighborliness'.

When EU students were asked to rank and discuss their 'main life problems/concerns', the results largely focused on interpersonal friendships and the freedom of movement, as well as education and entertainment. While the respondents from Turkey ranked 'family' as important, the absolute majority of EU respondents answered 'friends' instead showing a significant cultural difference in life priorities. Similarly, when the respondents from Turkey answered 'freedom and spending time independently', respondents from the EU considered further education and learning as a stronger priority. Other important factors for EU respondents include entertainment, fun and the freedom of movement. The least important factors for life satisfaction were 'marriage' and 'religion'.

A significant similarity between the respondents from Turkey and the EU was their shared emphasis on mobility, independence and freedom of movement. A majority of the interviewed respondents from both sides confirmed the significance of being able to travel, study and work freely across Europe. Similar, both sides value 'marriage' and 'religion' less.

Views on Politics and Civic Engagement

As discussed in the section above, looking closely at the role of politics in life, the respondents from Turkey do not appear to be active in the political space. Instead, they are seen much more occupied with their future, such as earning a living and job security. More importantly, politics is described a source of tension, and they tell about how political differences may adversely affect their social relationships, leading them to avoid conflict in their lives by not talking or discussing about politics among their social network. It was further observed that only a minority among the Turkey respondents mentioned their memberships in political parties. Still, this disengagement does not necessarily mean that they are indifferent to or unaware of political and societal developments both home and abroad, which they actually are so.

On the other side, politics seems to reflect more in the daily discussions of EU respondents, particularly certain socio-political concepts tied to climate change and societal justice. The levels of civic participation in non-governmental organisations linked to societal causes was seen higher among EU respondents, as well as the mentioning of words like 'refugees', 'climate' and other socio-political causes.

With regards to civic engagement, the respondents from both the EU and Turkey noted that they had voted in elections and were interested in participation, seeing voting as a tool for expression.

Tolerance towards differences

To understand and analyze respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards differences in their own society, we asked their opinions to what extent they would agree or disagree with listed societal and political demands and attitudes of a variety of ethnic and religious segments of society in Turkey. An overall look at the scores shows that an overwhelming majority among the respondents in Turkey are tolerant towards differences in society and they disagree with the religious dogmas and most traditional attitudes towards gender stereotypes.

With reference to the questions linked to the religious traditions and lifestyles, an overwhelming majority among the respondents in Turkey "strongly disagree" or "disagree" with statements such as "I prefer not to eat at restaurants where alcohol is served", and "abortion must be prohibited".

Regarding to the questions about tolerance towards religious differences and societal demands, respondents in Turkey again showed great support to statements such as "Cemevis should be recognized as places of worship", and "religious classes should not be obligatory".

When questioned on their opinions about negative attitudes towards homosexuality and its impact on the moral codes of society, respondents in Turkey strongly disagree with the statement "homosexuality is a disease", as with around 81.56% of all respondents participated to the in-depth interviews. Similarly, over 85% of the in-depth interviews respondents from Turkey disagreed with the statement "homosexuals are negatively affecting the moral code of society".

To understand the level of belonging and attachment to their culture and nationality, we asked to what extent they support the statement "I believe we should own and preserve our national culture and values". Around 74% of the in-depth interview respondents in Turkey showed their support for this statement.

When asked whether they would prefer to be a citizen of another country if they had a chance to select their nationality, half of the respondents in Turkey agreed that they would prefer to be a citizen of another country. This is something often discussed when respondents mention about their future plans, career path and potential job opportunities during the in-depth part of the interviews in Turkey. Besides, it is important to note that there is a relatively high number of in-depth interview respondents in Turkey (approx. 22%) saying that they are uncertain about this statement, and they neither agree nor disagree with it.

EU respondents demonstrated the highest level of tolerance based on their answers concerning religion and homosexuality. When questioned on their opinions concerning homosexuality and its impact on the moral codes of society, all EU respondent strongly disagree with the statement that "homosexuality is a disease". Similarly, EU respondents regularly mentioned or self-identified themselves as "tolerant" when describing themselves and their world views. EU respondents with Erasmus experience also showcased a high degree of cultural tolerance when explaining that they selected Turkey as their favored exchange destination due to their desire to learn about a new culture.

Attitudes towards Syrian refugees

To understand the young students' level of tolerance towards different ethnic and religious groups, we used two different question types. One question type was about the extent they agree or disagree with the statements that followed; and the other question was whether they would be satisfied receiving treatment by a doctor belonging to a specific social group. Responses to these two types of questions show that there is a significant level of intolerance towards Syrian refugees among the majority of respondents in Turkey.

Looking into to what extent the respondents participated to the fieldwork agree with the statement "Syrian refugees should have rights to citizenship in Turkey", we see that 70% of the in-depth interview respondents in Turkey disagreed with this statement. In addition, the findings show that 80% of these respondents in Turkey think that "Syrian refugees should return to their home country when the war is over".

EU respondents demonstrated a very high level of empathy and tolerance towards specific communities, such as Syrian refugees. According to respondents, most of their participation in civil society organizations or volunteering programs to support refugees. Many EU respondents also noted that their Erasmus exchange was marked by discussions, support and outreach to vulnerable refugee communities in Turkey.

Current Problems and concerns

The economic situation is by far the most commonly mentioned concerns and problems among the respondents in Turkey, when looking at in-depth interview and online survey data. Feeling insecure about the job opportunities and the fear of long-term unemployment are of the most significant concerns. The second most common problem for the respondents in Turkey comes with personal and psychological references. Being or feeling indecisive about themselves, their future and the selection of a career path, problems with time management include some of the examples. Concerns over nation-wide problems or references to the current situation of the country were the least mentioned issues by the interviewees. A minority group among the respondents directly linked their problems and the source of their concerns to the political and economic situation in Turkey.

When EU respondents were asked to rank the EU's main problems, the concept of 'economy' neither took first not second place. Instead, a majority of EU respondents believe that political division, Brexit and Euroscepticism ranked as being more important concerns. Similarly, many EU respondents also expressed concern about migration, populism and climate change.

Perception of Turkey and main issues

A two-way perception appears to dominate what the respondents from Turkey – in both in-depth interviews and online survey - think of their country regardless of their participation to the Erasmus Program. On one side, they generally embrace the sense of belonging to, and also the feeling of pride to being from Turkey, which is understood over their appreciation to the country's diverse cultural and historical elements, and its perceived hospitality. On the other side, their perception is significantly influenced by political, economic and social developments in a constantly-changing speed, which raises the feeling of uncertainty and being concerned. In the narratives of these respondents, the concepts mostly associated with the perception of Turkey came out as "culture", "home", "nation", "family", "politics", "religion", "chaos" and "disorder." The answers of the respondents from Turkey further demonstrate that (1) economy, (2) justice and (3) education are the three most pressuring issues of Turkey, which followed by the refugee issue and openness to differences at the societal level.

Both EU respondents with and without Erasmus experience mentioned the importance of Turkey's 'cultural richness' and its unique 'East-West position'. They equally noted that Turkey is 'overburdening by refugees', and faces 'political instability and lacking democracy', as well as conflict and war. According to many EU respondents, these notions were crucial in defining 'Turkey' and were repeatedly mentioned during the interviews.

EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey observed to demonstrate a comprehensive and detailed cultural and socio-political understanding of the country. The same respondents also mentioned concepts like 'polarization' and 'societal diversity' to describe the society in Turkey. This reflects a general trend among medium to high income level Western countries ranging from the United States and Turkey to Europe and Ukraine.

Both EU respondents with and without Erasmus experiences said that the Turkish economy was amongst the most pressing issues for Turkey. According to 56% of EU respondents with Erasmus experience and 34,8% of EU respondents without Erasmus experience, the economy was Turkey's most pressing problem. The single most pressing issue however continues to be 'Governmental/Political/Democratic' according to 78% of EU respondents with Erasmus experience.

Perception of Europe and main issues

Looking at the findings derived from the study's Turkey part, Europe generally has a positive image for most of the respondents, especially when it comes to the benefits that the young generation associates with. We see that three concepts – "freedom", "welfare" and "order" – are the most commonly associated with the perception of Europe. While freedom is interpreted as border-free movement, welfare is linked to higher life standards and quality of education. When interviewing respondents from Turkey with Erasmus experience, they further discussed the concept of order by mentioning urban planning, architecture, the rules observed in public spaces and an organized lifestyle. Visa-free travel is rather seen an important advantage for the interviewed respondents for which they see their European counterparts privileged. The living experience of the respondents from Turkey with Erasmus experience further reveals that their engagement with locals during their stay have an impact on their Europe perception. Pursuant to some respondents, their positive feelings dropped as they experienced the sense of "being other," saying that there are instances of discrimination and nationalist tendencies. Also, being asked to describe the most pressuring issues in Europe, the respondents from Turkey mention (1) populism and xenophobia, (2) refugees in Europe, (3) disunity within the European Union as the three most common issues.

When asked about 'Europe' and 'being from Europe' the topics raised by EU respondents appear to be entirely independent of their Erasmus or non-Erasmus experience. For example, an overwhelming majority of all these respondents mentioned either of the following four categories as important: 'Borderless society' (e.g. Schengen, visa-free travel, easy travel), 'Economic prosperity' (e.g. wealth, innovation, Euro, privilege), 'Democracy' (e.g. freedom of expression, openness, rule of law, multicultural society), or 'Unity' (e.g. union, strength, integration, peace). Similarly, EU respondents with and without Erasmus experience were asked to rank, from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), how valuable they considered the EU to be. In a calculated average, EU students without Erasmus experience ranked the EU 7.2 out of 10, whereas EU students with Erasmus experience ranked the EU 8.0 out of 10. Based on the ranking and in-depth discussions, the result would suggest that student populations inside the EU continue to express support and attribute positive value to the EU. By the same token, it is likely to indicate that Erasmus experiences outside the EU (e.g. Turkey) could have a heightened impact on pro-EU sentiments. This hypothesis is based on the difference in value attributed to the EU by Erasmus and non-Erasmus student respondents.

Perception of Erasmus and living experience abroad

Among the respondents from Turkey, the perception of Erasmus is generally identified with the most mentioned concepts as "traveling", "cultural experience", "learning a foreign language", "having fun", ''freedom" and "making friendships". From respondents both with and without Erasmus experience, the program is seen as an excellent opportunity to travel, study and live abroad with funding. Their living experience abroad also influence their openness in learning about the "other" and the "new", related to the attitude of tolerance. An overwhelming majority of the respondents from Turkey reflected positively about their Erasmus experience and they are willing to join the program again if further opportunities are available.

The findings of EU respondents show a very similar trend. 70,7% of EU respondents with Erasmus experience expressed that their Erasmus expectations had either been 'almost met' or 'definitely met' during their stay in Turkey. The reasons given for this very positive feedback were described as 'societal openness', 'favorable prices', 'welcoming cultural attitude', 'functional public transport', 'diversity' and 'great culture richness and activities.

Turkey-EU relations

Our study findings suggest that there is a significantly low expectation among the overall respondents towards Turkey's EU membership process (93% of the online survey respondents said "No" to the question "Will Turkey become an EU member.). For the respondents from Turkey, the background of this unfavorable perception lies on the declining membership motivation, and the divided interests of Turkey and the EU, both of which are said to make the relations remain in limbo with uncertainties. Likewise, respondents from the EU express uncertainty and pessimism about Turkey's EU membership process due to 'fatigue', 'democratic deficit' and 'political complications on both sides'. Interestingly, EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey express more pessimism about the relationship, in part due to their detailed understanding of the complex and highly politicized - but simultaneously important -relationship between the EU and Turkey.

The respondents from Turkey do not generally hold an optimistic view on the direction of Turkey-EU relations and the membership process in the near future (Around 42% of the online survey respondents believe the relationship between Turkey and the EU will get worse within the next 5 years, while around 40% think the relationship will remain the same.) The fragility of the political ground and constantly changing dynamics at both the regional and international level are perceived as a challenge to finding common ground, and stabilizing the fluctuating relations. Still, the respondents see the potential benefits of Turkey's membership to the EU, and the improvement of the bilateral relations, particularly in the areas of freedom of movement (visa-free travel), economic welfare and opportunities in education, the last of which is majorly stressed by respondents from Turkey with Erasmus experience in Europe. The respondents from the EU also held a pessimistic view on the direction of Turkey-EU relations with a majority of EU respondents mentioning the lack of democracy and hopelessness as two major barriers.

These views reflect the reality of the EU-Turkey relationship and the frozen nature of Turkey's bid to join the EU as a full member. Despite EU respondents' pessimistic outlook regarding EU-Turkey relations, they nevertheless expressed a variety of benefits which derive from a stronger and more institutionalized relationship between the EU and Turkey. Many students spoke about areas in which it is important to cooperate like migration, countering terrorism, trade, defense, research, Erasmus, and mobility. These examples show that EU respondents are well aware of the contradictory relationship between the EU and Turkey, particularly concerning the need for improved cooperation in key policy areas like trade and security. Their responses also reflect their understanding of the EU's gradual move towards right-wing politics and enlargement fatigue, while also taking into consideration Turkey's lacking level of democratic reform, which remains incompatible with the Copenhagen criteria and the EU accession process. Discussions with EU respondents also reflected a degree of comprehension and willingness to see past the frozen accession process and prioritize a new and different or equal partnership between the EU and Turkey.

Expectations for the Future

In this study, we asked our respondents to tell us their most important dreams to achieve for the future. Looking at the answers from Turkey, we see that realizing professional goals and having a chance to work in the areas of interests are the two commonly mentioned expectations for the future. Being fully satisfied about what they do as a profession is something quite important for the students both with and without Erasmus experience. Financial security, which refers to having financial freedom and not experiencing monetary problems, was another most common dream about their future. It is also interesting to note that living or working abroad is preferred among these respondents, an overwhelming part of which would think of moving to another country for the reasons of better job opportunities and economic conditions", and "better conditions of fundamental rights and freedoms".

EU respondents shared a range of concerns and views about the future, notably about the need for economic stability and job security. Both EU respondents with and without Erasmus experience expressed a strong desire for holistic and progressive concerns relating to social justice, climate change and stability. EU respondents with Erasmus experience showcased a strong degree of support for migratory issues and refugees more broadly, while expressing concern for their future and well-being. On the subject of social issues and EU-Turkey relations, many EU respondents expressed concern about Turkey's future with regards to its lack of civil liberties and freedom of press, while also sharing concerns about the rise of populism, xenophobia and divisive politics across Europe.