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

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Introduction

This report is the second part of a comprehensive study that focuses on university-level youth in Turkey and the selected countries of the European Union (EU) [i.e. Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium]. Referring to the first report “Values, Interactions, and Aspirations: Understanding University-Level Youth in Turkey (I)” detailing the background of the study and the analysis of the findings from Turkey, the objective is to explore the perceptions of university-level youth with regard to their value-sets and priorities in life, but also the potential impact of intercultural mobility on youth based on their own narratives.

To do so, this report looks at interview responses from EU students who have traveled to Turkey during their Erasmus exchange. As a control factor, the report also interviewed EU students with no prior experience in exchange programs. The report regularly quotes respondents to show the importance of individual answers and repetitive trends. Importantly, the study looks in detail at how the respondents perceive themselves, societies and their own exchange experience, including questions about individual life priorities, civic engagement and identity/belonging under separate sub-sections. The analysis also provides data on the most pressing issues presently confronting Europe, Turkey and the EU, and how the perceptions of university-level youth towards Turkey and Europe, and Turkey-EU relations are evolved in line with the current political, economic and social agenda. The responses are primarily based on individualized and semi-structured interviews and in-depth discussions with Erasmus and non-Erasmus students.

Socio-Demographic Background

The first section of this report covers socio-demography and generally identifies societal and economic aspects of all student respondents from Europe including the following EU countries: Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium. Firstly, in terms of gender, it is important to note that a balance between male and female respondents was respected. Concerning age, the date of birth of all EU student respondents were reported to be between 1990 and 2000, with the youngest student respondent aged 20 and the oldest respondent aged 30. The majority of EU student respondents generally ranged from the age of 22 (1998) to 26 (1994). An absolute majority declared that they were born in their countries of residence (Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands). Only a small minority declared that they were either born and/or held citizenships from other countries (e.g. Kosovo, Lebanon, Poland or Turkey).

An **absolute majority** of the respondents said that they had graduated from free educational/public high schools. Concerning language capabilities, a noticeable difference was observed among the respondents who had undergone an Erasmus exchange. A **majority** of the respondents from all countries (i.e., Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands) declared higher levels of language knowledge compared to others who had not participated in educational exchange programs. This disparity shows a clear difference in language skills when comparing the respondents with and without Erasmus experience. It was observed across various geographic locations in Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

Based on the respondents' background information and a wide range of in-depth interviews, this hypothesis provides an important starting point for the study, as it showcases the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural openness. One hypothesis, which deserves further examination, could be that exchange students may be more predisposed and willing to learn about new cultures and languages based on their existing linguistic capabilities. This hypothesis is, in part, confirmed during our interviews with students, many of whom already spoke multiple languages, or had previously been in contact with other cultures through travels, friends, or their own family background. During open-ended discussions with each student, we noticed that many of our respondents tried to learn Turkish during their Erasmus exchange in Turkey. Those same students also informed us that they had previously engaged in learning other foreign languages like Arabic and Spanish.

Life Priorities

During the in-depth interviews, the respondents were asked to express their views about their own personal lives, while also being asked to rank their levels of satisfaction more broadly. The findings are particularly relevant as an absolute **majority** of the EU respondents expressed a 'very' to 'complete' level of life satisfaction. This included undergraduate/graduate students from Europe with Erasmus experience in Turkey, thereby showing no real difference between the sub-groups. The life satisfaction result is relevant when we consider the complementary findings obtained through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with all respondents from Europe. For example, when the respondents were asked to rank and discuss their 'main life problems/concerns', the results largely focused on interpersonal friendships and the freedom to travel, as

well as education and entertainment, which reflects a degree of optimism. The exact findings were the following: An **absolute majority** of the respondents categorized 'friends' as the most important factor towards 'what they value in life'. This was followed by 'further learning', 'fun and entertainment' and 'freedom to travel/mobility'. The least important factors towards life satisfaction were 'marriage' and 'religion' across respondents from all four EU countries. The least important factors towards life satisfaction were 'marriage' and 'religion' across students from all four EU countries, including both students who had participated in Erasmus programs and students who had never engaged in any educational exchange program.

The findings about what the EU respondents 'value in life' are best analyzed and understood when contextualized with further in-depth interview responses. This was done to better understand the potential meanings attributed to life satisfaction. In a series of semi-structured questions and open discussions about 'concerns', 'problems' and 'satisfaction', all interviewees from Europe were asked to talk about their 'main problems in life'. Indirect factors of concern (or "collective factors" of concern) such as 'climate change', 'societal empathy' and 'fear of populism' were recurring among many respondents.

An important example of this can be seen in the following response from a German interviewee:

"I'm often indecisive about trying to find priorities in life, especially between my passions and interests. I'm often very empathetic and I respect my Syrian friends and their situation, which also paralyses me. These are problems and difficulties in my life." Female, Age 26, Erasmus experience, Germany

The above quote shows a strong societal prioritization (e.g. concern for social/environmental and other ethnical issues) when speaking about concerns, which is a recurring response among many EU students. Similarly, another EU response ranks 'global warming' and environmental concerns as a key priority.

"Being away from home can be a problem, and not finding an internship is also worrying. But global warming and environmental problems more generally are a big concern for me, maybe even more important." Female, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France

These recurring responses reflect potential characteristics of a post-modern society, in which traditional and highly individualized concerns like 'job security', 'wealth' and 'family expectations' become secondary to collective-societal and existential factors of concern.

Another strong example of this trend can be seen in an interview with a respondent from the Netherlands saying that "The main problems for me are linked to personal and future developments after my studies, but I'm concerned equally about populism and climate change, which could both threaten Europe." Female, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Netherlands.

A **majority** of EU students, including both Erasmus and non-Erasmus respondents, also discussed and ranked 'stress', 'indecisiveness' and 'interpersonal concerns' as important issues. However, more often than not, they deprioritized 'wealth', 'family', or 'career prospects'.

"My main problems and concerns in life are largely anxiety, stress and concerns about friends and family, especially about their happiness and well-being." Female, Age 24, no Erasmus Experience, Netherlands

This example is observable among many EU respondents, including both respondents with and without Erasmus experience. Similarly, when comparing these results with the initially observed 'high level of life satisfaction', it leads to various hypotheses and relevant discussion points which merit further investigation. Firstly, it shows a high level of life satisfaction among all interviewed groups. Liberal and progressive concepts, such as 'fight against injustice' and 'concerns for fellow citizens or other cultures', were especially prevalent among most respondents. Secondly, it shows a potential correlation between post-modern societal priorities (e.g. collective factors of concern) and heightened levels of 'life satisfaction' in developed countries. Thirdly, based on the in-depth discussions with each respondent, the concept of 'mobility' in various forms (e.g. 'freedom to travel', 'career mobility' or 'freedom to work elsewhere') appears to be a vital priority and an important factor for a high level of life satisfaction. Furthermore, a **majority** of interviewees confirmed the importance of being able to travel, study and work freely across the EU. This was described by a student in the following way:

"Mobility, movement and travel in general is so important. Also safety, peace and stability, but freedom especially for a career and to earn money is important." Female, Age 29, Erasmus experience, Netherlands.

The emphasis on mobility as a prerequisite for life satisfaction is important for three key reasons. Firstly, because this confirms how important cultural exchange, travel and independence continues to be for the youth. Secondly, because this shows how important border-free travel and exchange programs, like Erasmus, can be for the mental health and life satisfaction of young students. And thirdly, it indicates how important the concept of a borderless society and the facilitation of visa-free travel is for young students.

A final result from this section comes from answers regarding the respondents' social media connections with friends from abroad. An **overwhelming majority** of the respondents with Erasmus experience reported that they were still connected with friends they had acquired in Turkey during their exchange. However, only half of the non-Erasmus EU respondents were connected with friends they had acquired during their visits (e.g. holidays) abroad. Based on in-depth discussions with each student, several hypotheses can be drawn from this, including the fact that Erasmus-exchanges appear formative in developing stronger relationships and friendships, which are supported and/or facilitated by continued social-media connections. Respondents did indicate that not all social media connections resulted in regular engagement. The **majority** of respondents confirmed that educational exchange, like the Erasmus program, allows for proximity and new friendships, which are sustained afterwards through social media and online connectivity. The developments of social groups and online communication forums therefore facilitate cross-cultural interaction and the maintenance of friendships. This represents an important finding, since the use of social media to maintain friendships and interpersonal relations is an important method for Erasmus students to sustain their ties and friendships.

"I'm on social media with almost all the friends I made during my time in Erasmus." Female, Age 27, Erasmus experience, Germany

Civic Engagement

With reference to participation in civil society activities and volunteer experience, the respondents were asked about their volunteer activities in non-governmental organizations (NGO). This question was asked in order to better understand the level of civic engagement of students in today's university environments. During in-depth discussions, an **overwhelming majority** of interviewees confirmed that they had volunteered in an NGO. During in-depth discussions, all of the EU respondents who had participated in an Erasmus exchange confirmed that the NGO they had volunteered with represented a social/humanitarian cause. However, only half of the respondents who had not participated in an educational exchange attributed the NGO they had volunteered with as having a social/humanitarian dimension. The respondents who had participated in an Erasmus exchange most commonly described the NGO's they had volunteered with as 'social', 'refugee-related', 'humanitarian', 'activist' and/or 'environmental'. However, over half of the respondents who had not participated in an educational exchange described their volunteering activities as 'educational', 'festive', and/or 'university' or 'sports-related'.

Based on the discussions, it is relevant to note that a potential hypothesis between educational exchange and cultural-openness is likely to support higher levels of social and/or humanitarian activities among students. In fact, many respondents confirmed this trend in their responses. For example, a large number of EU respondents with Erasmus-experience from all four countries confirmed that their NGO participation was either inspired or directly connected with their exchange in Turkey. Similarly, many confirmed that their exposure to refugees and social injustices and/or problems in Turkey (e.g. refugees, the Kurdish question, political censorship and the lack of media freedom) had contributed to their ideas and civic activities or humanitarian engagements. The most commonly discussed and mentioned NGO's among EU student respondents across all countries were 'Amnesty International' and 'Red Cross'.

An example of this is a French respondent who noted that: "I worked for both Amnesty International and Red Cross." Female, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France

Similarly, other respondents from France, Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium who had undergone the Erasmus exchange mentioned the following types of social volunteering as examples of their civic engagement: 'private tutorials for disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds', 'mentoring programs for underprivileged people' and 'social volunteering activities', 'helping poor people in a mosque', 'ecology volunteering', 'supporting refugees and world famine programs', 'working to help sexually abused children', 'supporting a program for poor children', 'legal advice for disadvantaged people' and 'helping kids in poor conditions'.

One respondent from France described his volunteering work as follows: "I volunteered to help the disadvantaged, especially refugees. It's of course related to my studies and my relationship to Turkey through my exchange. When I was in Turkey, I saw the situation there with regards to refugees. When I was in France, I volunteered and worked to support refugees." Male, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France.

When inquiring about students' civic engagement, this study also found it important to discuss and question the various levels of voting interest and political engagement. For example, when EU respondents were asked about their past voting patterns, almost all respondents (with the exception of two respondents) confirmed that they had either voted in all or some previous elections. The respondents declared that they had voted in all previous elections in which they were eligible to vote, including local, national and European elections. This result, which is independent of exchange program engagement, would indicate a strong pro-voting culture among university educated students across all four EU countries. This is further supported by a secondary set of questions which asked EU respondents whether they would vote if an election were held in the near future. This question was answered by all respondents with one of the following two answers: 'I would vote' or 'I certainly would vote'. During the following interview discussions about voter engagement, an **overwhelming majority** of EU respondents confirmed that they perceived voting in elections as "important to exercise their democratic duties and responsibilities", while many also said that voting is a "vehicle for change and impact".

This pro-voting trend among them can be exemplified by the following response:

"It is my right to vote. And it's very important for my future and for myself to vote. I feel like it is important on many levels. In a democracy, it is our duty to vote and be informed. Voting decides who gets power in a country and many had to fight for that right for a very long time. I always vote and would vote this week if there were an election." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Netherlands

The reference to historical sacrifice and the importance of voting for the greater good of society was confirmed by many respondents during our discussions. Several of them expressed the particular uniqueness of historical sacrifice, which had been accomplished by previous generations throughout history. Some respondents with a specialization in political science especially underscored that such sacrifice is a vital historical memory, which must not be forgotten. They argued that those historical sacrifices allow for younger generations to vote today and thereby have an impact on laws and policies ranging from freedom of expression, welfare policy, privacy protection, the environment and consumer rights. Some respondents also asserted that 'democracy' and 'elections' remained a privilege exercised by a minority of countries worldwide.

Self-perception, Belonging, Tolerance

Within the context of the study's sub-section on 'Identity, belonging, and interaction with different identities', all EU respondents were asked to reflect openly about what it means to be from 'Europe' and 'Turkey'. They were also asked to share their views about 'Turkey' and 'Europe' as geo-cultural, economic, historical and political entities. The answers and topics raised by EU respondents followed similar patterns across all countries. When asked about 'Europe' and 'being from Europe' the topics raised by the respondents appear to be entirely independent of their own Erasmus or non-Erasmus experience. For example, an **overwhelming majority** of all EU 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). A **minority**, however, also expressed serious concerns about 'Brexit' and 'Fortress Europe' with a reference to migration. Despite self-criticism about Europe's colonial past and wrongdoings historically (e.g. national socialism), the **overwhelming majority** expressed positive opinions about a multicultural conception of 'Europeanness'. This was often based on ideas, values, collective strength and shared benefits.

A strong example of this trend can be seen in an interview response from Germany: "Being from Europe means freedom of thought and valuing the individual. It means democracy, in the sense that history has allowed many countries to develop strict checks and balances against tyrants and excessive power. It's freedom of religion and prosperity in terms of welfare, workers' rights, and also borderless societies where we can travel freely and move from country to country." Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Germany

Another respondent, from Belgium, answered in the following way: "Europe is open-minded with freedom of speech and good living standards." Male, Age 26, no Erasmus experience, Belgium

Similarly, a respondent from Germany described "Europe" and "European" as: "Lots of beautiful places to visit and of course the European Parliament. Overall, it's a multicultural and very open, modern society. Maybe one of the most important aspects of Europe is the fact that it gives citizens' rights. If you are a citizen; you have guaranteed rights and support. There is a degree of openness and tolerance, despite its problems today, which is undeniable. It's rare in other places around the world, whatever religion or background you may come from." Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Germany

However, not all interview answers were positive when describing Europe today. Differences in opinion among a **minority** of respondents confirmed media concerns about migration, populism, intolerance and anti-EU sentiments. For example, a small group of respondents expressed a more critical point of view when asked about 'Europe' and 'being from Europe'. One German respondent who had undergone her Erasmus in Turkey answered in the following way when asked about being from Europe:

"To live in Europe basically means privilege, privilege and more privilege. You think there are no borders, but actually there are borders and they often discriminate against people who have less or are poorer." Female, Age 26, Erasmus experience, Germany

In this study's quest to understand concepts like 'belonging' and 'identity', we also discussed and asked the respondents about their self-perception and how they would define their identity. An interesting observation from all EU respondents (including both Erasmus and non-Erasmus students) was their 'holistic' and 'non-nationalistic' definition of self-identity. When asked how they would describe 'themselves' and 'their identity', a **majority** of the respondents gave answers which were linked to non-national values or ideas. Unexpectedly, the respondents did not give 'traditional' answers about ethnic identity, religious belonging, and/or nation-based identity (e.g. Belgian, French, German or Dutch). Instead, an **absolute majority** of the respondents identified themselves as, for example, 'open-minded' or 'defender of peace' more often than national-based answers like 'Dutch', 'Muslim' or 'Bavarian'. During the in-depth discussion, it was noticeable that all respondents were fully aware about their choice of self-identification, being linked either to

European identities or political and ideological values like feminism, ecology, peace and freedom. One significant example of this non-national self-identification can be found in the following response from a German respondent:

“I am an open-minded person. I believe that all people are the same. I don’t like separating people into different groups. I am a citizen of the world. My nationality and identity is not German nor Turkish or anything else. I am first and foremost a human being.” Female, Age 26, Erasmus experience, Germany

The respondents from all interviewed countries in Europe used very holistic and non-national language to self-identify and describe themselves. Only a **minority** of the respondents described their national identities (“Belgian”) or background (“Rwandan”), whereas a slightly higher number of respondents described themselves as ‘European.’

The following descriptions were regularly used by an **overall majority** of the respondents:



When respondents were asked to reflect about the notion of ‘Turkey’ and ‘being from Turkey’, the answers were less consistent, perhaps reflecting respondents’ differences in educational exchange, media exposure and travel. In this regard, the responses from students with and without Erasmus experience did not seem significant. This pattern was confirmed throughout our in-depth discussions, in which a very diverse range of perceptions about Turkey was observed. Despite this general diversity of answers, there were some basic similarities in responses. Notably, both EU respondent groups spoke about Turkey’s ‘cultural richness’, ‘East-West position’, ‘overburdening by refugees’, ‘political instability and lacking democracy’, ‘conflict/war’ and ‘food culture and beauty’. According to many interviewees, these notions were crucial in defining ‘Turkey’ and were repeatedly mentioned during the interviews. One Belgian respondent summed up her sentiments about Turkey in the following way:

“It’s a country between East and West, both geographically and culturally. They are Muslim, but really they have a double identity, mixing Asia and Europe culturally.” Female, Age 26, no Erasmus experience, Belgium

Similarly, another respondent from Germany said: "Turkey is such a unique country bridging the East and West. The friendliest of people. It's great, and a little bit unhealthy food, it's a chaotic political situation. It's a caged in country, because they have wars next door, so there are many refugees, and they are also enclosed because of visa restrictions for travel to Europe. They are a bridge to the world." Male, Age 28, Erasmus experience, Germany

When interviewing EU respondents with and without Erasmus experience about their perceptions of 'Turkey', a few other differences were also noticeable. For example, based on the discussions, it was clear that the students with Erasmus experience in Turkey have a more comprehensive and detailed cultural and socio-political understanding of the country. The respondents with Erasmus experience mentioned concepts like 'polarization' and 'societal diversity' within the society of Turkey on a regular basis. Surrounding the complexity of Turkey's political and social fabric, one French interviewee succinctly describes it in the following way:

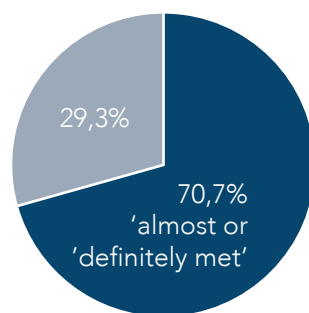
"To me, being Turkish represents being proud and patriotic and to some degree nationalistic. It also represents polarization of values and society. For example, in Turkey people are culturally, politically, and in general societally very different. There are strong political divisions and society is often politicized. There is not one standard Turkish person, there are many differences between people in Turkey. Much more than in other countries." Female, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France

The detailed understanding of Turkey's complex social fabric by EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey are relevant, as it shows the positive impact of exchange on student's perceptions of Turkey. On the contrary, the responses from EU respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey appear to reflect a more standardized understanding of Turkey. This perception indeed resembles the general media narrative, which is regularly expressed in Europe about Turkey. European media has often had to focus more on major news stories originating from Turkey with relevance to everyday EU viewers/readers. Those major news stories can be categorized as linked to the Middle Eastern conflict/Syria, refugees and freedom of press/democracy. However, news about the complex social and political fabric of Turkey is often overlooked, due to the natural media constraints of time and scope. For example, in Europe, the rigorous media focus on the refugee-crisis and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is likely to deviate attention away from new political and social changes in Turkey, including its multi-ethnic societal fabric, new political parties, developments about minority groups and the real demographic make-up of Turkey, which also consists of secular groups, religious minorities, agnostic people and other non-traditional groups. It is therefore very relevant for this study to observe that EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey describe the country in a more complex and correct fashion with a strong focus on 'multiple voices', 'polarization', and 'politically diverse'.

Erasmus Perception

In the fifth section, which covers 'Erasmus perception', primarily EU students with Erasmus experience were asked about whether the Erasmus exchange to Turkey had met their expectations. Apart from ranking their expectations from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum), each student was also given the opportunity to discuss their reasoning through open-ended answers and discussion surrounding their initial expectations and the reality they faced during and after their exchange in Turkey. Out of forty-one (41) EU student respondents with Erasmus experience, twenty-nine (29) expressed that their Erasmus expectations had either been 'almost met' or 'definitely met' during their stay in Turkey.

GRAPHIC 1: Did the Erasmus exchange to Turkey meet your expectations?



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'. Behind the **minority** group of twelve (12) respondents that stated that their Erasmus expectations had only been 'slightly met' or remained 'undecided' were the following reasons: 'sexism', 'bureaucracy', and 'political problems and/or conservatism'.

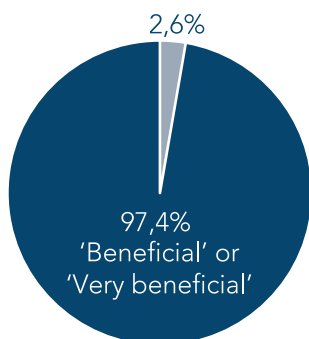
One feedback example was given by a French respondent who said: "The beautiful and oriental culture in Turkey is stunning. From the personal relationships I developed to the beautiful music, culture, mosques and food. I can say that overall the Erasmus experience in Turkey had a huge and very positive impact on myself and how I view Europe, the world, and its closest neighbors like Turkey." Female, Age 21, Erasmus Experience, France

A respondent from Germany also captures the positive trend in sentiments among EU interviewees when speaking about cultural exchange and their Erasmus experience in Turkey: "Societal openness towards people coming from abroad was very apparent. Turkish people are very welcoming and all my expectations from my Erasmus exchange in Turkey were definitely met. The history of the country is captivating and impressive. It was also very affordable and beneficial, from an economic point of view." Female, Age 26, Erasmus experience, Germany

EU students who have not participated to the Erasmus Program at all were also asked to rank the benefits of engaging in Erasmus. As a result, the respondents were expected to express their views about the perceived benefits or disadvantages of the Erasmus exchange program. The results

of such discussions were extremely positive with thirty-eight (38 respondents) out of thirty-nine respondents (39 respondents) expressing the view that an Erasmus exchange is either 'beneficial' or 'very beneficial' for students¹.

GRAPHIC 2: **How beneficial is engaging in an Erasmus Program?**
(Respondents without Erasmus experience)



During the interview discussions, many EU respondents without Erasmus experience mentioned the following reasons for their positive views about the program: 'meeting new people', 'developing new perspectives', 'personal growth and skills', 'independence', 'cultural richness', 'developing language and interpersonal skills' and 'open-mindedness'. An **absolute majority** of respondents stated that their positive opinions about the Erasmus program were based in large part on the views of their friends or fellow students who had engaged in the program.

EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey generally explained their country choice for one of the following two reasons: they wished to learn about a new culture, or because of the financial advantage of living in Turkey in comparison to countries which use the Euro as currency. A **sizable minority** of the respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey also noted that they selected Turkey due to their previous holiday experiences. A few respondents also noted their interest in legal studies, international relations and migration. A **minority** also mentioned that they had selected Turkey because of their own background (e.g. parents of Turkish origin). An **overwhelming majority** expressed that they had positive experiences, ranging from 'openness' and 'rich culture' to 'food', 'weather', and 'dynamic lifestyle'. When asked about their negative experiences, many respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey categorized traffic and noise as major issues, as well as political problems and economic hardship. A small group of female students mentioned the problem of gender differences in Turkey and sexism or harassment.

An **overwhelming majority** with Erasmus experience categorized their exchange in Turkey as either 'excellent' or 'good'. Similarly, respondents of both sexes noted that they felt safe overall during their stay in Turkey. For example, a respondent from France stated that:

¹ It should be noted that among the sample of EU respondents, four respondents had Erasmus experience in a country other than Turkey. This is taken into consideration in the analysis of the answers to the interview questions.

“In some instances, I felt a lack of gender equality for all women, and in Turkey there can be some conservatism. Overall however, it was a great and culturally enriching experience.”
Female, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France

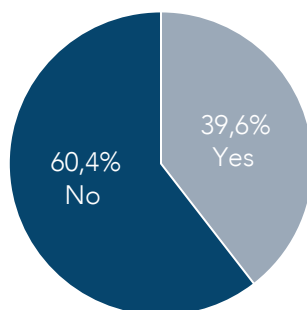
EU-Turkey Relations and the Main Issues in Turkey and Europe

The final section of this report covers EU respondents' perceptions about EU-Turkey relations, and the main issues in Turkey and Europe. All EU respondents were asked to assess whether Turkey would become an EU member country in the future, while also discussing their views about the ongoing Turkish accession process.

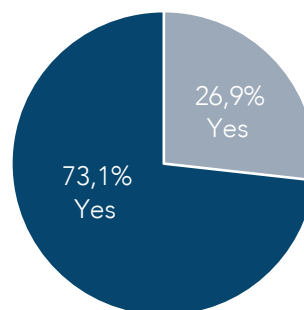
As a general observation, in the case of EU respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey, a **majority** of respondents said that they did not believe that Turkey would enter the EU in the future. Similar, an **overwhelming majority** of EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey also said that Turkey would not become an EU member in the future.

GRAPHIC 3-4: Will Turkey become an EU member in the future?

Views from respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey



Views from respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey



This finding is important because it shows that the group of EU respondents who are the most familiar with Turkey also gave the most skeptical and negative answers about Turkey's likelihood of joining the EU. The same group of students were also empathetic to Turkey's difficult situation, despite their negative expectations regarding Turkey's accession process. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that respondents who had undergone an Erasmus exchange in Turkey were more informed about the realistic situation of Turkey vis-a-vis the EU and the frozen accession process.

Based on follow-up discussions and open-ended questions with all of the aforementioned EU students the following observations were made. Firstly, nearly all respondents noted that Turkey's accession process was tainted by fatigue, and political complications on both sides. Secondly, respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey more often than not said that the major barrier for Turkey joining the EU was 'lacking democracy'. The respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey also noted the importance of democracy but had a more nuanced

analysis. They also focused on concepts like ‘hopelessness’, ‘unlikelihood’, ‘unrealistic’, and ‘complications’ when referring to the accession process. One example was given by a French respondent who said the following:

“In the beginning, both sides wanted integration. But now it won’t happen as the only thing left is opportunism. It doesn’t make sense anymore, but maybe there are other options?” Female, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, France

Similarly, another respondent from Belgium also captured the general sentiment among EU students by saying: “I don’t think it’s possible for Turkey to become an EU member today. Without human rights or democracy, it’s difficult to enter the EU.” Male, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Belgium

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. A **majority** of EU respondents said that they remained pessimistic about the likelihood of Turkey becoming an EU member. Nonetheless, they expressed a variety of benefits which derive from a stronger and more institutionalized relationship between the EU and Turkey. Many interviewees spoke about areas in which it is important to cooperate like migration, countering terrorism, trade, defense, research, Erasmus, and mobility. For example, an interviewee from Germany noted the following:

“Their relationship is strained today, but due to geography the EU and Turkey have to deal with each other. The EU and Turkey are very interconnected when it comes to trade, transport, energy, refugees and many other areas too.” Female, Age 26, no Erasmus experience, Germany

It should be noted that the in-depth discussions with all EU respondents show a high level of awareness about the current state of EU-Turkey relations. However, realistically negative, perception is not always mirrored in governmental relations and their communication to citizens. Contrary to popular perception, a **majority** of the respondents appear fully capable of understanding the importance of Turkey as an EU partner, while expressing pessimism about the likelihood of Turkey becoming an EU member in the future. One respondent gives the following argument:

“I don’t think it’s possible. Without human rights or democracy, it’s difficult to enter the EU.” Male, 22, no Erasmus experience, Belgium.

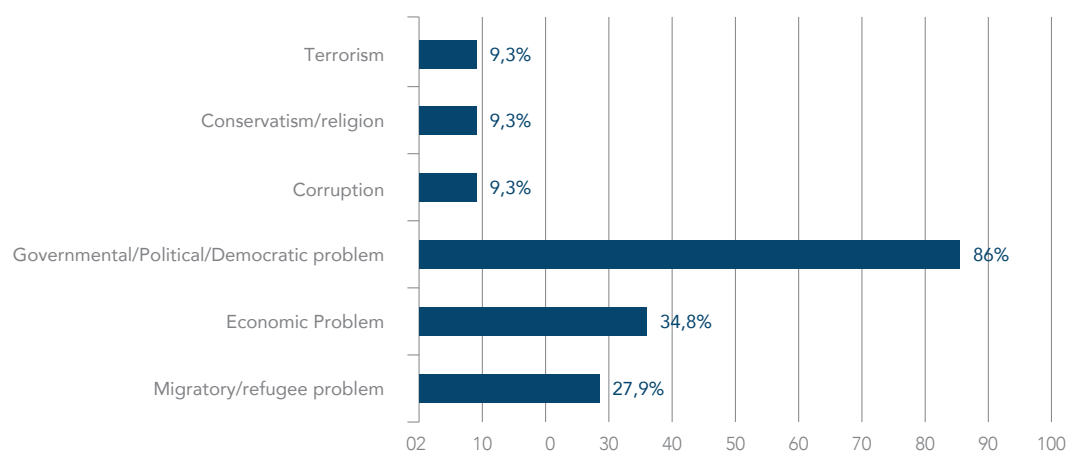
This perception among the respondents should be regarded as positive, considering the context of the current EU-Turkey climate. It exemplifies that our respondents are fully aware of the importance of maintaining positive and deeper relations with Turkey, despite the difficulties and instability associated with the current accession process. Discussions with the respondents 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.

EU respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey were also asked to speak about the perceived problems that Turkey faces today. Each student respondent was given the opportunity to mention three problems that they find to be particularly relevant to Turkey. One example was given by an interviewee from Germany who said:

“Turkey faces political democratic problems, economic problems and other societal problems, like many other countries in the world today. The levels of polarization and disunity in Turkey are worrying, and so is the economic problem which is reflected in the rising prices, levels of unemployment and the exchange rate. In some places there are rising levels of intolerance which is also a concern for Turkey.” Female, Age 22, no Erasmus Experience, Germany.

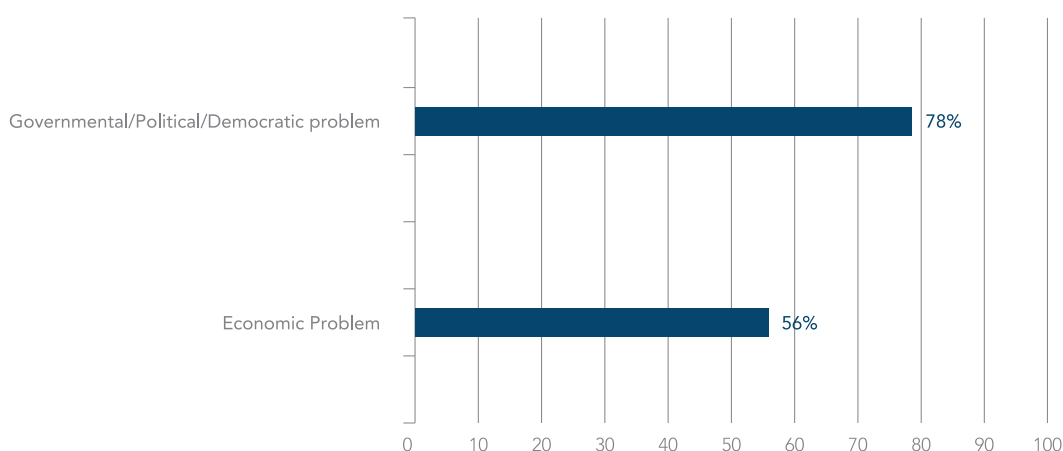
The most commonly mentioned problem facing Turkey, described by thirty-seven (37 respondent) without Erasmus experience in Turkey, was the ‘governmental/political/democratic’ problem. This category included words like ‘democracy’, ‘freedom of speech’, ‘human rights’, and ‘judicial independence’. Following this came the ‘economic problem’ (15 respondents), which was widely described as linked to the weak exchange rate and domestic living standards with words like ‘financial instability’, ‘currency’ or ‘exchange rate’ being used. After the ‘economic problem’ came the ‘migratory/refugee’ problem, which was noted twelve (12 respondent) times. Words like ‘corruption’, ‘conservatism/religion’, and ‘terrorism’ were each mentioned four (4 respondent) times. The least frequently mentioned problems of Turkey were ‘the failed coup’, ‘Kurds’, ‘environment/ecology’, and ‘relationship with the EU.’

GRAPHIC 5: Most commonly mentioned problem facing Turkey among respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey (based on frequently occurring keywords)



When asked the same question, the group with Erasmus experience expressed themselves similarly, with some noticeable differences. The ‘Governmental/Political/Democratic’ problem was the most frequently mentioned category with thirty-two (32 respondent) mentions, similar to the finding seen among the respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey. The second most mentioned category, as with the respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey, was the ‘Economic’ problem, which received twenty-three (23 respondent) mentions.

GRAPHIC 6: Most commonly mentioned problem facing Turkey among respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey (based on frequently occurring keywords)



The responses show that both interviewees with and without Erasmus experience in Turkey believe that Turkey's biggest problem today is tied to its governmental, political and economic situation. This finding confirms that all EU students, regardless of exposure to Turkey and exchange programs, draw very similar conclusions about the type of problems that Turkey faces today. It is important to note that 'nationalism' practically received no mention by respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey. On the contrary, 'religion' was mentioned on various occasions. The respondents with Erasmus experience (and knowledge of Turkey) instead mentioned 'nationalism' more times instead of religion, and also ranked a more diverse selection of problems, ranging from 'educational' and 'environmental' to issues like 'overpopulation', 'urbanism', and internal minority/Kurdish problems'. This finding again reflects our previous finding about how the respondents with Erasmus experience have a more nuanced, detailed and differentiated analysis of Turkey. Some examples can be found in an interview with a French respondent who had undergone her Erasmus exchange in Turkey:

"The three biggest problems that Turkey and its citizens face today are linked to immigration; nationalism; and poverty." Female, Age 21, Erasmus experience, France

It is significant that the respondents with more experience from Turkey show a wider and more diverse understanding of the country's problems, compared to others who focus entirely on issues of 'governmental/political/democratic', 'economic' and 'migratory/refugee' problems without paying attention to other areas of concern like the environment, socio-economic disparity, and urbanism.

The respondents were also asked equally to rank and speak about their perceptions of Europe, and the problems the EU faces today. Each respondent was given the opportunity to mention three problems. The most commonly mentioned problem facing the EU, mentioned by twenty-three (23 respondents) respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey, was the 'division/Brexit/Euroscepticism' problem, characterized with words like 'polarization', 'internal division', and 'anti-EU.' Following this came three problems, which were mentioned in equal amounts, notably fifteen (15 respondents) each. These were: 'populism/xenophobia', 'migratory/refugee', and

'global warming/environment'. The 'Socio-economic' problem also received a considerable number of mentions (12 respondents), and included words like 'unregulated markets', 'weak labor market', 'unemployment', and 'economic crisis'. The international problem of 'foreign relations' was mentioned ten (10 respondents) times and included wording like 'NATO', 'China competition', 'lacking EU military' and 'tension with the United States'. The least frequently mentioned problems of the EU were 'terrorism' and 'lobbying'. Exemplifying these diverse responses, one respondent from Germany said:

"The major problems facing the EU today are of course global warming, followed by the refugee and migration concern of many Europeans. Finally, the populist trends and internal divisions, which can be seen in Brexit, are also real and serious concerns for Europe today."
Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Germany.

When asked the same question, EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey gave more uniform answers. For example, twenty-five (25 respondents) of these respondents mentioned 'Populism/xenophobia' as a problem for the EU, whereas twenty-one (21 respondents) mentioned 'Division/Brexit/Euroscepticism'. Following these, the most commonly mentioned problem was the 'Migratory/Refugee' problem. In that respect, both student groups shared a concern for 'Populism/xenophobia' and 'Division/Brexit/Euroscepticism'. However, it is noteworthy that 'Populism/xenophobia' was mentioned substantially less (15/25) by this subgroup. It is clear that both groups see EU-divisions, populism and the migratory crisis as serious problems. It is hypothetically possible that the Erasmus exchange experience in Turkey has allowed students to prioritize populism and xenophobia more. Based on the in-depth discussions with each respondent, the hypothesis is that their cultural exposure in Turkey allows them to perceive xenophobia more concretely. Similarly, it is possible to say that EU respondents with Erasmus experience from Turkey perceive populism as more problematic, due to their capacity to compare populist trends in both EU countries and Turkey simultaneously.

Both EU respondents with and without Erasmus experience in Turkey were also 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 in Turkey ranked the EU 7.2 out of 10, whereas EU students with Erasmus experience in Turkey 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. Similarly, 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 both groups.

When EU respondents were asked about how they thought other EU citizens would rank the EU, the results were far lower. EU respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey believed that others would rank the EU as 5.5 out of 10. Similarly, EU respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey believed that others would rank the EU as 6.5 out of 10. Based on the in-depth discussions with each student, it is very clear that all EU respondents, regardless of exchange experiences, saw a degree of value in the EU project. For example, among the lowest student scores (ranking the EU value at 2 and 1) the following explanations were given: "I don't have any idea about what the EU does" and "I don't know what EU is exactly". This is important, as practically no interview

answer included direct or rational-choice criticism, but instead focused on the lack of information or day-to-day irrelevance. Some also mentioned the ‘generational gap’ and ‘the divide between Northern and Southern Europe’ as core problems. The **majority** of responses about the EU were positive and attributed the following elements to the EU: ‘peace and stability’, ‘economic benefits’, ‘freedom of travel’, ‘security’, and ‘single currency’.

TABLE 1: THE EU’S MAIN PROBLEMS (BASED ON KEYWORDS)

Division/Brexit/ Euroscepticism	Populism/ Xenophobia	Migration/ Refugees	Global Warming/ Environment	Socio-economic	Foreign Relation
Polarization	Far-right	Migrant	Ecology	Unregulated markets	NATO
Internal division	Xenophobia	Refugee	Environment	Unemployment	China competition
Anti-EU	Populism	Asylum	Climate	Economic crisis	Tensions with U.S.

