



# Fact and figures from the youth mobility “scene” in Turkey

By **Yörük Kurtaran**

Photos by Marlies Pöschl



Yes, mobility matters, because it is a good tool for young people to explore another culture. It is also a good mechanism to help young people know more about what Europe is all about, with all its glory and its problems. Moreover, it matters because it is one of the fundamental rights that has been recognised under the European Social Charter as well as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

However, what does it really mean when we look at mobility in the context of a specific country, for example, to an Erasmus+ programme country like Turkey? This is a country that was one of the miracles of the last decade (yes, not “has been”, but “was”), a country that has the highest voting turnout rates (more than 85%) in the last five elections yet is highly polarised thanks to the debates and allegations about authoritarianism, secularism, corruption, human rights abuses, minority rights and so on.

Young people in Turkey constitute around 16% of the population. The percentage has been decreasing due to economic developments and rapid urbanisation. Their numbers – around 12.5 million in a total of 78 million – will remain firm in the next 15 years (if *ceteris paribus*, yet refugees will probably change this if they stay) because the overall population is still rising. However, as there is an uneven development between the east and west of the country as well as the city centres and the urban poor areas, the percentage of disadvantaged young people among the youth population has a potential to increase in the coming years. That is probably one of the most significant developments that the country needs to address within the context of youth policy. However, we know that the public expenditure for youth is less than 2.5% of GDP.<sup>1</sup>

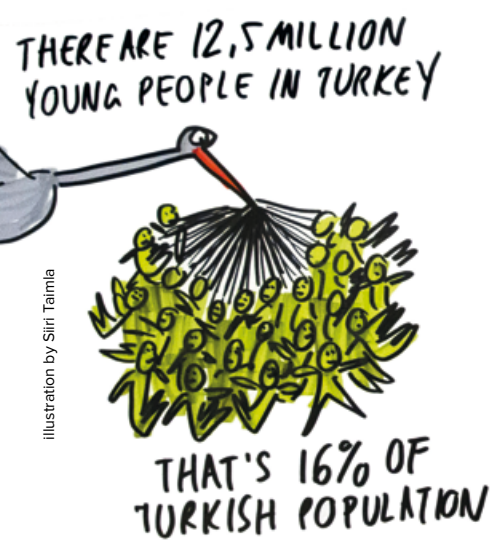


Illustration by Sırı Taimla



Another way to put this is to claim that the policy makers choose tanks and military planes (with a figure of more than 4% of GDP, the security expenditure of Turkey is high above NATO members countries’ average) over the needs of the young people. It is also accurate to claim that as youth unemployment has never been below 15% since 2001, it is the “normal” state for Turkey not to provide employment support to a significant portion of its youth population. The list of “normals” of Turkey can be lengthened; for example according to the 2016 World Press Freedom Index,<sup>2</sup> Turkey ranks 151st out of 180 countries, and it is 125th out of 142 countries in the Gender Gap Index<sup>3</sup> of 2014.

Added to this, the historical conceptualisation of youth in Turkey has been troublesome. Youth are seen as the future of the country, meaning that their rights for today can be delayed for tomorrow. A good example is the right to vote at 18, but the age limit of 25 for running for the parliament. When people talk about young people in Turkey, they tend to think they are all students, yet they forget

that out of the 34 OECD countries Turkey is at the bottom of the list for the percentage of students who graduate from high school. Youth is also considered only as an age group. However, thanks to Pierre Bourdieu, we know that being a young person has a lot to do with taking power relations into consideration. Again, one of the classic lines that probably everybody heard from their elders is “when I was your age, I was doing this and that, yet today you – with all the opportunities that are provided to you, you do just this”, meaning that youth is seen as a group beyond space and time. Do we blame our grandmothers because they do not use the Internet? No. Then why do people tend to behave like this towards young people? That we do not know. Another classic piece of thinking about young people is that they are brought up to fulfil what people think is a greater cause. This instrumentalisation finds its expression in phrases such as the “integrity of the country”, or for “rapid economic growth”. Young people are important, but not because they are simply young people.





## Fact and figures from the youth mobility “scene” in Turkey

Up until 2010, the official youth policy of Turkey was to not have an established youth policy. However, times have changed. Since 2010, the General Directorate of Youth has turned into a Ministry of Youth and Sports. A National Youth and Sports Policy Document has been drafted. Thanks to the highly polarised society, youth has become one of the battle grounds for politics. You can hear a lot of politicians talking about how an “ideal” young person should be.

As anyone can see, youth is one of the hot topics in Turkey. Not because the politicians tend to talk about it more (because they do), but because young lives matter. That is why, in the university, we chose to focus more on the relationship between youth and mobility in one of our projects implemented in 2013.

Based on a series of workshops and research projects that have been implemented through the Network: Participation of Young People in Turkey programme,<sup>4</sup> the field work of one of the research projects was conducted in May 2013. This is a significant date because just after the field work was finished, the Gezi Park protests gained ground and more than 2.5 million people in Turkey (as this is according to the police records, we multiply this number by two) went out in the streets to protest for two months.



Some 2 508 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were interviewed for the study and we found out that 64% of young people have been mobile within Turkey. Yet out of those who were not mobile, 40% say even if there is an opportunity they cannot participate due to “obstacles”. These obstacles were lack of permission from parents, resources, etc. Another striking finding was that the ones who were mobile tended to remain mobile.

The findings for mobility outside of Turkey are equally striking. Only 9% of young people have been out of the country. Of those who had gone abroad, 73% could do so with the support of their family, 7% with the support of their employer and only 1% through a mobility programme. We see that men (remember the “obstacles” of the above paragraph?) and young people living outside of their parents’ house tend to be more mobile. In parallel, children of highly educated mothers tend to be more mobile. Thanks to the findings of such field data as well as our experience in the youth work field in Turkey, we know that visas, the price of a passport, funding opportunities, not knowing a second language, education level and other

factors are determinants of youth mobility. In other words, because of the state’s inability to mobilise social support mechanisms for – at least – equal opportunities, young people from middle and upper income backgrounds are more mobile. And yes, it widens the class gap in Turkey.

When you compare this data with other research<sup>5</sup> results, you see that youth who are more active in a civil society organisation (CSO) tend to be more mobile, thanks to the student exchanges and the support of both CSOs and public institutions. So what does all this tell us? It tells us that promoting and implementing mobility programmes are not enough to fulfil the mission, because the ones who have access to this set of opportunities are sometimes young people who already have access to similar tools. And “young people” are not only young people. This group can be broken down into different categories based on gender, ethnicity, social class and so on. This means that no matter what you imagine as being a full description of a situation involving “young people”, the reality is often way more complex.

