



Bu proje Avrupa Birliđi tarafından finanse edilmektedir.  
This project is funded by the European Union.

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

PODEM



---

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

---



## **TURKEY FINDINGS**

### **Publication Design**

POMPAA

info@pompaa.com

+90 850 885 0 722

www.pompaa.com

### **Cover Image**

Shutterstock

### **Release Date**

October 2020

### **Editing**

Dragoman Istanbul Team

## **PODEM PUBLICATIONS**

ISBN 978-605-67530-8-4

Copyright © 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced electronically or mechanically (photocopy, storage of records or information, etc.) without the permission of the Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (PODEM).

The viewpoints in this publication belong to the authors, and they may not necessarily concur partially or wholly with PODEM's viewpoints as an association.

This project is supported by the Directorate for European Union Affairs within the Civil Society Dialogue between the EU and Turkey Program (CSD-V). Contracting Authority is the Central Finance and Contracts Unit.

## **About PODEM**

Public Policy and Democracy Studies Association (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi alıřmaları Derneęi, 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.

PODEM would like to thank Zeynep Gloz Bakır and Glřah Dark Kahyaoęlu, who took part in the research process and the preparation of the report.

## **Acknowledgements**

With the financial support of the European Union (EU), the research project entitled "Understanding Future Values: Youth and Interaction across the EU and Turkey" is a part of the Fifth Phase of the Civil Society Dialogue Programme (CSD-V) coordinated by the Directorate of EU Affairs. The Contracting Authority is Central Finance and Contracts Unit (CFCU).

## Contents

- 6 Introduction
  
- 13 **I. Views on self-perception: How do the youth feel, think and see themselves and their lives**
  - What they value most in life
  - What they value least in life
  - Self-perception
  - Making decisions in life
  - Civic Engagement
  - Tolerance and Attitudes Towards Differences
  - Future Concerns
  - Future Expectations
  
- 30 **II. Views on Turkey and Europe: Perceptions, interactions and issues**
  - Perception of “Turkey” and “being from Turkey”
  - Perception of “Europe” and “being from Europe”
  - Perception of Erasmus and reflections of the respondents with Erasmus experience
  - Perception of the European Union and views on Turkey-EU relations
  - Main issues in the Political, Social and Economic Agenda

---

# Introduction

---

In the midst of the political, social and economic transformations of the recent decade, youth have become dynamic actors in the public sphere, while finding themselves facing a rapidly evolving global context. The global social interaction scaling up with digital tools and mobility has not only shaped the way youth live and work, but influenced their beliefs, fears and aspirations, and also their approach to the global challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Furthermore, the social interconnectedness is reflected in complex bicultural, multicultural and hybrid identities<sup>1</sup>, which are confronting traditional cultural norms and values at the same time.

Looking at the ideas presented by youth in recent studies on participation in social, political and civil life, we see that youth put emphasis on lifelong learning and mobility with easy access to information on moving and working abroad (European Youth Eurobarometer 2018)<sup>2</sup>. With regard to political space, the level or the way they engage with politics may show variance, but they seem to not be alienated from a variety of political and social issues like environment, health care, education, justice and economic inequality, which inspire their engagement through different means such as volunteering, civil society or online social networks (Pew Research Center 2018)<sup>3</sup>. Previous studies done in Turkey (Next Generation Turkey 2018)<sup>4</sup> also stress that youth in Turkey give priority to independence and individuality, and feel themselves disillusioned from day-to-day politics, although they demonstrate willingness to become active citizens within their communities, and also the wider world.

Against this backdrop, this study focuses on university-level youth in Turkey and the selected countries of the European Union [i.e. Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium] with the objective to explore not only their perceptions towards life domains but also their value-sets, including but not limited to life satisfaction, family values, gender values and self-expression values, the latter of which shows the extent of shifting towards a culture of tolerance and political openness.<sup>5</sup> To do so, we looked at the potential impact of intercultural mobility on youth perceptions and the assumed global consciousness through a robust fieldwork study including university students from Turkey who have travelled to Europe for the Erasmus Program, and

---

<sup>1</sup> See: Arnett, J. J. (2002). The psychology of globalization. *American Psychologist*, 57(10), 774-783.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2018), Flash Eurobarometer 455, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/FLASH/surveyKy/2163> Retrieved online April 8, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See: Wike, R. and Castillo A. (2018) "Many Around the World Are Disengaged From Politics," Pew Research Center. Retrieved online April 8, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/10/17/international-political-engagement/>

<sup>4</sup> See: "Next Generation: Voices of young people in Turkey," British Council (2018), <https://www.britishcouncil.org/tr/en/nextgeneration/turkey>

<sup>5</sup> See: Inglehart F. R. (2018) "Modernization, Existential Security and Cultural Change: Reshaping Human Motivations and Society" in M. Gelfand, C.Y. Chiu & Y-Y Hong (eds.) *Advances in Culture and Psychology Volume 7*, Oxford University Press.

those from Europe who travelled to Turkey for the same reason. The study also seeks to gather information that would allow the exploration of university students' attitudes toward the most pressing issues presently confronting Europe, Turkey and the European Union (EU), and how their perceptions towards Turkey and Europe, and Turkey-EU relations are evolved in line with the current political, economic and social agenda. Overall, the study aims to present the future aspirations and expectations of the target group based on their in-depth narratives.

#### **Under the section on “Views on self-perception” towards life and identity we look at:**

- **Life satisfaction, the most and least valued items in life, self-perception of identity and tolerance towards differences:** Looking at factors related to university students' life satisfaction and happiness; what they value the most and the least in their lives; self-perception of identity and exploring tolerance and attitudes towards differences
- **Decision-making and civic engagement:** Decision-making process in personal life, interest in political participation (i.e. voting) and engagement in civil society
- **Expectations and concerns for the future:** What are university students' future expectations and concerns as individuals.

#### **Under the section on “Views on Turkey and Europe” we look at:**

**Perception of Turkey and Europe, and being from Turkey and Europe:** How Turkey and Europe are constructed in the minds of university students and how they describe the notions of “being from Turkey” and “being from Europe”.

- **Perception of Erasmus Program and reflections of the respondents with Erasmus experience:** Looking at Erasmus perception among the respondents, reflecting Erasmus experience of the respondents in terms of their social environment and engagement with the local community, feeling of safety and living conditions.
- **Political, social, and economic issues of Turkey and Europe in perspective:** The thoughts university students have on the current issues of Europe and Turkey; the subject areas they find positive and negative and their opinions related to the policies implemented through political mechanisms.
- **Perception of the European Union and views on Turkey-EU relations:** The views university students have on the current direction of Turkey-EU relations, the accession process, and the value they attribute to the European Union.

## **Methodology**

This study primarily uses qualitative tools, supported by the use of quantitative data, in order to gain insights from the respondents on both sides. On a methodological basis, this study does not follow a demographically representative approach, and the findings presented here do not attempt to form a generalized depiction of the views and perceptions of the youth in Turkey and Europe, but are illustrative of the major themes and common issues addressed in the research scope. In this direction, we conducted the study in three basic phases as illustrated in the table below:

TABLE 1: METHODOLOGY PROCESS

Phase	Stages	Goal/Purpose	Data Collection Tools
Exploratory study	Literature review	Compilation of previous research on the value-sets of youth, intercultural interaction, perception of Turkey and Europe	Desk-based research
	Expert workshops	<p>Acquiring ideas and deepening the sophistication of the research framework, contents and headings of analysis.</p> <p>Discussion on previous studies carried out in Turkey and Europe on youth perceptions, values and beliefs.</p> <p>Technical feedback on methodology and phrasing of questions.</p>	Two workshops were held, one in Brussels (May 2019) and one in Istanbul (May 2019), respectively.
Qualitative research	Semi-structured interview questionnaire	Preparation of the questionnaire to be used in the fieldwork	<p>Defining the main analysis headings of the study</p> <p>Reviewing previous related youth and public surveys (e.g. World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, large-scale youth surveys)</p> <p>Preliminary visits to universities and pilot interviews</p>
	In-depth interviews in 5 cities of Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Diyarbakır, Trabzon) and 4 EU countries (Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium) with university students at undergraduate and graduate levels.	Collecting current data on the youth's self-perception towards their lives and value-sets; concerns and expectations for the future as well as their perception of Turkey and Europe, and the reflections of interactions through the Erasmus Programme	<p>4 semi-structured interview questionnaires designed:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.Questionnaire for Europe-based respondents with Erasmus experience in Turkey</li> <li>2.Questionnaire for Turkey-based respondents with Erasmus experience in Europe</li> <li>3.Questionnaire for Turkey-based respondents without Erasmus experience in Europe</li> <li>4.Questionnaire for Europe-based respondents without Erasmus experience in Turkey</li> </ol>
Qualitative survey	Online survey (applied only to the Turkey section)	<p>Distributed to universities and students' groups to be filled out voluntarily</p> <p>Data used to support the findings of the fieldwork study in Turkey</p>	<p>The interview questionnaires adapted to the online survey (via SurveyMonkey)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Survey questionnaire for Turkey-based respondents with Erasmus experience in Europe</li> <li>2. Survey questionnaire for Turkey-based respondents without Erasmus experience in Europe</li> </ol>

**1. Exploratory Study:** The first phase of the study followed an exploratory approach with the intention to review the relevant previous studies on the specific themes of (1) youth perceptions and value-sets in relation to their lives as well as social, economic and political developments, (2) the existing data on perceptions towards Europe and Turkey, and (3) the mutual interaction of the university-level youth in Europe and Turkey through exchange programs such as Erasmus Program. In this phase, we used two main tools:

**-Literature review:** As described, a literature review was done to form the basis of the study through examining different local and international resources, including large-scale surveys such as the World Values Survey, Eurobarometer and large-scale Turkey-based youth surveys, as well as relevant academic work on the construction of Turkey and Europe/EU in the perceptions of youth. The review was useful to form the main analysis headings of the research and the fieldwork questionnaire.

**-Expert workshops:** Two consecutive expert workshops were held, one in Brussels (May 2019) and another in Istanbul (May 2019). These workshops attracted the participation of academics from different universities and national Erasmus offices as well as experts and civil society professionals working in the area of youth and social perception, and also university students with Erasmus experience in Europe. Expectations from the workshops were met as we discussed the research framework and headings of analysis, and received technical feedback on methodology and phrasing of questions, and also previous studies on youth perceptions and values. The participants also shared relevant experiences regarding the Erasmus Program, and the implications of cultural interactions on mutual perceptions.

**2. Qualitative Research:** In the context of the qualitative research, we aimed to gather data regarding perceptions of the university-level youth from Turkey and Europe towards their lives and their value-sets. The study further aimed to gauge potential influences of social and cultural interaction through exchange programs on the respondents' lives and perceptions towards Turkey and Europe. This is because the study's target group included students from Turkey with Erasmus experience in Europe and vice versa.

In the course of the qualitative phase, a comprehensive semi-structured interview questionnaire was prepared, reflecting the primary questions taken up in various studies encountered in the context of the literature review and the expert workshops. The interview questionnaire was designed in a way to apply the in-depth interviews to the respondents with and without Erasmus experience in Turkey and Europe (see the Table 1 - Methodology Process). To make it clearer, the respondent group is comprised of the following:

- Undergraduate/Graduate students from Turkey with Erasmus experience in Europe
- Undergraduate/Graduate students from Turkey without Erasmus experience in Europe
  
- Undergraduate/Graduate students from Europe with Erasmus experience in Turkey
- Undergraduate/Graduate students from Europe without Erasmus experience in Turkey

**-Fieldwork process:** Accordingly, we carried out in-depth interviews in Turkey and Europe with a total of 195 respondents. The selection of the countries in Europe [i.e., Germany, the Netherlands, France and Belgium] is based on their political, social and economic connections to Turkey as EU Member States. On the other side, the selection of the cities in Turkey [i.e., Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Trabzon and Diyarbakır] considers geographical balance.

The selection of respondents involved snowball sampling methods and the research team visited different universities for the interviews. We also maintained a gender-balanced approach in the selection of respondents for the in-depth interviews with 109 female and 86 male respondents overall (see Table 2 and 4). Preliminary visits were done in Turkey for the purpose of testing the interview questionnaire – before the actual fieldwork stage started in both geographical locations - and also the technical and logistical arrangements to reach the respondents at their resident universities.

The in-depth interviews took between 40 minutes to 1.5 hours, and all interviews were carried out between September 2019 and February 2020. In very few cases, the research team reached the respondents via Skype to do the interview because of time and location constraints. The interviews were conducted by the authors together with two other researchers at ENC, and the three others at PODEM. All respondents were informed about the research project beforehand, their oral consent was asked, and all interviews were kept anonymous in order to protect the identity of respondents.

**3. Online survey:** In order to extend the study sample, the interview questionnaire was adapted to the format of an online survey prepared on SurveyMonkey. The online survey was applied only to the respondents from Turkey, and in two versions for the respondents with and without Erasmus Program experience. Overall, 146 respondents from Turkey's different cities answered the survey questions (see Table 2) between October 2019 and February 2020. The data extracted from the survey is used to support the findings of the in-depth interviews done in Turkey.

The respondents spent an average of 20 minutes to complete the online questionnaire, which included demographic, multiple choice, rating scale, ranking, matrix questions and certain open-ended questions. It is important to note that the respondents voluntarily participated in the survey. The research team shared the survey with the student and Erasmus offices at different universities through e-mail, and requested the officers to distribute it to the students.

TABLE 2: NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS

Turkey (in-depth interviews)	111
Turkey (online survey)	147
Europe (in-depth interviews)	84
Total	342

TABLE 3: LOCATION OF THE RESPONDENTS

Europe (in-depth interviews)		Turkey (in-depth interviews + online survey)
Germany	Berlin	Istanbul
	Cologne	Ankara
	Bochum	Trabzon
France	Paris	Diyarbakır
	Lille	İzmir
	Rennes	Kocaeli
The Netherlands	Amsterdam	Muğla
	Delft	Edirne
	Leiden	Eskişehir
	Rotterdam	Sakarya
Belgium	Tilburg	
	Brussel	
	Antwerp	
	Leuven	

## Background Information of the Respondents who participated in the study

TABLE 4: GENDER

	Female	Male
Turkey (in-depth interviews)	60	51
Turkey (online survey)	79	67
Europe (in-depth interviews)	50	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>153</b>

**Note:** Based on the gender data, one respondent of the online survey is identified as "Other."

TABLE 5: AGE

	Range
In-depth interviews + online survey	19-34

- Geographical background:** An absolute majority of the respondents from Europe declared that they were born in their countries of residence (i.e., Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands), whereas a small minority declared that they were either born and/or held citizenship from other countries; for example, Kosovo, Lebanon, Poland or Turkey. The entire of the remaining respondents are from Turkey.

- **Educational background:** An absolute majority of the respondents from Europe stated that they had graduated from free public high schools. Likewise, an absolute majority of the respondents from Turkey [including in-depth interviews and the online survey] graduated from public high schools with a very small minority holding a high school degree from a private school/college. No noticeable difference between the respondents from Turkey and Europe that engaged in Erasmus exchange and those who had never engaged in educational exchange programs were visible in terms of educational background.
- **Sources of Income:** When asked about “sources of income,” an overwhelming majority of the respondents from Europe across all countries responded that they rely on “part-time/student employment” and “pocket money [family support]”. Looking at the answers of the respondents from Turkey [including in-depth interviews and the online survey], an overwhelming majority are found to rely on “pocket money [family support]” and “scholarship/ state student loans.” The respondents also take short-term “part-time/student jobs” and benefit from “housing/accommodation support”.
- **Abroad experience:** It is observed that a significant majority of respondents from both Turkey and Europe have previous abroad experience, mostly short-term. The most common reasons to go abroad among the respondents– when excluding the Erasmus experience – are (1) touristic purposes; (2) learning experience (e.g. attending a language course); (3) going a special event; and (4) visiting relatives.
- **Knowledge of foreign languages:** A majority of the respondents from Turkey and Europe with exchange experience declared higher levels of foreign language knowledge compared to other respondents who had not engaged in educational exchange programs. In both geographical areas, the respondents with exchange experience are seen to be interested in learning the language of their Erasmus country. A hypothetical explanation for this disparity, which was apparent across the respondents both in Turkey and Europe, is likely to be connected to exchange student’s willingness to learn about cultures and languages, and merits further examination.

---

## I. Views on self-perception: How do the youth feel, think and see themselves and their lives

---

Our interviews started with a series of short-answer questions to obtain demographic information about the respondents. Afterwards, the respondents were first asked to assess about life satisfaction and happiness, two criteria perceived critical to evaluate quality of life.

Our findings suggest that the respondents from Turkey report an average life satisfaction value of 3 points on a 5-point scale. In our endeavor, however, the underlying quest is to discover the things that students correlate with life satisfaction, and to see the impact living conditions have on life satisfaction. Four factors were found to correlate with life satisfaction and happiness in the narratives of the respondents: (1) **individualism and freedom**; (2) **presence of family and friends**; (3) **economic situation**; and (4) **being optimistic and forward-looking**. While listening to the respondents, it was possible to note their self-awareness of the challenges around them, but also the hope that drives their perseverance:

“My motivation lies in what I want to achieve for the future. I do not look at today, I am living for the future,” Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“I want to follow my dreams, becoming an artist and an academic, and create good things for my country. I also want to travel around the world and have a good family.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Ankara

“Being productive, earning a living by using the skills I have and developing myself for the future.” Male, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The perceived optimism clashes with increased economic stress that appears to adversely influence life satisfaction, and also the respondents’ future perspectives (also see “Future Concerns”) as understood from the daily cases. A respondent based in the northeastern city of Trabzon speaks about his enthusiasm for sports and travelling during the interview, yet he finds sports equipment and travel to be relatively expensive. Similar feelings were observed among the other respondents:

“I can say the deteriorating economy in Turkey is a factor. Students are more affected by this.” Male, Age 24, no Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

## What they value most in life

More importantly, the study aimed to understand what young people value most in their lives, which would allow insight into their value judgements.

When 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 **(1) family** appears to be a strong value among the majority of the respondents. The family's unconditional support and sense of security strengthen the emotional attachment as reflected by a respondent in Istanbul:

"The fact that my mom has made so much sacrifice to provide me with good living conditions, and in response to this, it is important for me to avoid the behaviors that would hurt my mom. This actually gives me a kind of relief and the peace of mind to do other things I want to do." Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"My family is the biggest support in my life. My mother and father are my closest friends, and I always want to have their blessing." Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The acknowledged place of the family on one hand, but the young people's aspiration to live an independent life is what they value the most next. They care about **(2) sense of freedom and spending time independently**. This situation further reflects itself on living with parents. A majority of the respondents talked about how their personal spaces gradually become distinct from those of their parents. The cultural experience of Erasmus students adds another dimension to this perception with the flexibility and self-sufficiency they gained while they lived in a different country.

"Well, after a time, the personal spaces become distinct [compared to my parents]. We like different things, even our choices in what we like to eat become different." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

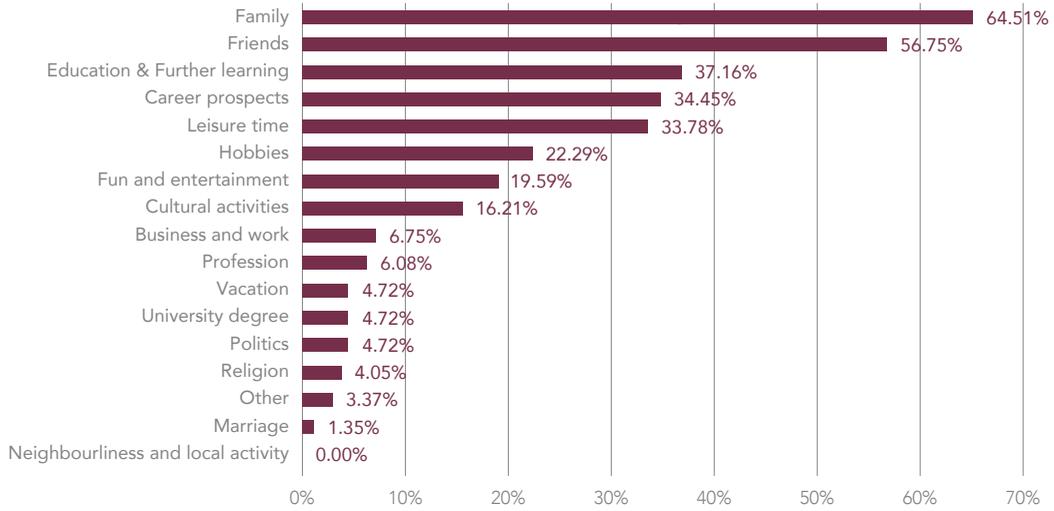
"I would prefer not to live with my parents as it kills individualism. On one hand, living with your parents offers a more comfortable space and you live healthier and perhaps happier. On the other side, it has shortcomings." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

We observe that economic factors and cultural values at the societal level seem to play a role in the extent that young people are able to create their personal space or to sustain it. Despite their willingness to live their own lives, the respondents stress the financial comfort that the family provides, and also in taking care of household tasks and urgent needs. "Living away from my parents is dependent on cultural aspects, I mean getting married, and monetary things," said an interviewed student from Istanbul.

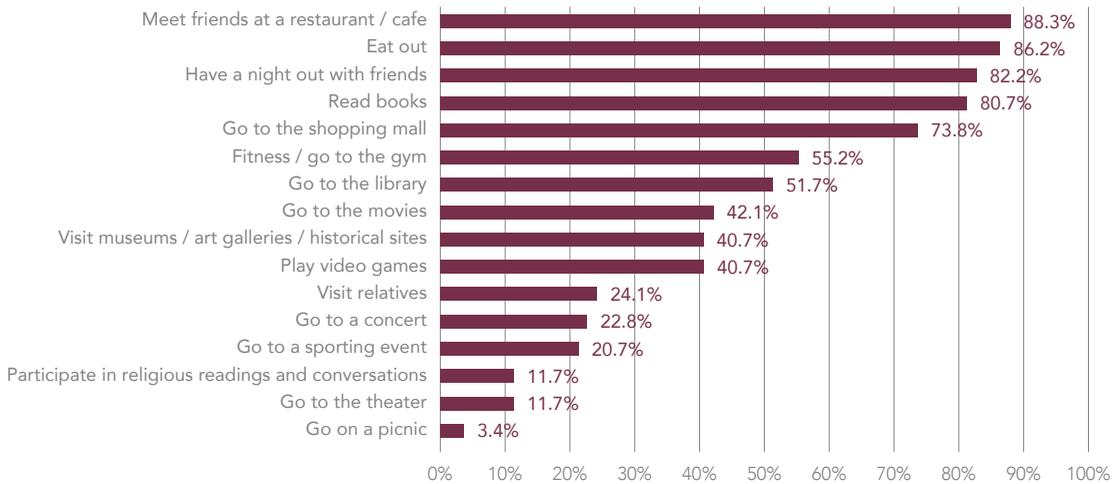
**(3) Friends and social environment** are what young people also value in their lives. An overwhelming majority of the interviewed students like having a night out with friends and meeting friends at a restaurant/café.

Looking at the findings of the online survey, we observe a similar pattern with "family" placed as the most important (64.5%) followed by "friends" (56.7%). Education and career prospects take their places as the next most important items with leisure time following right after. (see Graphic 1).

GRAPHIC 1: Which three of the following are the most important to you? (Online survey data)



GRAPHIC 2: Which of the following activities do you regularly do at least once a month? (Online survey data, multiple choice)

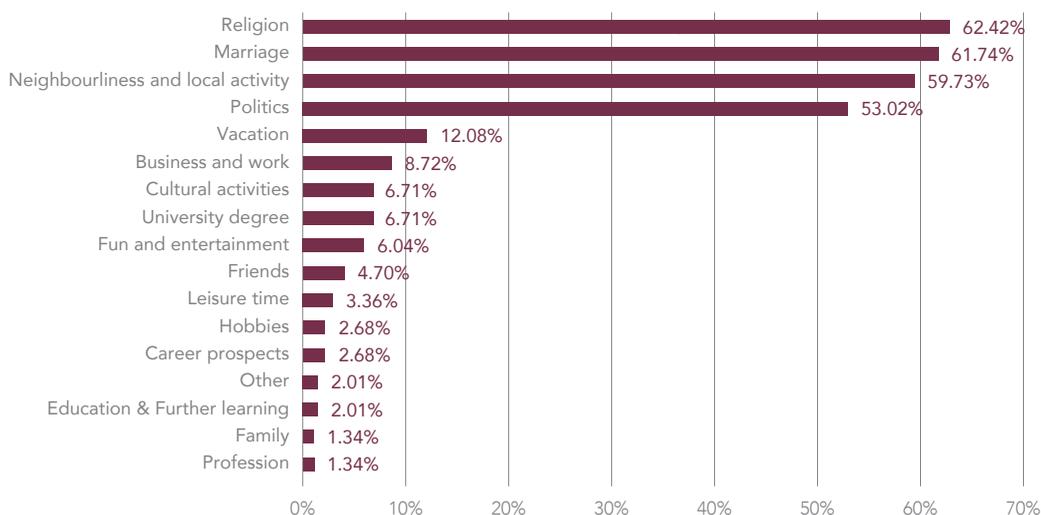


Other activities the respondents regularly engaged in are going to the movies; reading books; going to the shopping mall; eating out and going to the library to study. One interesting finding is that there is a tendency among the respondents with Erasmus experience to visit museums/art galleries/historic sites slightly more than the others. The least frequent activities they do are visiting relatives, participating in religious readings, and going to the theatre.

## What they value least in life

While asking the respondents to identify the most important things in their lives, we also tried to look at what they do not value or attach the least importance to. According to the findings of the in-depth interviews, four items appear to dominate the answers of the respondents - regardless of having Erasmus experience or not - which are respectively (1) **politics**, (2) **religion**, (3) **marriage** and (4) **neighborhood**. The online survey data also shows the same results (see Graphic 3) although the order of the items is slightly different.

GRAPHIC 3: Which three of the following are the least important to you? (Online survey data)



To start with the role of politics in their life, the respondents do not appear to be actively engaged in the political activity. Their minds are much more occupied with their future, such as earning a living and job security. Moreover, politics is seen 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 about politics. This was also revealed in previous studies conducted with a larger youth sample in Turkey (see Next Generation: Voices of Young People in Turkey, British Council 2018). Our finding, however, should be interpreted cautiously because disengagement does not necessarily mean that they are indifferent to or unaware of political and societal developments both home and abroad as further discussed in the following sections of this report.

“As someone who grew up in Diyarbakır, politics is unavoidably everywhere. Politics makes me tense, though. I avoid clashing with my family and friends due to the differences in our opinions.” Female, Age 19, no Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

“I would engage with politics, yet I think politics in Turkey does not meet the expectations of the society.” Male, Age 26, no Erasmus experience, Ankara

Secondly, the interviewees do not disregard **marriage** at all, yet it is not a priority item for them, and the concept of marriage is commonly associated with traditional social values to which they feel distant as discussed by a respondent:

“Marriage is related to our social values similar to having a child. If you are a son in the family, there is a stereotype you are expected to pursue: ‘Graduate from your school, find a job, do your military service and then get married.’ I am not a person against marriage, yet this is something related to what you might see your life. Of course, I can marry if someone [I like] comes up, but this is not a big deal.” Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

When it comes to **religion**, we understand that the young people have different interpretations about religion and develop different approaches when addressing it. “I take conscience as principle, instead of religion. Conscience is important. Living with clear conscience, not religious norms is important.” said one of the respondents in our study. Another student points to the practice of religion in a broader context:

“This is not something related to religion as phenomenon. People put religion at the very center of their lives and despite seeming to live according to the religion [they believe in], they are actually distant from it at all. They are forced to believe certain things.” Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Finally, while the young people value daily socialization, and have strong connections with their families and friends, **engagement with the neighborhood** is not on their list of important issues. There appears a lack of neighborhood culture in their lives, which is consistent with the shift from a collectivist culture to a culture where individualistic tendencies are increasingly being observed in society over time. This also has to do with the changes in the mode of socialization, particularly with the use of social media, which has become the avenue of interaction for youth in general.

## 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 students responded by describing their individual character, such as being open minded, respectful to others, free, a good friend, innovative, and enjoying helping others. We observed that students have a tendency to describe themselves through their ordinary life experiences and their own social environment, rather than political, ethnic or religious identities and/or ideologies.

While describing themselves, the respondents put a strong emphasis on two issues; having tolerance towards differences and awareness about the impact of societal dynamics on people’s attitudes and perceptions. These two issues were referenced by the majority of the respondents regardless of their Erasmus experience during the interviews in Turkey. With strong reference to the social and political dynamics around them, they refrained from giving “static” descriptions about themselves and mentioned how social and political changes are continuously shaping their personalities and perceptions towards their lives.

“I identify myself as a woman and a Turk. I am not a feminist, but I defend gender equality. I am a citizen of the world. I do not think that identities are very important as they are like stamps attached to people. If I were born within a Christian society, my religious identity would have been shaped by

Christianity, but I was born in Turkey and my religious identity is shaped by Islam. However, I do not identify myself through predetermined patterns." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Trabzon  
 "If I had to identify myself, I would say that I am a person who tries to stay away from religious or political identities even though the environment which I was born and raised in affects me and I cannot escape that. I was born in Central Anatolia and I stay away from leftist tendencies as far as I can due to the teachings of my environment." Male, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon  
 "I do not find this conversation sincere. Your identity changes with the place where you live in. For example, if I move to a conservative place, I would stand out as an open-minded person but in Europe for example, I would stand out as a conservative person. For this reason, it is not right to establish specific identities or label myself with them." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Ankara

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" (or global citizenship). It is also important to note that while respondents were describing themselves as "world citizens", they were explaining their reasoning through the use of negations, namely by "what they are not". For example, while they emphasized they are "citizens of the world", they explain themselves with references to "not being discriminative", "not having religious dogmas", and "not having prejudices towards others".

"I do not value the nationalist identity highly and I am a citizen of the world. Religion should not be the determining factor. Freedom of expression is important." Female, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

"I am tolerant, open-minded and cosmopolitan. I care about humanity and there is no place for discrimination." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

"I never discriminate against people. I approach people because they are people. There is only one identity for me and that is humanity and it is shaped by how I help someone and take my place in their hearts." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

"I identify myself as a human of the world. I respect all contradicting opinions, but I keep my distance. I try to avoid discussion platforms. I discuss things when necessary, but I do not prolong anything, and I do not turn them into fights. Other than that, I believe that I am open-minded, and I never judge people. I do not care about what people do, speaking in terms of gossip. I am not very interested in that. I care about people's experiences and I like to hear about them." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Compared to the high tendency of defining themselves via the concepts of inclusivity and tolerance, the use of political and religious concepts such as "nationalist", "secular", "conservative", "libertarian", and "socialist" was low and mentioned only by a minority group among the respondents. 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. We observed that just a couple of respondents used notions of gender while describing themselves. Some examples from the narratives of the respondents are:

*“Liberal, conservative, proactive, positivist”*

*“Liberal, conservative, democrat, Muslim”*

*“Muslim, humanist (Islam embodies humanism), student (as I feel the need to learn wherever I visit)”*

*“Woman, free, liberal, environmentalist”*

*“Reformist, open-minded, interested, feminist, pansexual or an individual of the LGBT, equalist, vegetarian, animal-lover, poor”.*

## **Making decisions in life**

*“It was the first time [in Erasmus] I was away from my family. When I was doing something, when I got sick, when I went somewhere or to shop, or when doing laundry and cleaning, it was all me deciding everything.”* Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

*“I had the same worldview with the Erasmus students there, we were doing joint activities, and we travelled the country with different friends. [Here] both my family and friends intervene in my decision-making. I was very free there.”* Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Ankara

The narratives of the respondents reflect much about the perceived gain of independence and sense of freedom when they were in Erasmus. Indeed, a majority of the respondents with Erasmus experience said that daily responsibilities, whether large or small, positively impacted their self-decision and problem-solving skills.

A more interesting picture comes out when learning of the strategies they come up with to avoid conflict with the family in decision-making, which would support the argument (Lüküslü 2013)<sup>6</sup> that young people have strong ties to their families, and tend to “lie to their families or hide their relationships rather than engaging in direct conflict with the rules and values of the family.” Some respondents stated that they did not mention their application to the Erasmus Program to their families, or changed their country preferences to find a compromise.

*“I gave the news that I was going to Erasmus after it was confirmed. I thought I would be unsuccessful and my application would be rejected, this is why I was afraid to mention it to my family.”* Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

*“Sometimes, I shape my decisions according to my family. I may have chosen to go to the Europe for Erasmus, yet I chose Poland not to put my family in a financially difficult situation.”* Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

It appears that the role and guidance of the family has a particular place in the lives of the respondents, a large majority of whom are not financially independent. They opt to consult their parents about monetary issues such as moving to another house, going abroad, finding a job, or pursuing further education. Consistent with this view retained from in-depth interviews, the online survey results show that 55% of the overall respondents live with their parents, while the remaining

---

<sup>6</sup> Lüküslü, D. (2013) “Necessary conformism: An art of living for young people in Turkey”. *New Perspectives on Turkey*.

portion live away from their parents, either sharing a flat with friends or a close relative such as cousin or brother/sister, living in student dorms or alone.

“I do not make my decisions entirely by myself. I am financially dependent on my family and they have a say. They do not intervene in my political views and faith, and other personal things, yet I cannot move to another city or house on my own.” Male, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul.

“Although my family does not impose on me, I do prefer not to do something that makes them unhappy. I once had a chance to do an internship at a bank. However, I knew that, since my family is conservative, they would not want it. This is why I entirely gave up [working in] the finance sector. They do not know anything about this.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The individual decision-making mechanism among the respondents appears to work more actively with regard to micro- level and personal issues, including relationships with friends.

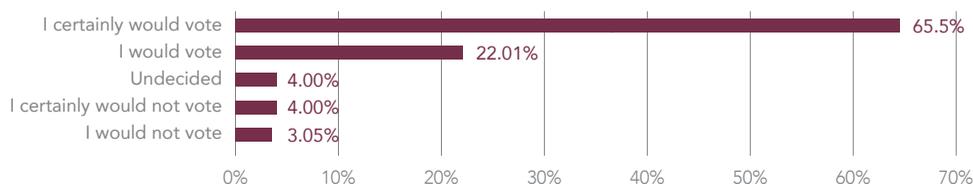
## Civic Engagement

With reference to participation in civil society activities and volunteer experience, half of the respondents, with and without Erasmus experience, mentioned that at least once in their lives they had voluntarily participated in a civil society activity. Regardless of having Erasmus experience or not, the majority of volunteer experience was in the areas of environment, humanitarian activities and youth studies.

To understand their level of engagement with civil society organizations, we asked whether they have active membership in any kind of civil society institutions ranging from university student clubs, to political party and union memberships. The overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they are members of university student clubs with a specific focus on sports and cultural activities. Compared to the high level of engagement with cultural and social activities, only a minority among the respondents mentioned their memberships in political parties.

With relation to their political engagement through voting, we observed both in in-depth interviews and the online survey that **the overwhelming majority of the respondents are actively voting** (since the age of voting eligibility) and they consider voting as a duty and a critical tool to actively participate in the politics of the country. When asked about whether they would vote if there were elections next week, the overwhelming majority of the students stated they would “definitely go for voting” to perform their duty, to exercise their right to vote, and to have a say in government and their own future.

GRAPHIC 4: **Would you vote if there were elections this week? (Online survey data)**



The majority of the respondents state that the reason behind their willingness to vote is their desire to have an impact on the country, to voice their political ideas and exercise their right to express themselves.

"I believe that democracy should be our mission. The representation of my ideas is important. My country's profile should match more with my vision and I see this as my duty." Male, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Ankara

"I see voting as a way of actively participating in politics and it is a way to voice your opinion. The path to be active in politics and have a say in my country's as well as my own future lies in voting." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"Voting is my right. The people who have the capacity to change the country I live in will be determined by my vote. If I do not vote, I will not have the right to complain." Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"As an individual, it is a way of expressing myself as well as performing my duty." Female, Age 20, no Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

"Especially in Turkey, there are very limited options for an individual to display his/her opinions to the government or its institutions. Although it might not have a great impact, elections are one of those options. It is one of those rare platforms where you can express your own opinion. Although the odds are slim, why should I not take this chance? If I lived in a very democratic country where society was highly active in building their channels of dialogue, maybe then, I would not vote." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Compared to the majority of the respondents who argue that voting is important to shape the political scene in the country, a minority group among the respondents feels more pessimistic and think that their vote will not change anything in the country. They state that voting is of crucial importance for the country, but still argue that their vote has no direct impact on the politics in Turkey.

"I think it is a responsibility. The decisions that will be made by the leading authorities will have a direct impact on me, therefore, we need to share our opinions. There's no party that represents me though. I have to remain apolitical and it will always be like this." Male, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

"I like the fact that this right is given to us, not because it can change anything." Female, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, İzmir

"Voting determines the future of my country. We know that the results will not change but even as an intangible responsibility, we have to vote." Female, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"I've always voted for my father's sake as he wanted me to vote. There is no political party which reflects my opinions. I do not think that things will change. If my house were further away from the election center, I would not have voted." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

"I do not think that elections will change politics." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

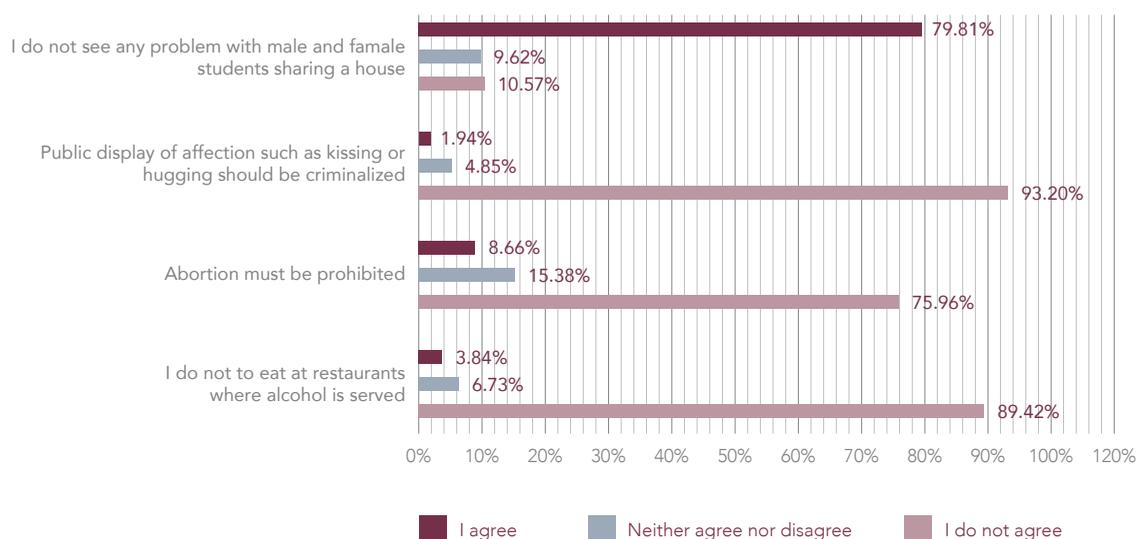
"I'm aware that things will not change but why not? I am a citizen of the Republic of Turkey and it is my duty to vote." Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

## Tolerance and Attitudes Towards Differences

In order 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 show that an overwhelming majority 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 "strongly disagree" or "disagree" with statements such as "I prefer not to eat at restaurants where alcohol is served" and "abortion must be prohibited." (see Graphic 5)

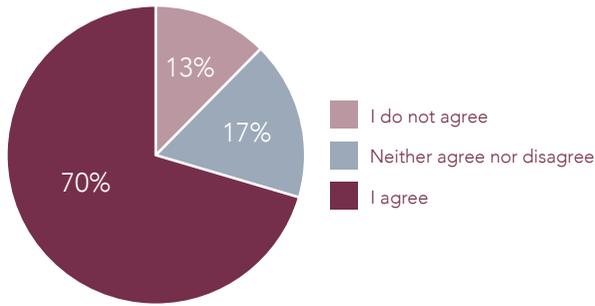
GRAPHIC 5: Lifestyle and religion-oriented traditions (In-depth interview)



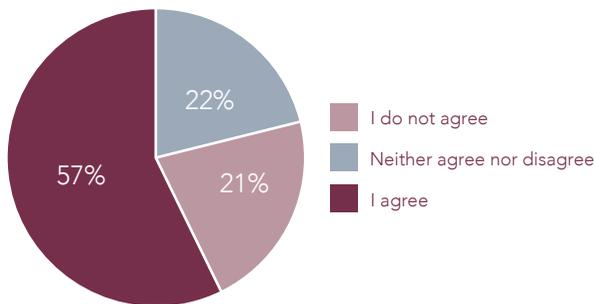
Regarding questions about tolerance towards religious differences and societal demands, the respondents again showed great support to statements such as "Cemevis"<sup>7</sup> should be recognized as places of worship" and "religious classes should not be obligatory" (see Graphic 6 and 7).

<sup>7</sup> Cemevi refers to the place of worship for the Alevi community.

GRAPHIC 6: **Cemevis should be officially recognized as palaces of worship** (Based on in-depth interviews)

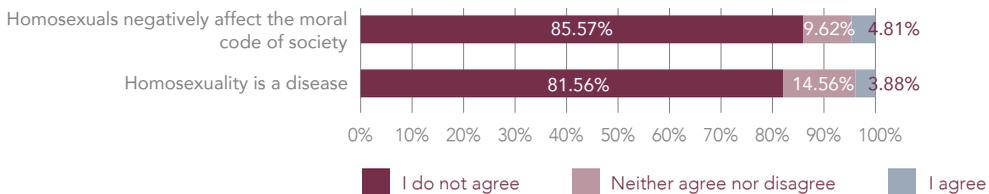


GRAPHIC 7: **Religious classes should not be obligatory** (Based on in-depth interviews)



When questioned on their opinions about negative attitudes towards homosexuality and its impact on the moral codes of society, the respondents strongly disagree with the statement “homosexuality is a disease”, around 82.% of the respondents participated to the in-depth interviews. Similarly, approximately 86% of all interviewees disagreed with the statement “homosexuals are negatively affecting the moral code of society” as shown in the table below.

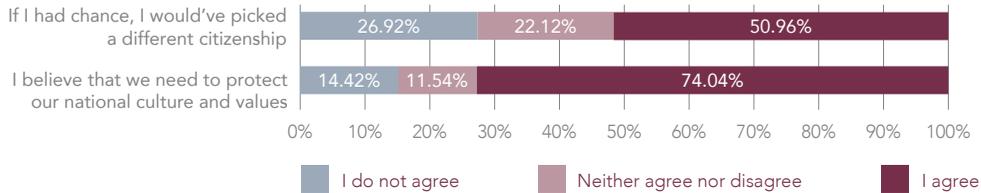
GRAPHIC 8: **Tolerance towards homosexuality (In-depth interviews)**



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 all interviewees showed their support. However, when asked whether they would prefer to be a citizen of another country if they had a chance to select their own nationality, half of the interviewees agreed that they would prefer to be a citizen of another country.

This is something often mentioned when respondents' future plans were discussed during the in-depth part of the interviews. As it will be discussed in detail, the reasoning behind this is mostly related to job opportunities and their career plans abroad. However, it is important to note that there is a relatively high number of interviewees (approx. 22%) saying that they are uncertain about this statement, and they neither agree nor disagree with it.

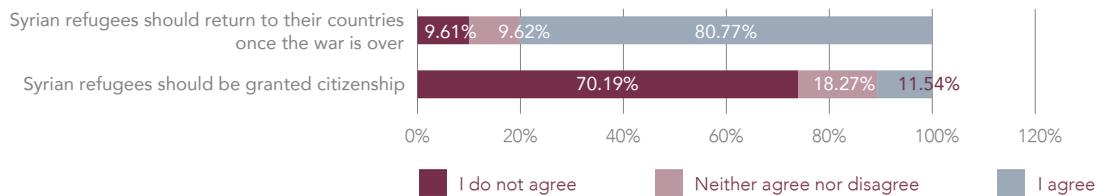
**GRAPHIC 9: Belonging and attachment to nationality and culture (In-depth interviews)**



To understand the respondents' 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 from a specific social segment. Responses to these two types of questions show that there is a significant level of intolerance towards Syrian refugees (Syrians under temporary protection status - SuTPs) in Turkey among the youth. In parallel with the findings of other public surveys conducted in Turkey<sup>8</sup>, our study also confirms the low level of tolerance among the respondents.

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

**GRAPHIC 10: Attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey (In-depth interviews)**



Although an overwhelming majority of respondents do not want to see Syrians as citizens of Turkey, they do not have social prejudices. Majority of respondents stated that they would accept a Syrian refugee to be their doctors or physicians, building on the view that they received more or less the same medical education in their own country. The societal segments listed in the question

<sup>8</sup> See the results of the study conducted by Emre Erdoğan and Pinar Uyan Semerci, "Attitudes Towards Syrians in Turkey-2017", weblink: [https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/03/15/turkish-perceptions-of-syrian-refugees-20180315\\_Y0gYZol.pdf](https://goc.bilgi.edu.tr/media/uploads/2018/03/15/turkish-perceptions-of-syrian-refugees-20180315_Y0gYZol.pdf)

included, "Pious, Kurdish, Turkish, Armenians, Alevis, Homosexuals, Syrian refugees, Atheists". An overwhelming majority stated that they would be satisfied to receive treatment by a doctor from any of these societal segments.

However, it should also be noted that a minority group among the respondents stated that they would not prefer their doctors to be a Syrian refugee, regardless of their university degrees or experience in medical treatment. The reasons behind "not preferring a Syrian doctor" is explained through references to "the low quality of the university education in Syria" and the perception of "privileges reserved for the Syrian refugees" in Turkey. The majority of the respondents who showed a negative reaction towards Syrian doctors referred to these two issues. Discontent about Syrians' presence in Turkey is mostly related to the issue of "government's providing exceptional privileges to the Syrian people living in Turkey". This is mentioned the most as the main reason behind their discontent. Among the list of different societal segments, "pious people" were ranked as "the second most unwanted doctors" by the interviewees.

"According to my observations, pious people would not completely perform the necessities of medical sciences. I can give you an example from something my friend told me. A woman fainted in Konya and people did not even lift her up. Due to this perception of religiosity, I would not want a doctor in Turkey. Regarding the Syrian refugees, frankly people's race does not matter to me. While I do not have any problems with Kurdish-Turkish-Armenian people, why do I have something against them? The concept of "Syrian Refugee" bothers me. This is related to the concessions presented to them. I would prefer a Syrian refugee to be a doctor in his/her own country. Their understanding of motherland and mine is very different. I think that a Syrian refugee would be insufficient as a doctor. For example, there are currently some claims and one of them is this; these Syrians come to this country and without any examination can be admitted to the faculty of their choosing in our universities and it is not fair. I do not think that I can trust someone performing his or her profession like this. The second is; I think that I cannot communicate with them. There are many people who have lived and studied with Syrian refugees, but I think that culturally we are very different. Whatever I told you about the religious people applies to the Syrian refugees. I think that their stances are very similar. Of course, there are exceptions in both societies, but I see these societies like this. " Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İstanbul

## Future Concerns

To understand what bothers them in their lives today and analyze the issues of concern and future expectations, we asked our respondents various open-ended questions. These questions asked about “the three most important problems in their lives”, “the three most important concerns towards the future” and “the three most important dreams and expectations for the future”. We see that the first two concerns towards the future are in line with the first two problems in their lives today. As it is the case with the other public surveys<sup>9</sup> conducted across Turkey, **problems and concerns related to the economic situation are by far the most commonly mentioned issues among the overall respondents.** Feeling insecure about the job opportunities and the fear of long-term unemployment are the most common concerns. We also see that there are no apparent differences between students who have Erasmus experience and those who do not.

“First, concerns about future, would I be able to find a job? Second, economic concerns. Third, will I ever have the economic means to achieve my dreams?” Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

“First, there is uncertainty: we do not know what will happen to the economy, [there is the] fear of unemployment. Second, will I have my current economic means in the future – I mean economic and educational means.” Female, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“I have concerns about the future. I am afraid of a future where I do not achieve my dreams and have to live a life I had never imagined. That is why I always try to come up with plans A, B and C. I did not choose my major willingly and I am indecisive about what I will do. I am concerned about if I will be able to work abroad”. Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“Concerns about the future (normally I do not make long-term plans and I look at recent graduates and I see problems like unemployment or having a job in an undesired field). The uncertainties in the country and the problems at school.” Male, Age 25, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The second most common problem comes with personal and psychological references. These include being or feeling indecisive about themselves, their future and the selection of a career path; problems with time management and feeling of lagging behind in their to do list, i.e., not being able to catch up with their own schedule or accomplish all the things they want to do.

“It might be related to my indecisiveness and I am aware that this will have a role in my career. I am not a person who can make decisions and I get bored easily. Things have to change constantly for me. I cannot focus on one thing. If I start to do something, I am sure that I will get bored and try to do something else. My major being open to different fields makes this situation even worse for a person like me. My major is very problematic in Turkey. If I ever want

<sup>9</sup> See the fieldwork report “Türkiye’de Gençlerin İyi Olma Hali” [Wellbeing of Youth in Turkey] by Emre Erdoğan <https://habitatdernegi.org/wp-content/uploads/turkiye-de-genclerin-iyi-olma-hali-raporu.pdf> [in Turkish]

to do something in literature, how many English journals are there? To be honest, I slowly want to gain my economic independence from my family, but school is very time consuming etc.” Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Concerns over nation-wide problems or references to the current situation of the country were the least mentioned issues by the respondents. A minority of the respondents directly linked their problems and the issues of their concerns to the political and economic situation in Turkey. It is important to note that the problems in Turkey was mentioned as one of the three most important concerns about the future, but not the problems in the respondents’ everyday-life experiences. In that regard, these concerns should be considered as influencing their outlook towards the future.

“Politics in Turkey; finding a job; foreign affairs of Turkey leaning toward a politics of loneliness.” Male, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

“Not being able to get rewarded for your effort due to social issues and state related affairs; Moving backward in terms of the economy, industry and mentality.” Male, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“First, not being able to leave the country before it gets worse, and being stuck in Turkey while it became worse. Second, not having another planet as humanity, as we are currently killing the planet. And third, not being able to realize a film I wrote.” Male, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, İzmir

“First, living in an unjust environment, second lack of economic freedom and third not being able to raise my children well in terms of educational and cultural atmosphere.” Female, Age 26, Erasmus experience, Ankara

## Future Expectations

To understand how they are feeling about the future and their perceptions and aspirations towards life, we asked about their three most important dreams for the future. What was mentioned the most by an overwhelming majority was realizing professional goals, including the selection of their profession and the related educational path. With different paths, such as an academic career, starting up a new business, or working in an international company, the majority of the respondents emphasized a desire to work in areas of their interest, meaning the jobs they really love. Being forced to do a job due to financial needs or indecisiveness were among their concerns. Being fully satisfied about what they do as a profession is something quite important for the students both with and without Erasmus experience.

“(1) Having a non-static job or lifestyle; (2) Gaining psychological satisfaction from my profession is important. What I mean is, my profession could have an impact on society or change something about it. Or, it could be about constant self-education and improvement. (3) I would like to have more general knowledge. I have many friends with diverse interests, and I feel like I have much to learn”. Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"(1) Having a profession I enjoy, (2) Being tailored for that specific job, (3) Contributing to society through what I do." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Ankara

"(1) Being happy about my job, (2) Having a happy family, (3) Being able to buy my own house." Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, İzmir

"A successful career and family life, being satisfied when I look back at my experiences." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"(1) Being happy with my job, (2) Happy social environment, (3) Having an economically comfortable life and having the luxury of sparing time for myself." Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, İzmir

Their emphasis on social relations, with specific references to their own family and relations with their friends, including their future family plans, was the second most mentioned dream by the majority of respondents. After their career plans, the respondents put great emphasis on having a peaceful and happy family, living in a peaceful environment, which is mostly linked to being close to nature, and they desire to establish a peaceful family life and make their loved ones happy.

"(1) Owning an international commercial enterprise, (2) Living within a large family, (3) Living in nature." Male, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, İzmir

"(1) Becoming an illustrator, (2) Living abroad for a long time, (3) Having a house within nature." Female, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Having financial freedom and not experiencing monetary problems and concerns that would prevent them from realizing their dreams was the third most common dream about their future. Around one third of the respondents, including students with and without Erasmus experience, had specific plans such as being able to afford a high-standard of living, living a financially comfortable life, not having concerns about money, being rich, and owning a house.

"(1) Successful career, (2) Having the economic capacity for doing things I enjoy, (3) Living/traveling/working in different countries as an expat." Male, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Ankara

"(1) Not being stuck in Turkey and having connections with the rest of the world, (2) Financial independence to travel, (3) Representing Turkey abroad". Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

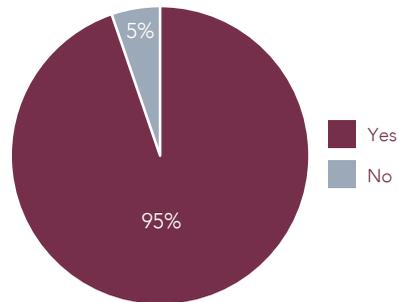
Community-related social issues were among the least mentioned dreams about the future. Either through civil society organizations or community actions, a minority group of respondents stressed the importance of being productive and useful for the community they live in. The areas of their concern were mostly about the environment, poverty reduction and education.

Compared to mostly mentioned future dreams such as being successful in career path, satisfied with the jobs and living a peaceful life, their willingness to work and live in another country was among the least mentioned dreams. Mostly linked to having a high standard of

living and access to more job opportunities, a minority group of respondents mentioned that they dream about moving abroad to work.

When asked directly, “would you prefer to live in another country?”, an overwhelming majority of respondents answered “yes”. Although a minority group mentioned this as their future dream, almost all respondents stated that they would prefer living and working in another country if they had the opportunity. When asked, “what would be your first reason to move to another country?”, half of the respondents selected “better job opportunities and economic conditions”, and the other half “better conditions of fundamental rights and freedoms”.

GRAPHIC 11: **Would you prefer to live in another country? (Online survey data)**



---

## II. Views on Turkey and Europe: Perceptions, interactions and issues

---

We also aimed to trace how Turkey and Europe are constructed in the minds of our respondents, identify the main issues in Turkey and Europe, and understand whether or how the international exchange experience shapes perceptions towards both sides.

Under the same heading, we also explored the reflections of the cultural interaction among the respondents, particularly with Erasmus experience, in order to see its potential influence on their world view and value-sets.

### Perception of “Turkey” and “being from Turkey”

How Turkey is perceived among the respondents indicates a dichotomy, demonstrating the youth’s sense of belonging to their home but also the frustrations they feel in relation to political, economic and social developments in the country. When analyzing the findings of both in-depth interviews and the online survey, the most common concepts associated with Turkey can be grouped as (1) homeland/cultural diversity/hospitality; (2) chaos/uncertainty/injustice, (3) political/economic stress. No significant difference is identified between the answers of the respondents with and without Erasmus experience.

“Warmness in every sense. Both culturally and geographically. The second is cultural richness. To reflect from my professional background in tourism, we have one of the world’s most diverse cuisines. I am also a musician, and from that perspective we have the world’s widest culture of hybrid music.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İzmir

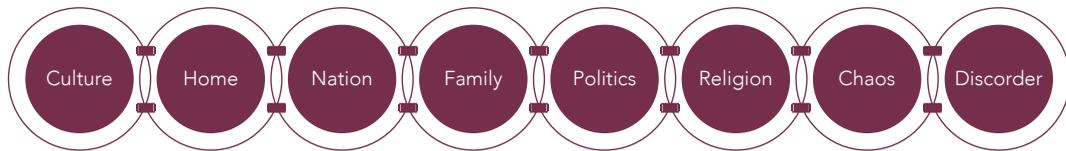
“Rich culture and culinary diversity. Together with the Erasmus Student Network, we went to Şanlıurfa. You see a fascinatingly different culture within the same borders.” Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

The positive points when describing Turkey are overshadowed by the concerns expressed. One feeling is that nothing is predictable in Turkey, which leads to a sense of uncertainty among the young people. They further perceive Turkey as in a chaotic situation where everything is subject to constant change.

Furthermore, the major issues in Turkey are also what significantly shape the perception. Economic challenges and unemployment, the perceived lack of quality in education, political stress, the problems in human rights and justice are commonly mentioned in the narratives. It was interesting to hear that some interviewees found themselves being defensive when they talked about Turkey in Erasmus, and felt themselves in limbo as stated by a respondent from Istanbul:

“Pride and embarrassment. I felt both when I was talking with foreigners. I am proud of the history of our republic and being from Turkey. Our conscientious and generous side make me feel proud. However, in the cases of violence to women, harassment, air pollution, mathematics and in other indexes, Turkey is not good. I felt embarrassed. There is the constant need to defend my country.” Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

TABLE 6 : COMMON CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH TURKEY (Online survey data)



We also asked what comes to mind when they think of **being from Turkey**. We observed that (1) **identity clash**; (2) **being proud and sincere**; and (3) **demanding** are the three common concepts identified. A majority of the respondents are proud of being from Turkey, yet they see it has a challenging aspect due to certain factors, including Turkey’s geopolitical position as recalled by a respondent in Ankara, saying “geography is destiny”. This is also where they see an identity clash as they perceive people in Turkey caught in the middle between the West and the East. Some respondents further reflected on nationalism in the society, which is seen among different societal groups.

“Being from Turkey means being strong. We are trying to overcome several things, both material and moral. I am saying this when I compare with Europe. If you look at developed countries like in Europe or the US, I have more life struggles than my peers there. We look solid.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İzmir

Among the respondents particularly with Erasmus experience, they also mentioned the strength of the Turkish passport, which is lower when compared to the EU passport.

## Perception of “Europe” and “being from Europe”

When looking at the narratives of the respondents both with and without Erasmus experience and the findings of the online survey, we see that two concepts – **freedom and welfare** – appear to build on their perception of Europe. While freedom is commonly associated with borderless travel and a more relaxed lifestyle, welfare is linked to higher life standards, quality of education and happiness.

The perception of Europe among the respondents with Erasmus experience further reflects the **concept of order**, referring to the rules observed in public spaces, the urban planning and architecture, and an organized lifestyle. An overwhelming majority of the respondents with Erasmus experience held positive views about Europe prior to their arrival, and their opinions did not change much when they returned to Turkey. A similar pattern was also observed in the online survey. [i.e. 79 of 92 respondents with Erasmus experience held positive views about Europe before they participated in the program, and 82 of 92 respondents held positive views about Europe when they returned.]

A respondent from Istanbul, who joined the Erasmus Program in Germany, stated that young people in Europe are tied to their families, but they are not dependent on them, pointing to the differences in family culture.

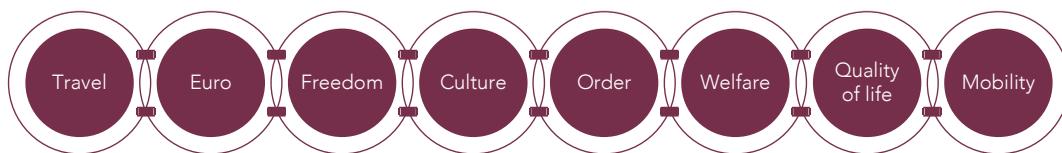
“I remember small children at the airport; they were carrying their own bags. In Turkey, you see mothers carrying their children’s stuff even they are 12 or 13. I also think of freedom, I think they are free to make decisions. They know how to say ‘no’ and do not spend time in something that they do not want to do.” Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

“The daily life is much more organized there; and does not move randomly. My life was also more organized when I was there, I used to do sports every day.” Male, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Ankara

“They appear more relaxed than Turkey. The middle class in Europe live in wealth.” Male, Age 24, İzmir, Erasmus

“I can point to the value that artists are given in Europe. I have opened art exhibitions both in Turkey and Europe, there were more participants, including senior academics from the school in the Europe edition. The art culture keeps artists alive there.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Ankara

TABLE 7 : COMMON CONCEPTS ASSOCIATED WITH EUROPE (Online survey data)



Answers on how they perceive “being a European” are in line with the perception of Europe, and the reflections of the respondents can be subsumed under three concepts – (1) **privileged**; (2) **individual**; (3) **having higher purchasing power** (i.e. currency value). A large majority of the interviewees with Erasmus experience mention the freedom of movement and visa-free travel as a privilege offered to Europeans.

“They have more opportunities than us. They travel more comfortably, the value given to people is different. Nobody is taking a concrete step against women’s murders and child abuse in Turkey. It is not like that in Europe.” Female, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“Individual identity is more important than social identity among Europeans.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

## Perception of Erasmus and reflections of the respondents with Erasmus experience

When it comes to the perception of Erasmus, among an overwhelming majority of respondents, with or without the Erasmus experience, we identified the most mentioned concepts as (1) **traveling**; (2) **cultural experience**; (3) **learning a foreign language** and (4) **having fun and freedom** and (5) **making friendships**, all of which are also the main expectations of joining this program. From respondents both with and without Erasmus experience, the program is seen as an excellent opportunity to travel, study and live abroad with funding. As we delve into the respondents' narratives, their openness in learning about the "other" and the "new" is visible, and also tells something about their attitude of tolerance.

"I wanted to become a part of a different people. I was curious to learn how they live, what opportunities they have, and compare what I am not able to do and what they are not able to do." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

"Different friendships and different environments. You get rid of many prejudices you have [while in Erasmus]." Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"For me, Erasmus means speaking with people other than in your native language." Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İzmir

Among our respondents with Erasmus experience, some also point to the differences in education systems, which is another reason for their interest in exploring a different university environment through this program. **In relation to country choices**, in addition to the bilateral university agreements, the respondents mentioned that **the country's affordability, climate** and **cultural heritage** all play a role. We observe that the distribution of Erasmus countries among the respondents is centered on Czechia and Poland for affordability and Spain and Italy for its climate and culture. Germany is also one of the top destinations for Erasmus.

"The fact that Czechia does not use the Euro and the prices of the dormitories there are less expensive were a plus." Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"Spanish culture and language sound interesting and attract me. The weather in Spain is also better than other countries in Europe. The school I went to there was fine with a lively campus life." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

An overwhelming majority of the respondents with Erasmus experience gave positive feedback about their exchange experience, mentioning that their expectations were generally met [45.56% of the online survey respondents said their expectations were fully met, and another 45.56% said their expectations were met]. We further delved into their life abroad to explore the influence of the three following factors: (1) **social environment & engagement with the local community**; (2) **feeling of safety** and (3) **living conditions**, offering a more extended look on cultural interactions and certain social values such as tolerance and respect for other people, safety and self-development and independence.

The social environment of the respondents with Erasmus experience appear to feature a mix of people with whom they share both similar and different worldviews. The respondents consciously tended to interact less with people from Turkey and spent most of their time with Erasmus students from other countries [see the Graphic below – 47% percent of the survey respondents stated that they spent a lot of time with Erasmus students from other countries], and also, to a certain extent, the locals of their residence country. Additionally, an overwhelming majority of the respondents had dating experience primarily with an Erasmus student from another country or one of the locals from the residence country.

The engagement of the respondents with the local community reveals certain challenges, particularly in relation to how locals perceived them and behaved towards them. When asked what bothered them the most during their stay abroad, we identify two main factors, **discrimination** and **nationalist tendencies**. Some respondents described this as linguistic nationalism especially when locals avoid speaking in English or cannot speak it at all.

“Especially middle-aged people and over, they are still closed to the outside world. They do not know English. Poland is less developed compared to Western Europe.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

“When I was saying ‘hello’, they did not respond. They speak in their local language and avoid speaking in English. The police do not know English, either. In the case of an emergency, this creates difficulty.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İzmir

Certain incidents of discrimination were also reported by our respondents, pointing out that their peers or the locals hold a biased and stereotyped perception towards Turkey, with limited knowledge about the country.

“They have prejudices towards Turkey, especially over political issues and migration.” Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

“From their perspective, Turkey is a Middle East country. This perception will not change.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

“My friends [in Erasmus] who did not know our culture and Islam, were biased against us. When we got to know each other, they saw it is not the case. I can say we removed the differences between our different societies.” Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The engagement with the local community and the living experiences shape the perception of Europe among the respondents with Erasmus experience. Some respondents reiterated the shift in their perception from very positive to positive after they traveled abroad. One respondent explained that her positive feelings dropped as she experienced the sense of “being an outsider,” saying that “they made me feel I am not one of them.”

An overwhelming majority of the respondents with Erasmus experience felt safe during their exchange experience. In their narratives, **the feeling of safety** is interpreted using daily experiences, access to transportation and also whether the respondents can speak the local language of the country they were in. Some respondents further associated safety with the implementation of penalties.

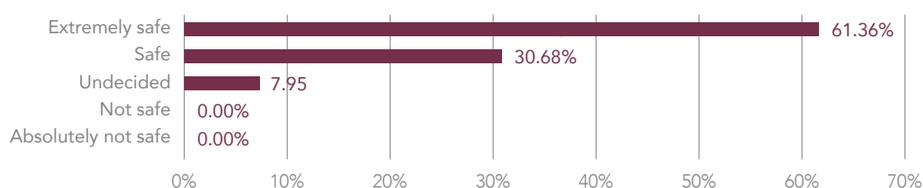
"Danger is everywhere. As a woman, you can be subjected to harassment everywhere, but if something happens to you there, you are aware that it will be punished. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Turkey." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"I was outside in most of my time. 24-hour access to transportation is what made me feel safe. There were also 24-hour markets. The only thing made me feel uneasy were the homeless people."

Overall, a good majority of the respondents reflected positively about their Erasmus experience and they are willing to join the program again if further opportunities are available.

"I compared the university life both in Turkey and Germany. Arts and cultural activities are free [in Germany]. There are more opportunities there. The infrastructure of the universities is very good. This is not the case here. Transportation is also free to students there." Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Diyarbakır

GRAPHIC 12: How safe did you feel during your Erasmus? (Online survey data)



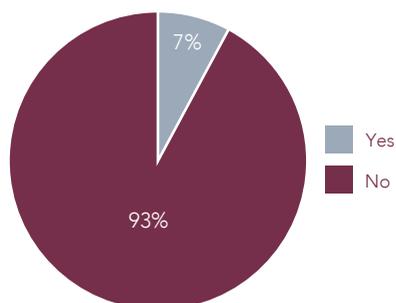
## Perception of the European Union and views on Turkey-EU relations

During our interviews, it was interesting to find out that the respondents did not distinctly differentiate the perception of Europe and the EU as they interpret both as the same. Apart from that, the perception of the EU in the minds of the respondents is associated with certain concepts, which can be grouped as (1) "borderless," "Schengen visa" and "freedom of movement"; (2) "euro" and "economy; and (3) "Germany" and "Merkel". Some respondents further describe their perceptions of EU disunity:

"[The EU is] an entity that looks unified to the world, yet the countries in it do not get on well with each other." Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

When asked whether Turkey will become an EU member, an almost absolute majority of the respondents from Turkey said "No" during the in-depth interviews. We observe a similar pattern in our online survey, where only 7% percent of the respondents have a favorable perception about Turkey's accession to the EU.

GRAPHIC 13: Will Turkey become an EU member? (Online survey data)



The background behind the very low expectations towards EU membership manifest the perceived differences on both sides and the targeted criticisms on Turkey and the EU.

"The EU is not only a political formation. The process has a religious and cultural dimension."  
Female, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"At the beginning, it was a rational move. I do not support Turkey's EU membership at the moment. I do not see a good future for the EU as we've seen with Brexit." Male, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"There has been never-ending talk with people saying, 'Turkey is about to become an EU member.' Well, if you really want this, then do it; if you do not want this, then don't do it. And if you want, do not backpedal." Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"The process has always been in limbo. Europe sees Turkey as a buffer zone and will never want a border with the Middle East. That's why Turkey will not be an EU member." Male, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

"Turkey will not be able to meet the requirements to become an EU member for a long time due to [the issues of] human rights, cultural heritage, economy and freedom of press." Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience Istanbul

Still, a large majority of the overall respondents think that Turkey's EU membership has benefits with others feeling uncertain. The respondents perceive **the major potential benefits as the freedom of movement, economic welfare and opportunities in education.**

"From the student perspective, the quality of education in Europe is better and the future of the students looks clear. Work opportunities would also be better. EU membership would not rescue Turkey, but would force it to become better." Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

"The membership would positively influence the economy. The awareness towards environmental problems would increase. However, there would be problems due to religious differences." Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Ankara

Next, the in-depth interviews clearly show that **the value attached to the EU** slightly varies between the respondents with and without Erasmus experience. On a ten-point scale, the value the respondents with Erasmus experience attributed to the EU is 7.1 while it is 6.4 for the respondents without Erasmus experience in the online survey. While the EU is still seen as leverage, its treatment towards Turkey is one of the main points of criticism.

“The EU is an important neighbor to Turkey. There are several areas that the EU is ahead of us. I do not give them 10 points because it is not fair to Turkey in political issues.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience Diyarbakır

“The economy is getting worse [in Europe], and the EU may break down. Also, life there is not as relaxed anymore compared to the past.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience İzmir

“The EU takes sides, especially in Turkey-related issues. They disregard Turkey’s sociological structure or do not know it all. They do not come up with correct interpretations on Turkey’s future. There are also historical enmities. The EU is directly blaming us over the East Mediterranean and the Syria issues.” Male, Age 23, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

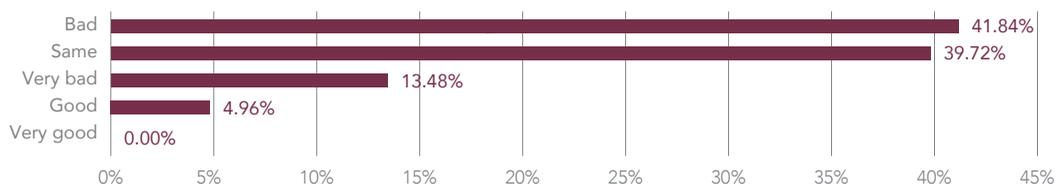
The respondents further see a divide within the society of Turkey towards the EU, while one part of society has a high opinion of the EU, the other part remains indifferent to it. Thus, some respondents describe the youth as being favorable towards the EU, and the elder generation as the group that does not attach significant interest to the Union and the membership issue. The value of the EU in society is also perceived by the respondents as being diminished over the years, especially with the prolonged membership process. Another finding is that political discourse and the media are the two factors that shape society’s perception of the EU, as reiterated during the in-depth interviews:

“Society does not think that being a part of the EU is important. The society does not know what it actually wants, either. The EU can suddenly become very important depending on the developments heard through the media. Otherwise, the society does not care about the EU in general.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, İzmir

“The pro-Europe people in Turkey have decreased significantly. Although Turkey has not reached the required level both economically and culturally, the fact that Romania and Bulgaria became EU members is interpreted an act of double standards. The EU also treats Turkey as the camp of the refugees.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, İstanbul

Looking at the overall picture, the respondents do not generally hold an optimistic view on the direction of Turkey-EU relations and the membership process in the near future [41,84% of the online survey respondents think the direction of Turkey-EU relations would look bad in the next 5 years]. 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. On one hand, the betterment of the bilateral relations is anticipated to bring positive impact to the economy, cultural dialogue, human rights issues and mobility. On the other side, some respondents stress the divided interests of Turkey and the EU as well as the uncertainties on the idea of “Europeanization” and its social implications, and also the internal crisis the EU is facing with Brexit.

GRAPHIC 14: How will the relationship between Turkey and the EU look within the next 5 years?  
(Online survey data)



"I am uncertain. I do not think there will be a membership process anymore, but the cooperation will increase. There are lots of common issues like refugees." Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

## Main issues in the Political, Social and Economic Agenda

### In Turkey

The respondents' answers reflect the extent they have been affected by the problems surrounding Turkey's economic and social agenda. When asked to describe Turkey's **three main problems**, (1) **the economy** is identified as the number one main problem by an overwhelming majority in both in-depth interviews and the online survey. The economic problems being experienced are tied to factors such as unemployment, income equality, foreign debt, lack of local production and the decline of the Turkish lira.

"Turkey's economy has greatly receded. I am 21 years old and do not know whether the situation was worse before. At least, I am aware the economy has not been doing well. Education has also regressed. I feel there were times when education was better. Now you see a university at every corner. State universities have lost their significance." Female, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

(2) **Justice** is the second most mentioned problem among the respondents. The interpretation of justice related issues appears diverse with particular reference to the murder of women, child marriage, democracy, violation of fundamental rights and freedoms, animal and environmental rights and fair and equal trials.

"There is the lack of respect for rights and freedoms. Crimes are acquitted without satisfying punishment. These problems must be solved to have real justice." Female, Age 22, Erasmus experience, Ankara

The third most mentioned problem is (3) **education**. A good majority of the respondents highlight the rising number of universities lowering the quality of education. One of the respondents points to student success in university entrance exams when compared to other countries.

"For example, we are far behind in the world when looking at the number of correct answers in mathematics and languages in the university entrance exam. Our native language is Turkish and the number of the correct answers in Turkish language is extremely low. Most students fail to pass the minimum required score." Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

The **refugee issue** and **migration** are also seen as other important problem areas by the respondents. Most of the respondents see migration as both an economic and demographic problem.

“Migration is not a problem. The problem is the rising population of refugees and its unplanned management.” Female, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

Besides these, the respondents appear to focus on **the issue of social compromise and openness to differences at the societal level**. Some respondents further relate intolerance as an underlying factor of political distress, populist and nationalist discourse and diminished space for social dialogue.

“This is indeed the number one problem of Turkey. We are not open to different opinions at all. There is the tendency to believe that everybody must share the same views. However, no one is able to do this. We are all individuals, in other words, each of us is unique. And this issue extends to religion, politics, everywhere.” Female, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

“There is an ideological and political inconsistency in society. This also manifests itself in foreign policy. For example, even if there is a common interest, one political party opposes it just for the sake of being opposed to the other political party.” Male, Age 21, no Erasmus experience, Trabzon

TABLE 8: **MAIN PROBLEM AREAS IN TURKEY (Based on in-depth interviews and online survey data)**

Economy	Justice	Education	Politics	Migration
Unemployment	Murder of Women	Quality of education	Democracy	
Income equality	Environmental rights	Rising number of private universities	Lack of strong opposition	Irregular migration
Foreign debts	Child marriages	Insufficient educational staff capacity	Inefficient checks and balances	Rising number of Syrians in Turkey
Lack of local production	Violation rights and freedoms	Insufficient education to Syrian children	Foreign policy	Refugee integration
Decline of the Turkish lira	Fair and equal trials		Politicians	
			Inefficient administration system	

## In Europe

The three commonly identified problems in Europe are (1) populism and xenophobia, (2) refugees in Europe, (3) disunity within the European Union.

“I think people are assessed in relation to their nationalities in Europe. I do not think the EU’s attitude is sincere. They are trying to balance migration and building their own walls to push migrants to go back.” Male, Age 24, Erasmus experience, Trabzon

“It is racism. They are racist towards Muslims. They are also not open to sharing, and live in their own shells.” Female, Age 22, no Erasmus experience, Istanbul

In addition to these, the national interests of EU member states are seen as a significant impediment to the Union in finding middle ground to the problems, and acting in coherence, particularly in relation to a common EU response to the migration issue.

“What they think of refugees is based on the idea of where they can push refugees away.” Female, Age 25, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

According to our respondents, European societies are also confronted with population ageing, with all its economic and social consequences. One respondent describes ageing population a danger that needs to be addressed by European countries.

It is also mentioned that Europe appears to put more emphasis on global-level problems such as the environment and global warming.

One last comment is on the Eurocentric tendency visible among the EU countries. As reiterated by a respondent:

“There is Eurocentric understanding in Europe, which we have to be aware of. This perspective is constructed on the idea that the European culture is the best and a high level to achieve.” Male, Age 23, Erasmus experience, Istanbul

TABLE 9: MAIN PROBLEM AREAS IN EUROPE (Based on in-depth interviews and online survey data)

Economy	Populism	Migration	European Union	Population	Environment
Income equality within European states Labor needs	Right-wing political parties Discrimination Xenophobia	Rising number of refugees	Brexit Disunity within the EU states Eurocentrism	Aging population	Global warming

