



## Youth Politics and Activism in Turkey

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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*Non-Resident Scholar, Turkey Programme*

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ELIMED is a collaborative project between the Turkey Program of the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) and Medyascope. The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of the CATS Network, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey. "ELIAMEP-MEDYASCOPE MEDIA SERIES (ELIMED)" is a project of the CATS Network.

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#### Summary

- Media outlets and polling companies have started publishing reports that claim the young people's vote will be a game-changer in the upcoming elections.<sup>1</sup> It is Generation Z<sup>2</sup>, the so-called millennials, who are going to make a political statement with their vote in the Turkish elections. They constitute a sizeable portion of the eligible voters (20%) and around half of them will be casting their votes for the first time (RIS Report, 2022).
- Whether we are talking about Generation X, Y or Z, young people do not constitute a monolithic bloc in Turkey. The country is polarised along different ethnic, religious and ideological fault lines, and so is its youth. This is reflected in their activism, as well as their everyday lives.
- Turkish youth became an object of scrutiny for researchers during and after the Gezi protests and their repertoires of action and political participation were analysed by researchers both in and outside Turkey. However, new systematic studies are needed if the results the polling companies are receiving with regard to young people's preferences and lifestyle choices in a changing Turkey are to be explained.
- Evidence shows that wooing youth support features on the parties' political agendas. Strategies include investing in youth branches, organising events and festivals, as well as creating opportunities for young people, to keep them loyal to the party agendas.
- Do young people only express their frustration with the system through demonstrations on the streets or social media posts? No: young people are also leaving the country in protest. My recent research reveals that a sizeable group of young people tend to plan for futures outside Turkey, and that they would take any opportunity that presented itself abroad in order to leave the country permanently or temporarily.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/generation-z-turkey/a-54057490>

<sup>2</sup> Anyone born between 1995 and 2010.

## Introduction

As the Turkish Republic approaches its centenary, Turkey finds itself at a crossroads—yet again. It looks like 2023 will also be the year of an important election, and yet another milestone in Turkey's political history. While numerous surveys and opinion polls have been conducted to assess public support for political parties and political personalities, it is still hard to make solid predictions about what the future holds.

In recent years, academics, politicians and experts have turned their attention to a specific group of voters: Turkey's youth. Media outlets and polling companies have started publishing reports that claim the young people's vote will be a game-changer in the upcoming elections.<sup>3</sup> It is Generation Z<sup>4</sup>, the so-called millennials, who are going to make a political statement with their vote in the Turkish elections. They constitute a sizeable portion of the eligible voters (20%) and around half of them will be casting their votes for the first time (RIS Report, 2022). Half of Turkey's population is under the age of 30. For most, Erdoğan is the only political leader they have ever lived under. They have no memory of the "old Turkey", as we know it, since they were born into a period of transformation which led to the so-called New Turkey under the rule of the AKP and Erdoğan. In 2018, polls showed that 80% of young people had shown no interest in politics.<sup>5</sup> Another poll by Turkey Report in 2022 showed that 58% of them would not join a political movement or party "as a way to try and build a better society to live in".<sup>6</sup> As "political participation is central to discussions of democracy and justice" (Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerçi, 2017:57), a young generation disinterested in politics could have dire consequences for Turkish society. Do the poll results indicate that these young people do not engage in politics at all? Or, as digital natives and children of the new millennium, do they use alternative means to express themselves outside the conventional methods of joining political parties and movements? Generation Y<sup>7</sup> was considered apolitical, but it still participated in seminal events like the Gezi protests (Bee and Chrona, 2017). Indeed, 31% of the protestors were aged between 21 and 25, and 51% were between the ages of 21 and 30. Moreover, 36.6 % of the participants were students (Gencoglu and Yarkin, 2019: 659). What has changed with Generation Z?

Whether we are talking about Generation X, Y or Z, young people do not constitute a monolithic bloc in Turkey. The country is polarised along different ethnic, religious and ideological fault lines, and so is its youth. This is reflected in their activism, as well as their everyday lives. Both the AKP and the opposition parties have active youth branches all around Turkey, and they are mobilising the new generation in order to sustain interest in their party-political agendas. However, the polls show a declining interest in such engagement among young people. As scholars suggest: "The decline in conventional political participation among youth is of serious concern for contemporary societies" (Kayaoglu, 2017:32). However, what people define as youth apathy in the light of the poll results might not reveal the whole truth. Young people are also opting for different repertoires of political action that takes place outside the conventional boundaries of party or movement membership. As a result, the Turkish political landscape presents fertile ground for studying new youth movements and activism at a critical juncture at which the country is becoming more authoritarian, the economy is in sharp decline, the rule of law is being undermined, unemployment is rising, and outward migration is growing.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Turkey/Elections-in-Turkey-The-vote-of-the-youth-188683>

<sup>6</sup> <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/erdogan-courts-turkeys-evasive-youth-vote-ahead-2023>

<sup>7</sup> Anyone born between the 1980s and mid-1990s.

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## Youth in Turkey

Young people have been a popular topic for researchers who focus on the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region for a variety of reasons. Young people played an active role in protest movements during the Arab Spring and managed to shake weak regimes and make demands for social justice and equality (Danahar, 2013). Until the Arab Spring, the literature usually depicted young people either as a “problem” to be dealt with, or as passive recipients of state policies. At times, this challenger/victim dichotomy disguised the wide-ranging ways young people engage in politics in their respective countries; at others, it neglected the heterogeneity of youth as a group of people with diverse interests and agendas. (Baser and Fazil, 2022). Although issues such as youth bulge have been widely studied in a MENA context, Turkey has not been included in these discussions, given that its political system and trajectory are distinct from those of other countries in the Middle East. For instance, according to Ozerim (2019: 429), Turkey’s youth traces a different trajectory than MENA young people, in the sense that they are in limbo: the youth bulge remains an opportunity for the society of the future, but at the same time, given the lack of effective education and employment policies, youth bulge can also increase the risk of future conflict and tension. Other debates relating to the situation of youth, such as the “waithood generation” (Honwana, 2014), have not touched on Turkey as a case study as much as they have Algeria, Tunisia or Egypt. Turkish youth became an object of scrutiny for researchers during and after the Gezi protests and their repertoires of action and political participation were analysed by researchers both in and outside Turkey. However, new systematic studies are needed if the results the polling companies are receiving with regard to young people’s preferences and lifestyle choices in a changing Turkey are to be explained.

Leyla Neyzi (2001) divided the construction of youth in public discourse in Turkey into three distinct phases. According to Neyzi, the first period (1923–50) was the period in which young people came to embody the new nation. They were given the task of building the nation, and elite narratives depicted them as the “future” of the country in which the state had to invest. In the second period (1950–80), when the student movements were on the rise that would lead to violent clashes between the supporters of the “Right” and the “Left”, youth was depicted as a threat to public order. In the third period after the 1980s, young people were depicted as passive and apolitical consumers. At that time, the Turkish state identity “othered” certain groups and various youth groups were under state scrutiny and social surveillance. For instance, Muslim students were subjected to labelling and stigmatisation in universities in the 1990s (Saktanber, 2007). Kurdish youth also had to endure various traumas as a result of securitisation policies and conflict in the 1990s (Akin and Danisman, 2011). However, activism at the youth level did not turn into the sort of game-changing leverage that can wrest state policies in another direction. Authors such as Gencoglu and Yarkin (2019:661) argue that, especially after the 2010s, a re-politicisation has been discernible among young people, and especially among young Turks concerned about Islamisation of Turkey. And, indeed, the Gezi protests showed that “the lack of interest among young people in politics, if there was any, was more in the conventional form of political participation, given that thousands of young people were on the streets in 80 of Turkey’s 81 provinces in May and June 2013” (Kayaoglu, 2017:33).

Various youth movements emerged in Turkey as the Gezi protests ended; however, it is not possible to talk about a specific movement which emerged in opposition to authoritarian tendencies in Turkey and sustained repertoires of action. As a recent study by Gokce-Kizilkaya and Onursal-Besgul (2017) showed, young people’s participation in local politics—on city councils, youth assemblies and such like—is impeded by the paternalist family structure in Turkey. Youth agency is undermined in these contexts, and young people do not feel represented; their voices are heard but not listened to. Although young people are justifiably anxious and concerned about their future, they cannot find a platform to express themselves. A focus group study by the

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International Republican Institute found out that Turkish youth are not optimistic about their and their country's future, and that they perceive themselves as victims of poor governance and double standards in the application of laws. Moreover, young people point to growing injustices in the country and they are sceptical about political elites. The focus group study also demonstrated that lack of hope about the future is making them think about a future outside Turkey's borders (RIS Report, 2022). In 2022, the Turkish polling firm Gezici also found out that young people are strongly opposed to clampdowns on lifestyle, free expression and the media.<sup>8</sup> The head of the Gezici polling firm, Murat Gezici even claimed that 80% of young people would not be voting for the AKP.<sup>9</sup> Besides political reasons, economic decline is also a source of discontent for young people from all walks of life in Turkey. Some authors, including Demiralp, define Turkish youth's situation as "daunted, frustrated and pessimistic". Quoting a survey conducted by Deloitte, Demiralp claims that 46% of Generation Z and 41% of Generation Y feel stressed, and the main reason is the economy.<sup>10</sup> Youth unemployment is hovering between 20.4%<sup>11</sup> and 25%.<sup>12</sup> Some sources suggest that the official statistics do not reflect the actual rate of unemployment and the full magnitude of the problem.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a recent OECD report published in 2021 showed that the pandemic also affected the livelihoods of young people in Turkey. In all, 30% of the survey participants—with female participants forming the majority—said they suffered from mental health problems.<sup>14</sup>

Are political parties addressing such problems effectively? Evidence shows that wooing youth support features on the parties' political agendas. Strategies include investing in youth branches, organising events and festivals, as well as creating opportunities for young people, to keep them loyal to the party agendas. For instance, Erdoğan's presidential speeches regularly target youth and ask for their support.<sup>15</sup> The actions of the ruling party also include social engineering, especially in the education sector, aimed at monitoring youth and reshaping their priorities. Erdoğan's Turkey has sought to create a pious youth which will be loyal to the AKP's political agenda in Turkey and embrace the party's vision for the future of the country. To do so, the AKP has transformed the education system and introduced more religion-driven, conservative changes to the public school curriculum.<sup>16</sup> As Alemdaroglu claims, the government-funded Imam Hatip schools have expanded considerably all around Turkey, with their number increasing from 450 to over 1400 during the AKP period (Alemdaroglu, 2018). The party has also tried to curb opposition at universities by appointing loyalist rectors, despite a lack of support for the AKP from academic staff, and by attacking academic freedoms and the right to assembly at numerous institutions, including Bogazici University, which has been a stronghold for liberal thinking among students and staff since its foundation.

The AKP did enjoy support from young people when it came to power in the early 2000s. As Demiralp puts it: "Voters who were young back then constitute the party's main support group".<sup>17</sup> Can we say that the party still has the same impact on young people? According to Alemdaroglu (2018), the AKP's youth vote is generally 5–10% lower than its national support level and lower than the youth vote received by other parties. However, the party is working diligently at home

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/no-votes-you-how-akps-targeting-lgbt-community-may-alienate-turkeys-youth-ballot-box>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/no-votes-you-how-akps-targeting-lgbt-community-may-alienate-turkeys-youth-ballot-box>

<sup>10</sup> <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/09/20/turkey-the-possible-political-outcome-of-youth-frustration/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/no-votes-you-how-akps-targeting-lgbt-community-may-alienate-turkeys-youth-ballot-box>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/generation-z-turkey/a-54057490>

<sup>13</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-youth/turkish-youth-become-acting-force-transforming-politics-analyst>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-youth-worried-about-their-social-economic-well-being-news-58383>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.birgun.net/haber/erdogan-genclere-seslendi-benim-karsimda-da-ozgurlugunuzden-asla-taviz-vermeyin-403821>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/no-votes-you-how-akps-targeting-lgbt-community-may-alienate-turkeys-youth-ballot-box>

<sup>17</sup> <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/09/20/turkey-the-possible-political-outcome-of-youth-frustration/>

and abroad to keep young people loyal to their vision and agenda (Bocu and Baser 2022; Yabancı 2021). Opposition parties are also striving to attract young people by organising youth assemblies<sup>18</sup> at home and disseminating their newly established manifestos abroad to attract the attention of young people in the diaspora.<sup>19</sup> They do not have the institutions of state at their disposal, as the AKP does, and lack the established mechanisms that AKP has invested in over the last decade.

Nonetheless, despite the authoritarian atmosphere that has dominated the political and social spheres in Turkey since the Gezi protests, many young people still demonstrate in support of LGBT rights or join women's marches in the country.<sup>20</sup> Issues such as climate change, participation in the Istanbul convention<sup>21</sup>, and the autonomy of universities are of high concern for many young people.<sup>22</sup> When they actively protest-- as, for instance, in the case of the Bogazici University demonstrations--they are arrested and receive a clear message from the state authorities: activism comes at a price.<sup>23</sup> Rather than demonstrating on the streets, Generation Z is mostly active on social media; they create hashtags and share their reactions to undemocratic policies through social media posts. However, the recent law giving the authorities the right to limit free speech on the internet may hinder such online activism repertoires as well.<sup>24</sup>

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Turkey's Kurdish youth has followed a different trajectory, even though their problems intersect with those of ethnically Turkish young people. Their political memory is different from that of ethnic Turks who did not grow up under conditions of conflict. As Darici (2013) has shown, many Kurdish children spend their childhood under conditions of securitisation and increasing public scrutiny. When they reclaim their youth, their political perceptions have already been shaped by the political environment that constructed a reality for them that was different from the reality of their Turkish peers.

### Is "leaving Turkey behind" becoming a popular protest repertoire?

Do young people only express their frustration with the system through demonstrations on the streets or social media posts? No: young people are also leaving the country in protest. My recent research reveals that a sizeable group of young people tend to plan for futures outside Turkey, and that they would take any opportunity that presented itself abroad in order to leave the country permanently or temporarily. According to a report by SODEV, 62.5% of young people would like to leave the country, of whom 47% them support the AKP and 69% the MHP.<sup>25</sup> Among their motivations for wishing to leave, young people underlined growing nepotism, unemployment and precarious economic conditions. These figures show that it is not only young people who support the opposition who are planning to migrate, regime loyalists are, too. My recent interviews with young people who left the country recently reveal a similar trend. They included people who worked as engineers in Turkey and opted to leave for another Mediterranean country to work in a pizza restaurant, and others who decided that starting from

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEeWZuy9xAg>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.arti33.com/chpnin-avrupa-genclik-kollari-almanyada-bir-araya-geldi/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/no-votes-you-how-akps-targeting-lgbt-community-may-alienate-turkeys-youth-ballot-box>

<sup>21</sup> <https://thenewglobalorder.com/world-news/the-second-voice/in-turkey-the-feminist-activists-struggling-to-defend-their-rights-are-facing-an-increasing-persecution/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://yesilgazete.org/born-to-tackle-the-climate-crisis-a-young-climate-activist-changing-turkey/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/turkiye/bogazici-universitesinde-gozaltina-alinan-ogrencilerden-3u-tutuklama-talebiyle-mahkemeye-sevk-edildi-1874779>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/10/18/turkeys-new-media-law-is-bad-news-but-dont-report-it/>

<sup>25</sup> <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-youth/turkish-youth-become-acting-force-transforming-politics-analyst>

scratch and leaving their social networks and capital behind seemed like a better option than staying in the country and struggling on a daily basis against a confluence of factors from above and below. Recent studies have shown that people from all age groups are leaving, and that these groups include intellectuals, doctors, software engineers and students (Baser and Ozturk, 2022).<sup>26</sup> The numbers are rising, and outward migration looks unlikely to stop anytime soon. This slow migration since the Gezi protests will lead to major losses for Turkey in the future which will exceed the problems a brain drain might cause.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://hakkitas.com/2022/05/06/doctors-fleeing-borders-is-turkey-becoming-europes-venezuela/>

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