Online workshop: Voluntary return to Turkey

Date: 08. December 2022
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Participants: 43

The first workshop of Transnational Exchange VI project took place online on the 8th of December 2022 with the topic "voluntary return to Turkey". Experts shared their research findings about minorities in Turkey and the Turkish labour market situation. The JRS reintegration partner MSYD also presented its reintegration work.

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1. Challenges to consider in the return of minorities to Turkey

Gülay Türkmen is one the most renowned academic Turkey researchers in Germany. She received her PhD in Sociology from Yale University in 2016. She currently works as a guest researcher at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center. In her presentation, she talked about the challenges that people from minority groups should consider when taking the decision to return to Turkey.

What do we mean when we refer to Turkish minorities? According to Türkmen, there are two ways to define the issue: The first is the legal perspective and the second is the socio-political perspective. The legal perspective is how national laws or international treaties define the term minority. From a socio-political perspective minority defines a group that has different characteristics than the majority, is fewer in number in comparison to the majority but most importantly is repressed/or feels repressed by the majority. This factor of repression is quite an important criterion as there are cases where minorities can be more numerous (like the Apartheid South Africa where 80% of the population was black) or still few in number but are powerful (like pre-war Syria, where Alevites were the ruling faction despite constituting about 15% of the population).

Who is part of minorities in Turkey?

In the light of this information, when we talk about minorities in Turkey who are we referring to? From a legal perspective, one needs to resort to the Lausanne Peace Treaty to understand what the term minority entails in Turkey. The treaty was signed on June 24, 1923, between the Turkish Republic on one side and the Allied Powers on the other. Articles 37 to 45 concerns the rights of minorities in Turkey and is titled Protection of Minorities. In this treaty, the term minority is reserved for non-Muslims only. Although article 38 ensures the protection of life and liberty of all inhabitants of Turkey and guarantees religious freedom and equality before the law for all of them, the term minority is used only to denote non-Muslims, namely Greek-Orthodox, Armenians and Jews. In this sense, Lausanne diverges from Sevr treaty, in which the Ottoman Empire promises to protect linguistic, ethnic, and religious minorities. In Lausanne, only religious difference was recognized as the basis for being a minority, hence depriving Muslim minorities (Laz, Arabs, Circassians, and Kurds) of the rights provided to non-Muslim minorities.

The Kurds

Upon hearing the British delegation's suggestion that the Kurds should be treated as minorities, İsmet İnönü, the head of the Turkish delegation, responded that "the Kurds were no different from the Turks" (Heper 2007: 124). In line with this understanding, and quite pragmatically, the Turkish delegation insisted on presenting the Kurds as one of the "founding elements (kurucu unsur) of Turkey" that needed no special protection as a minority group (Meray 1970). This Muslim fraternity was (and is) based on a shared Sunni Muslim identity. This right was explained even further in Article 41, which ensured that children of non-Muslim Turkish citizens will be instructed in their own language. In addition, this article guarantees that non-Muslim minorities shall be given equal public funds for educational, religious, or charitable purposes. As such, what Lausanne did was to provide non-Muslim minorities the right to open schools for their own communities and instruct their children in their native language. Yet, Muslim minorities were not given this right.

Because of this lingering problem, the right of instruction in one's own language is still a central demand of the Kurdish movement in Turkey. One thing that usually gets overlooked in these debates is that article 39 of the Lausanne treaty actually talks about the right to free use of one's native language in private conversation, public meetings, commerce, religion, in the press or in publications of any kind. It also provides the right to use one's native language in courts. However, because this article does not talk about education to this day Kurds (and other Muslim minorities with languages other than Turkish) cannot open schools for their own community, nor can they instruct kids in their own language. There is no official ban on Kurdish language in Turkey but Kurdish has been de facto criminalized since the very early days of the Republic. (The speaking of Kurdish in public was outlawed between 1983 and 1991). The current constitution, penned in 1980, recognizes only Turkish as the country's official language and article 42 of the constitution states that no language other than Turkish can be taught as a mother tongue to Turkish citizens. Moreover, since the coup attempt in 2016, scores of Kurdish-language TVs, newspapers, and Kurdish-language courses have been closed down by emergency decrees.

History of the Kurdish conflict

Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia is where majority of Kurds in Turkey live. Kurds comprise around 15-20% of Turkey's overall population of 85 million. (Official surveys do not ask about ethnicity and that´s why exact numbers lack). In addition to this region, Istanbul also hosts a large population of Kurds. So what is Turkey's Kurdish conflict all about? How did it start and where does it currently stand? The official narrative in Turkey tends to present the Kurdish conflict as a problem originating with the PKK's emergence in late 1970s.

Yet, in order to better understand the present day conflict, one needs to look back as early as the 19th century, when the first Kurdish revolts took place. Organized against the centralizing tendencies of the Ottoman government (Atmaca 2019), these revolts were led by tribal leaders in Ottoman Kurdistan and were not yet nationalistic in character. The heavy-handed suppression of the Sheikh Said, Ararat and Dersim uprisings and the mass killings, deportation and forced migration of thousands of Kurds greatly intimidated the Kurdish population. They went into a period of silence and stayed dormant until the transformation to the multi-party system in 1946 and the ensuing Democrat Party regime in 1950.

While early Kurdish revolts were all marked by a dominant religious discourse alongside a nationalistic one, the period between 1950 and 1978 was to witness the secularization of the Kurdish movement and the dwindling influence of religion on Kurdish nationalist leaders (but not among the Kurdish population). In 1960s a small Kurdish intellectual group later dubbed as the "Eastists" (Doğucular), played an important role in advancing Kurdish nationalism. These intellectuals framed Kurdish nationalism under the rubric of "regional inequality" and presented infrastructural developments in eastern provinces as the solution to what came to be known as the "Eastern problem" (Doğu Sorunu) (Özcan 2006). In early 1970s, following in their footsteps, the Labour Party of Turkey also drew attention to the region's economic underdevelopment and asked for increased state investment to achieve parity with western provinces. Influenced by the party's socialist vocabulary Kurdish intellectuals started employing a leftist discourse in talking about the Kurds' problems. This helped

transform the "Eastern question", with an emphasis on underdevelopment, to the "Kurdish question" with an emphasis on national oppression (Güneş 2012: 65). The newly emerging Kurdish national movement highlighted more the oppression of Kurds than the broader demand of equality voiced by Turkish socialists.

The state responded rather harshly to the efforts for increasing nationalist mobilization among the Kurds. In January 1970, to "prevent separatist activity and find out the separatists", Ankara sent professional soldiers to the Kurdish region. Following the peace agreement signed between the Baath government in Iraq and the Kurdish forces under Mustafa Barzani in March 1970, the Turkish state, worried about the repercussions of this agreement on Turkey's Kurdish citizens, increased the amount of violence and repression in the Kurdish region. Against this background, in October 1970, several Kurdish and Turkish intellectuals were arrested and put on trial. Most importantly, the second half of the 70s witnessed the ethnification of the Kurdish question. The void left by the socialist Kurdish intellectuals, who were banned or expelled from the political arena, was filled by a new group of Kurdish intellectuals who introduced a discursive framework that presented the "Eastern question" not as a problem of underdevelopment that could be solved by a socialist revolution, but as a problem of ethnicity and nationalism.

For Öcalan, the problem was "Turkey's colonization of the Kurdish region," coupled with imperialism and capitalism. The solution to this problem, according to him, laid in socialism and armed struggle. He argued for an immediate armed uprising. However, what really distinguished the PKK from its competitor Kurdish organizations and earned it the support of local Kurdish population was its opposition to the landlords and exploitative local tribal chiefs. Most of their attacks in between 1978 and 1980 targeted feudal landlords. It was only in mid-1980s that the PKK started carrying armed attacks against state security forces (Romano 2006: 77). It staged its first deadliest attack in Çukurca, Hakkari, in 1984, where eight Turkish soldiers were killed. The armed clashed continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s until Ocalan was arrested in 1999. Following Öcalan's arrest the PKK declared a ceasefire and entered a period of passivity until 2004. Meanwhile, the year 2002 marked a turning point in Turkish politics as the AKP won a landslide victory in the general elections and has since then remained in power.

According to the AKP of the early 2000s, Islam, as a supra-national identity, could help end the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. If only the Turkish state could implement Islam as an overarching identity, then the Kurds would have no further problems, as they would become equal members of the Muslim Turkish nation. With this belief in mind, the AKP governments, under the leadership of Erdoğan, put into practice several unprecedented, albeit minor, steps toward the solution of the Kurdish conflict. Immediately after its rise to power in 2002, the AKP lifted the 20-year-long state of emergency in Turkey's eastern and southeastern Kurdish provinces. Subsequently, it introduced legislation removing the barriers on broadcasting and teaching in Kurdish. Furthermore, a law to compensate the losses of those who were displaced during the clashes between the PKK and the TSK was enacted in 2005 (Yeğen 2015: 5). After a strong election victory in 2007, the AKP introduced a new policy of negotiation and a willingness to endorse a stronger policy of recognition. Toward that end, starting in September 2008, AKP cadres held secret meetings with PKK representatives in Oslo. Although these talks later collapsed (as secret recordings from the meetings were leaked), they still managed to give birth to additional policy changes. As such, at the end of 2009, the AKP, as an Islamist party pursuing an Islamic solution

to the Kurdish conflict, seemed much more promising than its secular counterparts—which had dominated the Turkish political sphere until then—in putting an end to the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish armed forces (Aktürk 2012; White 2013).

However, things have not gone as expected. In December 2009 the clashes recommenced. That same month, the Constitutional Court banned and closed the Democratic Society Party (DTP), the Kurdish party at the time. On July 2010, the PKK announced a new ceasefire, which began the second round of negotiations that lasted until the summer of 2011. The third and last round of negotiations began in 2013 and culminated in the Dolmabahce Agreement in February 2015. Signed between the HDP and the AKP, the agreement signified the beginning of the disarmament process. While it was as close to peace as Turkey ever got in its fight with the PKK, Erdoğan nullified it on March 22, 2015, when he declared that he "does not approve of the agreement." Following these developments, in the general elections of June 2015, the AKP, which "has emerged as the main competitor against ethnic parties in the southeast" in the 2000s (Sarıgil and Fazlıoğlu 2013: 559), experienced a significant loss in Kurdish-majority provinces (Bayhan 2015). The peace process shattered and clashes resumed. Rather than the Islamic-Turkish approach, prioritizing Islam, the AKP turned toward a Turkish-Islamist approach, prioritizing Turkishness.

There were several reasons for the failure of the peace process, most importantly the spillover effects of the civil war in Syria. This topic is further elaborated in the latest book of Gülay Türkmen called Under the Banner of Islam: Turks, Kurds, and the Limits of Religious Unity (2021).

Recent developments in the Kurdish conflict

Immediately after the peace talks halted, in the summer of 2015, the PKK called for unilateral declarations of autonomous self-rule in Kurdish-majority cities and towns. Departing from its traditional rural guerilla style warfare it carried the war to the cities by stationing militias in urban areas that responded positively to its call. Composed mainly of the PKK's youth wing YDG-H (The Patriotic Revolutionary Movement) these forces dug up tranches and built barricades reinforced with explosives to prevent the TSK's access to unilaterally "autonomous" urban zones. In December 2015, more trained PKK fighters started joining the ranks of the YDG-H. The Turkish government responded heavy-handedly to the PKK's declaration of self-rule and its adoption of urban warfare. Between July and November 2015 it deployed armored army units, as well as special operations teams of the police and the gendarmerie in the region. In some cities and neighborhoods (e.g. Cizre, Idil, Silopi, and Sur) heavy fighting ensued. The transformation of the YDG-H into YPS brought about the implementation of new tactics, such as snipers and roadsibe bombs, which in turn increased the fatalities of the Turkish forces. In response, additional troops and the Turkish Air Force were deployed. Cities and towns where PKK forces were suspected to be stationed were besieged and hit by bombs, and in some cases, buildings in residential areas were pummeled by heavy artillery, with little regard for civilians trapped inside. After a year of fighting, urban warfare came to an end. In June 2016, the PKK retreated from its last stronghold (in Nusaybin) and the conflict's center shifted once again to rural areas.

The cost of urban warfare was quite heavy. According to Turkish Human Rights Association, between August 16, 2015 and January 1, 2020, the Turkish government imposed at least 381 indefinite or daylong curfews in 11 cities and 51 towns in Southeastern Anatolia. The International Crisis Group

estimates that, between July 20, 2015 and January 9, 2019, at least 4,783 people were killed, including 489 civilians, with the number of fatalities peaking in the winter of 2015/2016. As a result of the destruction of homes and neighborhoods, and the emergency expropriation decisions (that involved the expropriation of 22 parcels of land in Cizre and 6,292 parcels of land in Sur), 350,000 to 500,000 people were displaced by 2017.

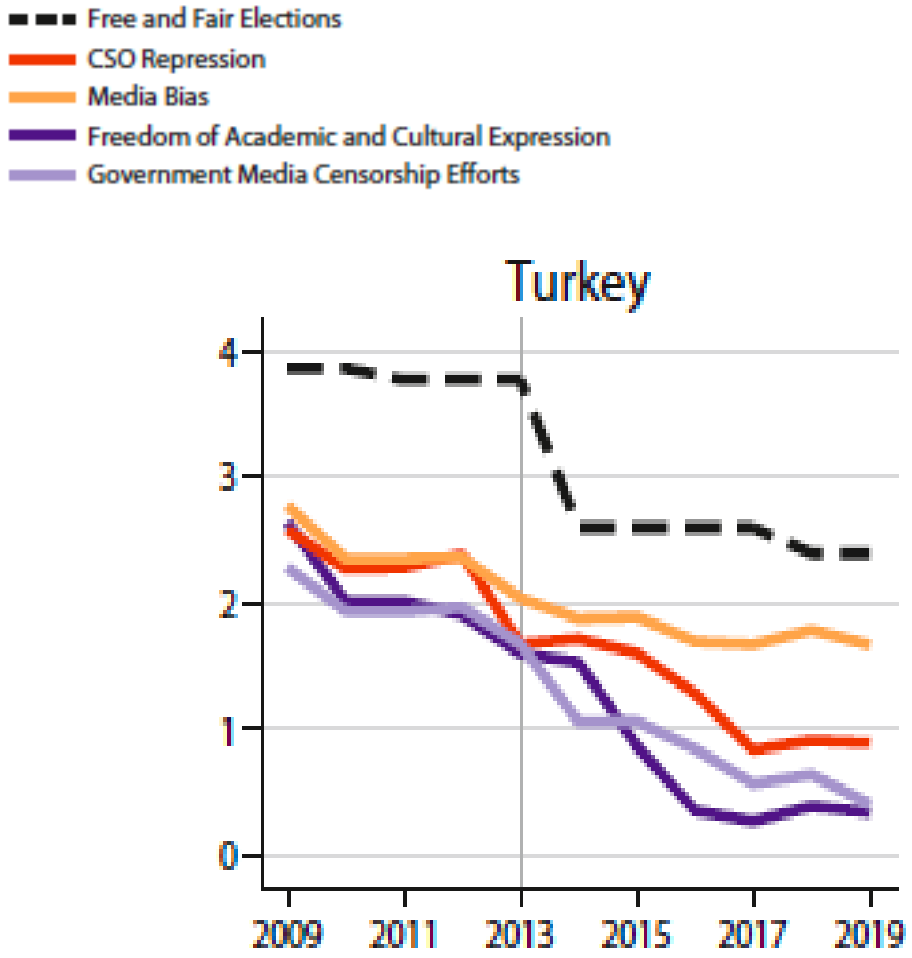
While urban clashes ended in June 2016, the two-year emergency rule declared in the wake of the coup attempt in July 2016 contributed to the continuation of the crackdown on Kurdish oppositional voices. In November 2016, 12 HDP parliamentarians (HDP stands for the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party), including the party co-chairs Figen Yüksekdağ and Selahattin Demirtaş were imprisoned on charges of "terrorist propaganda". According to a report issued by the HDP in December 2019, since July 2016, 10,719 HDP members were detained and 2,251 were jailed. In the aftermath of the March 2019 local elections, when the HDP got 65 mayors, 48 HDP co-mayors were replaced by government-appointed trustees, 39 co-mayors were jailed and 7 are still imprisoned.

This political repression was accompanied by a repression on Kurdish civil society as pro-Kurdish NGOS, newspapers and TV channels were closed down, following the coup attempt in 2016, their staff members were imprisoned, and their assets confiscated. In addition government-appointed mayors closed down bilingual kindergartens and Kurdish-language courses. As a result of a the terrorism investigation into one of the most important Kurdish civil society organizations, the Democratic Society Congress, more than 70 people, including politicans, lawyers, journalists, and doctors, were detained

TABLE 1: TOP-10 AUTOCRATIZING COUNTRIES, 2010–2020

		CHANGE	LDI 2010	LDI 2020	REGIME TYPE 2010	REGIME TYPE 2020
1	Poland	–0.34	0.83	0.49	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy
2	Hungary	–0.32	0.68	0.37	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
3	Turkey	–0.29	0.40	0.11	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
4	Brazil	–0.28	0.79	0.51	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Democracy
5	Serbia	–0.27	0.51	0.24	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
6	Benin	–0.26	0.55	0.29	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
7	India	–0.23	0.57	0.34	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
8	Mauritius	–0.23	0.73	0.50	Liberal Democracy	Electoral Democracy
9	Bolivia	–0.18	0.41	0.231	Electoral Democracy	Electoral Autocracy
10	Thailand	–0.17	0.34	0.17	Electoral Autocracy	Closed Autocracy

According to the 2020 report by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, Turkey, along with Hungary and Poland, is at the top of the list of countries which have autocratized the most over the last decade. While in 2010 it was categorized as an electoral democracy it is now an electoral autocracy.



This table shows in detail the autocratization process Turkey has experienced between 2009 and 2019. As one can see there has been a decline in all indicators especially after 2013, which marks the Gezi uprising repressed pretty oppressively by the government at the time. The coup attempt in 2016 and the ensuing emergency measures also accelerated the autocratization process.

In the light of all of this information, it would not be wrong to claim that Kurdish voluntary returnees to Turkey should pay significant attention to the political developments, especially if they are politically active. However, even if they are not politically engaged they should still be careful as the implementation of overly broad anti-terror laws and a heavily politicized judiciary means that simple acts like tweeting or even retweeting is enough to get someone arrested nowadays. Legislative changes to increase control over CSOs mean that arbitrary arrests have become normalized. For instance, in late 2020, a legislative change was issued, allowing the State to replace the leaders of organisations who face terrorism charges and to seek restrictions on their activities in court. There has been an increase in criminalising discourse by government officials and pro-government media targeting the dissident CSOs that receive foreign funding and portraying them as enemies of the nation. The media campaigns have been built on the government's strategy of escalating political polarisation around the themes of defending religious values and national security against Kurdish "terrorism" and Western "enemies".

Targeting activists

These changes and the intensifying authoritarian atmosphere in Turkey have brought about increasing risks not only for Kurdish politicians and civil right organizations but also for dissidents, rights defenders and civil society organizations of all sorts. The CSOs and their activists have been targeted through several court cases leading, for example, to the Büyükada and the Gezi trials. In Büyükada, an island near Istanbul, ten activists from various rights organisations including Amnesty International and Helsinki Citizens Assembly Turkey were taken into custody during a training workshop on digital security in 2017. They were charged with terrorism offences while in the media they were accused of espionage and contributing to the coup attempt. In the final court hearing in 2020, four of the rights advocates on trial were sentenced to prison. Similarly, in the Gezi trial several activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and artists were accused of attempting to stage a coup against the government via the protests in 2013. The indictment involved further allegations such as conspiring with foreign States and using violent means to overthrow the constitutional order and the government. In the verdict declared on 25 April 2022, Osman Kavala, a philanthropist and the leading promoter of civil society and human rights activism in Turkey since the 1990s, who has been imprisoned since 2017, was given an “aggravated” life sentence. Seven other defendants were sentenced to eighteen years and sent to prison.

LGBTQ+ community and women’s movement

Two other groups that are currently specifically targeted are the LGBTQ+ community and the women’s movement. The annual LGBT Pride march in Istanbul has been banned since 2014 and police disperse and detain protesters and anyone who attempts to march. Senior government officials encourage discrimination against LGBT people in their political speeches. It spells a major reversal for efforts to combat gender-based violence and promote women’s rights in Turkey. Government officials have also lately started hinting at an anti-LGBTQ+ constitutional amendment that will define the family as a union between a man and a woman (currently same-sex marriage is not legal in Turkey). There is also rollback on women’s rights as police also attack women’s rights demonstrations. In March 2021, Turkey became the first country to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention, with the claim that the Convention “normalizes homosexuality.” This, despite the fact that hundreds of women are murdered annually in Turkey and reported incidents of domestic violence remain high. In order to circumvent the progressive politicisation around gender identities, the government has increased pressure on LGBT and feminist organisations. Most recently, there has been a lawsuit to shut down the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, one of the most influential feminist organisations in Turkey.

The Gülen movement

In addition to civil society actors, leftist dissidents, members of feminist organisations and LGBTQ+ individuals there are other stigmatized groups in Turkey. One such group is the Gülenists, who are the followers of Fethullah Gülen, a preacher who has been in self-exile in the US since 1999 (due to charges of engaging in anti-secular activities). The Gülen movement used to be the largest religious network in Turkey, with strong grassroots support and a significant amount of financial resources. Called Hizmet (Service) by its followers, Cemaat (Jamaat) by some journalists and researchers, and Fethullah Terör Örgütü (Fethullah Terrorist Organization), FETÖ, by the government, the movement follows the teachings of Said-i Nursi, a Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian who lived at the turn of the 20th century.

Between 2002 and 2012 they allied with the AKP to facilitate the latter's takeover of key political institutions and repression of dissent. At the time, the movement was accused of and criticized for using wiretapping, blackmail and fraud in eliminating rivals. The alliance started to crack in 2011 and reached a climax in 2016 when a clique in the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to undertake a coup to topple the government. Accusing Gülen for masterminding the coup the AKP has since started an all-out-war against Gülenists; thousands have been imprisoned and exiled, and the assets of Gülenist companies have been confiscated.

Socio-political situation in Turkey

Religious, ethnic, political and sexual minorities aside there are also other socio-political factors to consider when advising voluntary returnees to Turkey. The most important one is the deteriorating economic conditions in Turkey. While Turkish economy has been in recess since 2018, Turkish lira has plummeted and inflation rate has only soared since December 2021, spiraling the country into the worst economic crisis in the last two decades. By September 2022, annual Turkish inflation indicated in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) had surged to a 24-year high of 83.45%, from 48.7% in January 2022. September's CPI also beat the previous high of 80.2% in August.

As of 1 November 2022, the USD/TL rate had increased more than 94%, to 18.6, from just 3.77 in November 2017. While one USD was 3.77 TL in November 2017, currently 1 USD equals almost 19 Turkish Liras. On 10 October, The World Bank projected Turkey's economy to slow to 2.7% in 2023, from an estimated 4.7% growth in 2022.

In addition to soaring inflation and plummeting Turkish lira, housing prices are also soaring. According to BETAM, a research center at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University, rental prices across the country increased by 166.4 percent on an annual basis in September, and this rate decreased to 159.2 percent in October. The highest increase was seen in Antalya with 257 percent and Trabzon with 200 percent. In Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, this percentage was 145%, 158% and 168% respectively. Real estate prices, on the other hand, rose by 199% over the year. Turkey leads the way in the House Price Index by Eurostat, the cost of Turkish properties has increased by 900% over the last 12 years. This is almost 20 times more than the average residential property prices in the EU.

Intensified social and political polarization and rising societal tension can generally be seen in the Turkish society, according to Dr. Türkmen. The increasing xenophobia and anti-immigrant attitudes have led even to attacks against Syrian refugees (especially in Istanbul, Ankara, and Gaziantep). There has also been racist discourse employed by some politicians against Syrian and Afghani refugees as well as restrictions on the Syrians' right to temporary protection and residency and restrictions on their presence in some parts of the country.

2. Syrian refugees in Turkey

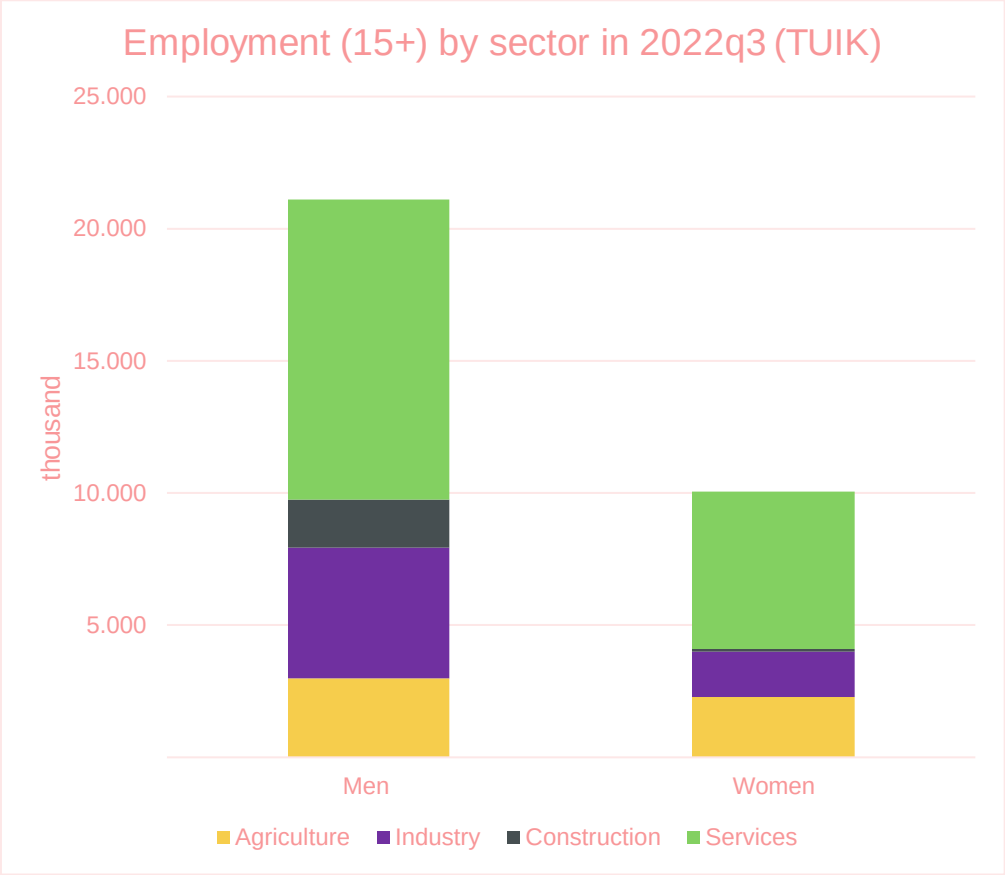
Continuing from Dr. Türkmen's presentation on minorities, Prof. Dr. M. Murat Erdoğan shared an overview of the Syrian refugee situation in Turkey. Prof. Erdoğan's research focus is on migration, refugee politics and EU. He has had a long academic career in Turkey in Ankara and Istanbul universities teaching and researching as a professor. In December 2022, time of the workshop, he was also a Fellow at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) in Berlin. CATS analyses political and social developments in Turkey and the relations between Turkey and Europe. Its tailored formats and products supply information to relevant political decision-makers and the public in Germany and Europe.

According to Prof. Erdoğan Turkey is the most refugee hosting country in the world since 2014. In accordance with its resettlement program, before 2017 Syrians were allowed to move freely to Turkey. There are 3,7 million Syrian refugees in the country, which makes up to 4,2% of Turkey's population. The amount is also growing, because of the new babies being born in Turkey (830 000 Syrian babies have been born in Turkey altogether). There are already 1,2 million school-age Syrian children. The labour market situation for Syrians is also challenging. This topic will be introduced next in the Turkish labour market presentation.

3. Turkish labour market

The next presentation gives an overview about the Turkish labour market situation. Berkin Şafak Şener is the research lead from the Youth Deal Cooperative, an organisation founded in 2015 in Turkey. The goal of the organisation is to enhance employment opportunities in Turkey especially for young people by helping with the school to job transition and providing research data on the topic. In 2022, Youth Deal Cooperative conducted a comprehensive research about labour market situation, job opportunities and impact of the pandemic on Turkish and Syrian youth with 1800 respondents (900 Syrians and 900 host community members). The study was done for International Labour Organisation (ILO).

The overall labour market situation in Turkey for over 15 year-olds shows a 28 percent inactivity rate for men and a 65 percent inactivity rate for women. 8,4 percent of men are unemployed whereas the unemployment rate for women is 13,6 percent.



The above chart shows the different employment sectors in Turkey. Men work mainly in Services (54%), the next biggest sectors being Industry (23%), Agriculture (14%) and Construction (9%). For Women the main sector is also Services (59%), followed by Agriculture (23%), Industry (17%) and Construction (1%).

The key findings

The impact of gender was clearly shown in the study: A young man aged between 18-29 is 16 percent more likely to work compared to a young woman with the same age, nationality and marital status. The age is also an indicator amongst the young workers. Young persons at 25-29 years of age are 23 percent more likely to work compared to their peers at 18-24 age group. The household size matters as youth living in larger households are 3,5% less likely to work. Marital status, however, didn´t have a significant impact on employment. Neither did nationality, education, place of residence or time spent in Turkey.

The role of education was undermined according to the survey-based research. It is a better career path for a young person in Turkey to become a blue-collar worker in the industry than to enter the university. There was no difference between Syrians and Turks: a blue-collar work in the industry offers

a much better career prospect. Higher education does not create any additional value in participating in the labour market unless graduating from the top five universities in Turkey (ILO, 2022).

Working hours and salary

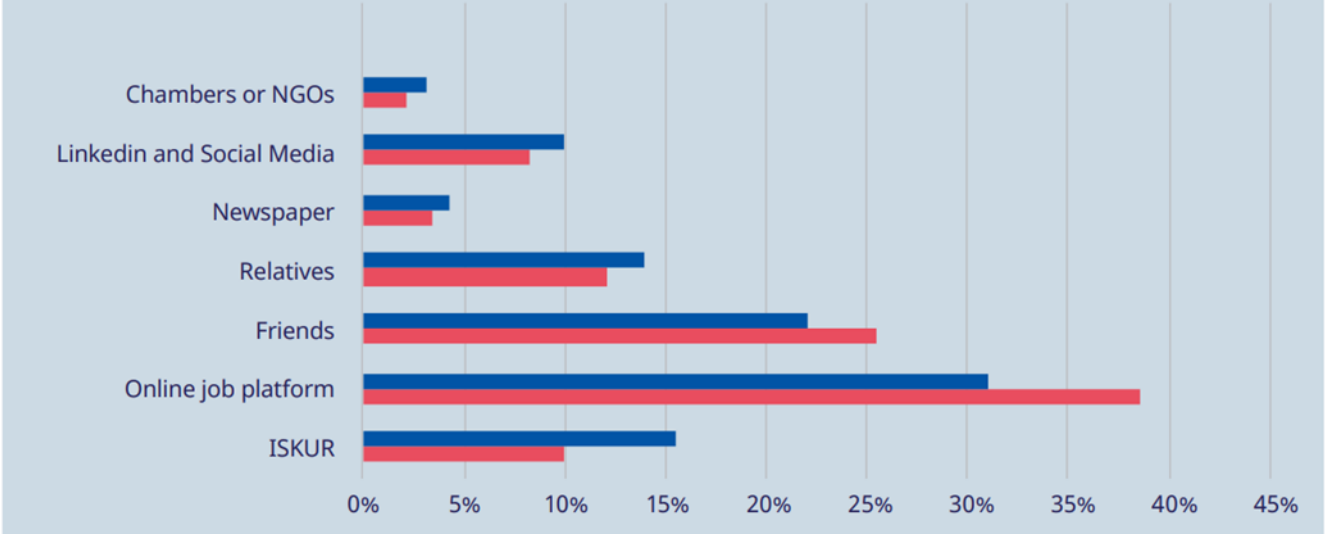
Average weekly working hours are higher among Syrians (59 hours) than Turkish workers (46 hours). One finding of the study was that Turkish workers tend to be paid on a monthly basis (87 percent). Among Syrians, five out of ten are paid monthly, four are paid weekly and one out of ten is paid on a daily basis.

Job search

Unemployed youth have been looking for jobs on average for 5,6 months. Average job search duration is higher among Syrians compared to Turkish youth. Those who are not actively looking for a job declare that they would accept a job offer if offered a higher pay flexible working hours, reduced working hours, and equal treatment to all workers.

Job-seeking channels

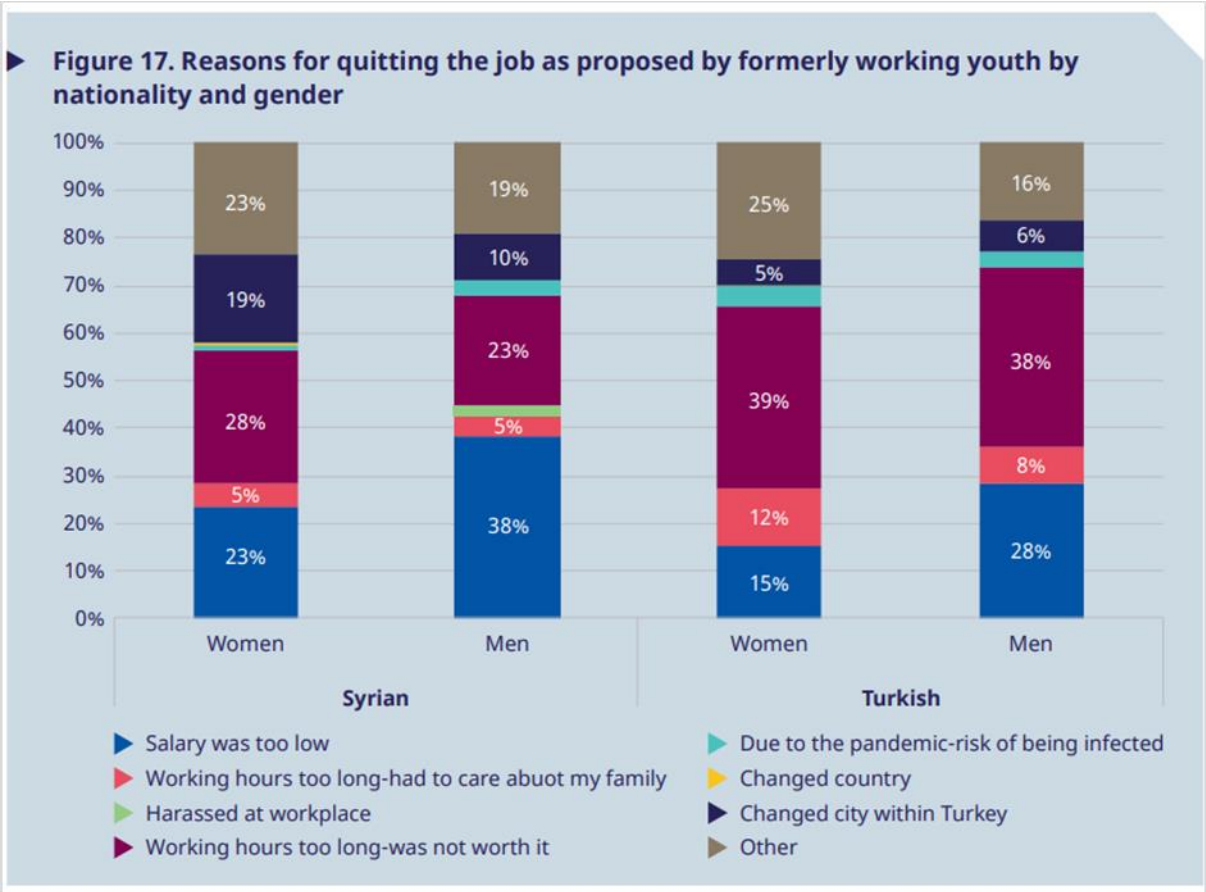
Figure 31. Job-seeking channels of job-seeking youth



▶Turkish ▶Syrian

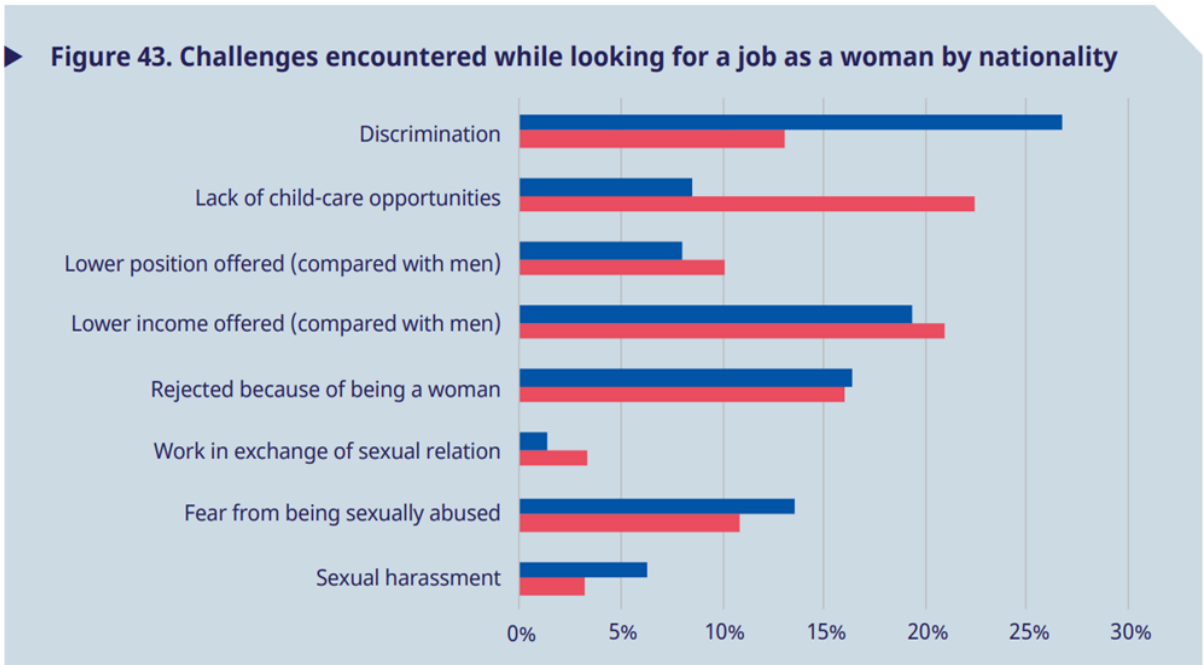
Friends and relatives, online job platforms, ISKUR, LinkedIn and social media rank highest as job-seeking channels. Friends and online job platforms are more popular among Syrian youth than Turkish youth. Young women are overrepresented among those seeking job through ISKUR and online job platforms as well as social media.

Reasons for having quit a job



For those who got fired from previous jobs, major reasons were pandemic (44%) and emerging family responsibilities (17%). For those who closed their own business, 22% stated that the main reason was the pandemic (17% having no clients and 5% facing the risk of being infected). 30% stated that their previous business was not profitable.

Challenges for women



▶Turkish ▶Syrian

For young Syrian women, lack of childcare facilities at the workplace, being offered lower income compared to men with similar competencies and gender-based rejection are the top three challenges encountered while looking for a job. For young Turkish women, discrimination, being offered lower income compared to men with similar competencies and gender-based rejection are the top three challenges that they encountered while looking for a job.

A young woman is 12 percent more likely to face a challenge in the labour market compared to a young man. Being Syrian increases the likelihood of facing a challenge in the labour market by 17 percent compared to being Turkish. Working Syrian young women reported under-payment and non-promotion more than Turkish peers. Turkish young women reported discrimination, fear of sexual abuse, family-related problems and lack of childcare facilities more than Syrian peers. Exposure to harassment and discrimination hence transcend national identities among young women in Turkey. Considering ideal work conditions, young women consider free childcare opportunities more than men while men consider working environment/workplace culture more than women.

Conclusion

Young individuals face multiple and compound barriers in the labour market that can be tackled by holistic and individualized social protection and labour market services.

When counselling possible voluntary returnees referrals and partnerships with domestic service-providers is key for successful return. Current economic outlook is however dire. Single breadwinner family structure is predominant and women's labour force participation is stagnant. Competition in lower-paid precarious jobs is stiff with young Syrian men workforce (and young Syrian women in specific sectors like textile).

Mr. Şener is pointing out that the year 2023 is important, as there are general election, parliamentary election as well as presidential election taking place. In surveys it is shown that young people who express that they would like to leave Turkey, actually do so. They have economic and educational motivation to go abroad (not so much political or security reasons). The polarization of the classes is taking place rigidly in Turkey at the moment: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. That´s why, according to Mr. Şener, the winning party should go an extra mile to convince the youth to stay.

4. MSYD, the JRS reintegration partner in Turkey

MSYD is a new reintegration partner of the Frontex JRS programme. Erdem Ayçiçek (PhD) works as the Head of Programs since 5 years for MSYD that stands for the Humanitarian Endeavors for Association of Assistance Solidarity and Support for Refugees and Asylum seekers in Turkey. He studied international relations and has previously worked for the International Middle East Peace Research Center.

MSYD objectives

MSYD is a non-governmental and humanitarian aid organization which focuses on meeting basic needs and improving living conditions of the individuals and the communities who are affected by humanitarian crisis, conflicts, human rights violations and natural disasters. MSYD has field representative offices in eleven provinces of Turkey and strong mobile and volunteer networks across Turkey.

MSYD has five objectives. The first one is the provision of both emergency and longer-term specialised humanitarian relief without regard to race, religion, cred, sex, age or country of origin of the recipient in the event of natural disasters and other man-made crisis. The second objective is to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of the crisis-affected population through the provision of medical, surgical and clinical care and treatment and distribution of medicines, drugs, medical, surgical and pharmaceutical appliances and equipments. The third objective is the provision of all forms of assistance for the rescue, evacuation, resettlement and rehabilitation of asylum-seekers (including undocumented ones), refugees and internally or externally displaced persons.

Fourthly MSYD wants to ensure active and high quality access and participation to the labour market through vocational and language upgrade courses. And lastly MSYD aims to improve the living conditions of the asylum-seekers, refugees, returnees and vulnerable host community members through shelter improvement interventions, third country resettlement application works, preventive and responsive legal consultancy, in-kind and cash social assistance.

Circle of support

MSYD has 173 full-time staff and 817 volunteers with the average age of 31,3 years. The post-arrival package includes cash assistance, airport pick-up, onward transportation and housing upon arrival. The post-return package includes cash assistance, long-term housing, regular medical assistance, education (including schooling and vocational training), job counselling and assistance, legal counselling, setting up a small business assistance and psychosocial support.

In practice each returnee is assigned a circle of support: volunteer team and a mentor. In year 2022 (until 8.12.2022) 32 returnees have been approved from the RIAD system. The main countries of departure are Germany, Croatia, Poland and Slovenia.

Numbers and figures

MSYD has conducted a survey among the Turkish returnees. The following numbers and figures are referring to returnees in year 2022:

- 93% of the returnees went abroad alone. The majority of returnees stated that they returned because they could not find a job abroad or obtain a work permit. Only 4% of the returnees were female.
- The education level varied from 44% having completed high school, 24% middle school and the rest having a primary school- (16%), undergraduate- (4%) or associate degree (12%).

- Almost all the returnees were under 40 year olds.
- How did the returnees feel about returning to Turkey? 46% felt positive about it, 38% felt very positive. 8% felt neutral and 8% negative.
- 92% of the returnees moved back to where they lived before they migrated.
- 69% moved back to family or friends home. 16% moved to a rented house or apartment. 15% had an own house or apartment.
- Only 38% stated that they have enough sources to cover their daily living expenses. 62% said they don´t have enough sources.
- It was also asked if the returnees have a social circle to support them after return. 69% answered "No".
- 31% of the returnees spent only 1 to 3 months in Europe. 46 % left Turkey less than 3 years ago.
- 69 % of the returnees lived in more than one European country.
- Main reasons to return to Turkey were not having a residence permit, negative decision regarding asylum request or difficulty finding employment or not having right to work.

The existence of the reintegration programme influenced the returnees "a lot" or "fully" in 31% of the cases. 46% of the returnees were "partially" influenced by the reintegration programme. 92% of the returnees expect to earn sufficient income in next 6 month period. 92% returnees state that they are not planning to migrate again.

However, most returnees said that due to the low purchasing power in Turkey (inflation), the amount of aid given is insufficient to generate income. Most returnees who want to start a business or engage in income generating activity seek support to continue their previous business or to expand and partner with their family´s business. Additionally most of the returnees stated that they went abroad by borrowing and they wanted to use the support to pay off their debts.

The income generating activities that the returnees want to do are for example: farming, online shopping, coffee shop, shop to sell handmade goods, PVC window frame installer or acting workshop.

Since some male returnees go abroad before completing their compulsory military service, they have to complete the military service on their return to Turkey. Most of them want the return support to reach their hands before they surrender to military service and, according to Dr. Ayçiçek, this is a challenge for MSYD.

In addition to great keynote speakers the workshop had 2 working group sessions, where the workshops topics were elaborated and discussed between the participants.

Information on Transnational Exchange VI:

This project is implemented by the Caritas Association for the Diocese Augsburg and is co-financed by the European Union. The title of the project is called “European AVRR counsellors in training”. From October 2022 until September 2025, European assisted voluntary return and reintegration counsellors can benefit from workshops, conferences and field trips offered by the Transnational Exchange VI project to enhance their counselling quality.

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Seit 1921
Mensch sein für Menschen

Caritasverband für die Diözese Augsburg e.V.