



BETWEEN FOSTERING AND
OUTSOURCING EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE:
THE EU-TURKEY STATEMENT AND ITS IMPACTS
ON THE EDUCATION OF “REFUGEE STUDENTS”
IN TURKEY

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

Introduction

March 2021 marked the fifth anniversary of the EU-Turkey Statement.¹ Since its adoption, the statement has been discussed from diverse perspectives and positions. While the primary focus has been on the statement's asylum and security policy program² as well as its role in strengthening the European Border Regime,³ so far little attention has focused on the statement's relevance for education policies and processes dealing with the effects of forced migration on the Turkish education system. A closer look at the consequences of the so-called EU-Turkey Deal for the education of young people experiencing forced migration seems especially pressing as numerous programs, projects, and collaborations within the agreement are aimed at increasing the participation of "refugee children and youth"⁴ in the Turkish education system. One-third of the approximately 4.1 billion euro earmarked by the European Union (EU) under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey to date has been transferred to education-related projects.⁵ A huge part of this education expenditure was allocated to inter- and supranational organizations such as the World Bank, the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). These organizations are pursuing various education projects in cooperation with the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MoNE), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local initiatives. All have played a significant role in restructuring the educational landscape in Turkey in recent years.

In this policy brief, I consider the actors in the education field and projects funded and supported under the EU-Turkey Statement within the current global dynamics of migration, globalization, and transnationalization. Against this backdrop, educational tasks and responsibilities are transferred more and more from nation-state educational institutions to inter- and supranational organizations.⁶ This development accompanies the emergence of what has been called a Global Education Industry⁷ that uses (market) criteria of efficiency, efficacy, and accountability to govern and assess educational processes, thus reflecting a broader neoliberal transformation of previously non-economic spheres such as education.⁸ I will argue here

that these developments also affect the design of educational spaces and projects designated for students experiencing forced migration. As I will show, non-governmental organizations in Turkey funded under the EU-Turkey Statement have become entangled in the logics of the Global Education Industry. As a result of this entanglement, these organizations find themselves supporting a homogenous notion of refugee children and youth that tends to ignore the special needs of those who are non-Syrian or LGBTI+ while perpetuating power asymmetries in the global education system.⁹ But first, I will briefly outline some current dynamics in the global educational sphere to elaborate upon the context in which educational justice is currently being discussed and negotiated.

Conflicting Developments in International Negotiations over Educational Justice

At the nation-state as well as the international and supranational levels, recent discussions have centered on how to ensure access to education for all children and to reduce educational inequalities, especially with regard to the situation of students experiencing forced migration. This discussion is characterized by different, partly opposing dynamics.

On the one hand, a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education has been strengthened, particularly at the United Nations, to consider multiple dimensions, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, religion, and disability, across which children form their identities and experience different forms of exclusion in educational systems and institutions. Thus, according to the definition of the UNESCO Education 2030 Framework, "inclusive education for all should be ensured by designing and implementing transformative public policies to respond to learners' diversity and needs, and to address the multiple forms of discrimination and of situations ... which impede the fulfilment of the right to education."¹⁰

This definition emphasizes the adoption of transformative policies and institutional changes to

achieve educational justice, challenging the one-dimensional understanding of inclusive education as “fitting” individual students or groups into educational systems. In this context, addressing intersectional discrimination has become an important message, especially from political actors in the European Union.¹¹ The term intersectional discrimination refers to situations in which discrimination on several bases operates simultaneously and becomes intertwined.¹² For instance, female students with disabilities or LGBTI+ refugees can experience discrimination in qualitatively different ways than peers marginalized on a single basis. In this regard, international NGOs call for a stronger practical application of the concept of intersectionality in legislative procedures, policy-making, and practice to allow for a holistic approach to addressing the needs of marginalized disadvantaged groups.¹³

On the other hand, recent pandemic policies combined with the upsurge of anti-migration discourses and nationalist notions of solidarity in increasingly diverse migration societies have led some to call into question the right to education for all, especially as it applies to students experiencing forced migration.¹⁴ This development is particularly evident in the case of minors living in camps on the Greek islands of Chios, Samos, and Lesbos.¹⁵

At the same time, education is increasingly influenced by a far-reaching economization, reflected in the perception of education as a key asset for the development of national economies and human capital.¹⁶ This economization has led to new forms of education governance, often captured in the term New Public Management, to organize and control educational institutions and processes according to economics-based management techniques. New Public Management entails, among other things, reducing state costs by outsourcing tasks to civil society actors.¹⁷ Further, corporate and private sector actors are perceived as providers of education services, and they increasingly participate in policy formation processes through a broad range of activities, including consulting, research, and evaluation.¹⁸ Additionally, education models are shifting their emphasis toward making educational institutions and processes more efficient and effective through stronger monitoring and performance evaluations. In this regard, education policy is shifting from de-

signing the input to measuring the output of educational institutions and programs by focusing mainly on measurable indicators. Accordingly, quantitative data and statistics play an increasingly important role when evaluating and legitimizing education policies, institutions, and programs.¹⁹

Debates around New Educational Governance have centered on whether and how it might reinforce educational inequalities nationally and globally. One argument against assessing the quality of education in terms of its economic value is that this approach tends to ignore questions of educational justice or address them narrowly in terms of meritocratic principles and performance-based equity.²⁰ In terms of expanding the influence of corporate actors in education, opponents have argued that this “engagement may result in a distortion of policy aims, and the decision of what education projects to support may become determined by areas that the private sector is willing to fund, instead of what is needed.”²¹ A more general critique sees the trend toward privatizing education as reflective of a broader dynamic of social change and redistribution of power that allows state actors to disengage from their responsibility to provide essential educational services and meet emerging challenges through transformations in education systems.²² Further, applying the idea of “education policy as numbers,”²³ numerous scholars have questioned the purported objectivity and neutrality of evidence-based education research and politics, arguing that “[n]umbers’ authoritative façade often hides a series of assumptions and practices which mean, more often than not, that statistics will embody the dominant assumptions that shape inequity in society.”²⁴

How have the logics of New Educational Governance shaped ideas of inclusive education and educational justice in EU-funded projects and programs in Turkey? And what new forms of exclusion, especially in the case of refugee children, have resulted in the Turkish education system? Before discussing these questions, I will briefly outline some of the key points of the “EU-Turkey Deal” and the main education projects being pursued under the statement.

The EU-Turkey Deal and Its Role in Education Policy

The EU-Turkey Statement is the result of several meetings between the European Council and the Turkish government between November 2015 and March 2016. The main focus of the statement is “addressing the migration crisis” in order to “end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU.”²⁵ In addition to measures to strengthen EU border controls and the so-called 1:1 mechanism,²⁶ the EU has pledged six billion euro under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey to fund projects addressing “health, education, infrastructure, food and other living costs.”²⁷ More than one-third of this amount is allocated to projects in the field of education, four of which receive particular attention:

- 1 | The Project on Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES), led by the Ministry of National Education (MoNe), which provides services such as Turkish language courses, school guidance, and psychosocial support for Syrian students.²⁸
- 2 | The construction and equipment of schools in Turkish provinces with a high proportion of Syrian refugees, led by the World Bank and the German state-owned development bank Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW).²⁹
- 3 | The UNICEF-coordinated project Conditional Cash Transfer for Education, which extends the national support program for Turkish families whose children regularly attend school to Syrian and other refugee families.³⁰
- 4 | Education projects for or including refugee children and youth, run by local, national, and international (non-governmental) organizations.³¹

In recent years, the educational activities of these NGOs have shifted from the field of emergency education in camps at the Turkish-Syrian border to cities and suburban areas, where currently most refugee families live. These educational activities are primarily informal since a governmental decree passed by the MoNe in 2017 restricts NGOs from cooperating with state educational institu-

tions such as schools.³² Organizations seeking to become involved in this work need the ministry’s permission, which, according to the NGOs interviewed, entails high bureaucratic hurdles and does not follow transparent criteria. Against this background, a parallel (informal) education system for young people experiencing forced migration has emerged in Turkey and largely operates at a distance from state education actors and institutions in Turkey. In contrast, many of the NGOs orient their activities toward the interests of international donors such as the EU as well as the private sector and, by this, adopt (neoliberal) logics of a New Educational Governance. This creates, specifically, the following dynamics:

1. “There is the funding – there is the need”: Growth and perpetuation as central premises in the NGO work for and with refugees

Interviews with representatives of NGOs in Turkey revealed that the once loose network of organizations and initiatives supporting refugees in Turkey at the onset of forced migration from Syria have developed into a “professional sector” in recent years. Because of increased political attention and financial support from national, supranational, and international donors, NGOs working in the field of education for people experiencing forced migration have come to be viewed as a “promising professional field.” The founder of one NGO describes this development as follows: “This refugee or Syria assistance has created job opportunities for thousands of people. Ten years ago, the situation for civil society in Turkey was different. Now thousands are employed in this sector. For example, we have a lot of colleagues who came to us from the private sector.” In addition to the expansion of their personnel, many organizations that were previously active in other areas have entered the field of education. However, not all NGOs have educational experience and expertise. As one NGO representative relates: “It can happen, for example, that an organization that is not an educational organization and that has never done educational work in its life suddenly offers language courses. So, there is the funding – there is the need.”

The expansion and professionalization of the NGO sector in times of forced migration reflects an organizational logic in which the NGOs are primarily concerned with securing a permanent presence for their education projects in Turkey. This aim also shapes the actors' perceptions of their role in the field of refugee support. Thus, according to the observation of some NGO representatives, these organizations are not currently focused on using their civil society position outside the system of official education to point out the system's shortcomings and to intervene temporarily; instead, they are working to establish their own position as part of the system: “And most people don't know what civil society does or why we are here. [...] Our goal is to close our doors one day, when we are sure that our vision has been achieved and there is no need for an organization like ours anymore. That is what we are working for. But most people currently working in civil society in Turkey do not have such visions; [...] they just like to maintain their jobs.” This speaker criticizes the mentality that allows the tasks and responsibilities related to educating children experiencing forced migration to be outsourced from the EU and nation-state levels to civil society actors like NGOs. This process is characteristic of the current transformations in the international education sphere described above.

In recent years, the heavy influx into Turkey of actors involved in refugee education has intensified competition between NGOs: “Unfortunately, the situation among NGOs in Turkey is now that we are competing with each other like there is a cake and each organization is trying to get the biggest piece. I cannot say that we have a close cooperation. It is more like we are competing with each other than cooperating.” According to this interviewee, competition for funding has resulted in a weakening of partnerships with other NGOs. While the orientation toward (inter)national donors has enabled the NGOs to grow and expand their education projects in Turkey, at the same time it has encouraged a lone wolf mentality among these nonprofits. This mentality not only runs counter to the formation of solidarity-based alliances, it also threatens to negatively impact the quality of work in the field of forced migration and education.

2. “Key partners” and “backbone organizations”: Collaborations between NGOs and the private sector

In recent years, many individuals have moved from the private sector to civil society organizations; at the same time a number of these organizations that are supported under the EU-Turkey Deal have been running informal education projects for and with the participation of refugees in collaboration with private sector actors such as companies. As one of the NGOs receiving the most funding from the European Union, the Dutch NGO Spark works with, among others, investors and the Islamic Development Bank, based in Saudi Arabia, as well as the Sheikh Abdullah Al Nouri Charity Society based in Kuwait.³³ UNICEF Turkey has also increasingly sought revenue streams from the private sector, as mentioned in its 2019 Activity Report. Several new partnerships with the private sector are listed in the report, which mentions Henkel, Karaca, and Carrefour.³⁴ These actors not only serve as important donors but are also often referred to as NGOs' “key partners” or “backbone organizations” involved in the conceptualization of education projects. In this context, collaborations with the private sector are portrayed as beneficial to the cause of promoting educational justice, and the actors involved admit to no conflicts or conflicting interests between public and private sector interventions. By and large these NGOs are not raising questions about whether and how the involvement of the private sector might affect, for example, the choice of education projects and their manner of implementation. Instead, as stated in its activity report, UNICEF “believes that the private sector plays an important role in helping all children realize their fundamental rights and freedoms.”³⁵

In addition to collaborating with the private sector, many NGOs link their education projects with the labor market. Spark, for example, operates under the stated goal of “empowering” especially Syrian refugees “to study, work and grow their own businesses”, for example, by providing scholarships for vocational training and internships in the corporate sector. On the main page of the NGO's website, the “success stories” of some former female scholarship holders are presented in the form of portraits

and quotes and feature statements such as “I can face anything in this life with self-confidence”; “I invested in myself so that doors would open, eventually”; and “Whichever country I am in, I should be doing something significant.”³⁶ The women quoted on Spark’s website are portrayed as entrepreneurs who, despite difficult personal histories and thanks to the empowerment provided by the NGO’s program, were able to develop their entrepreneurial potential and contribute to the economies of their host countries.

In addition to Spark, a number of other organizations funded under the EU-Turkey Deal run education projects focused on the entrepreneurial empowerment of young refugees with the help of the private sector. These measures aim to help these young people achieve economic autonomy by positioning them as human capital or market participants while also reinforcing a meritocratic notion of educational justice, in which educational success depends mainly on the efforts of the single individual. Structural and institutional barriers that women such as those quoted above may face in their reception countries (e.g., intersectional forms of discrimination based on their gender, residence status, and/or national origin) are not addressed by these education projects. Instead, structural barriers are individualized and individuals are positioned as “entrepreneurs of themselves.” The one-sided understanding of inclusion promoted by this approach to empowerment, typical for the majority of education projects funded under the EU-Turkey agreement, contradicts a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education that aims to transform structures and institutions in order to create equal educational opportunities for all.

3. “For Syrian refugees only”: Numbers and statistics as the pivotal orientation for action

The project descriptions that NGOs and the European Commission post on their websites show a striking tendency to report the results of their projects in terms of numerical evaluations and quantities. For example, the NGO Concern Worldwide, funded under the EU-Turkey Deal, reports the numbers of children “directly” and “indirectly supported” by the NGO’s education program without specifying what forms this support has taken.³⁷ The website for Spark publishes the number of “scholarships awarded,” “youth educated,” “academic credits received,” and “degree programs completed.” These figures update with every click on the page and are promoted as “results that really count.”³⁸ Similarly, on the European Commission’s website, project evaluation results are reported only in the form of absolute figures and statistics. This also applies to complex education project targets, such as “social cohesion among Syrian refugees and the host community,” which is evaluated in one of the EU-funded education projects via two indicators: (1) the “number of community centers and other institutions providing social cohesion activities” and (2) the “number of people” who participated in these activities.³⁹

These figures and statistics purport to convey objective information about the impact and success of the organizations’ education projects, drawing a direct line between figures such as the number of participants and the projects’ complex objectives, such as “social cohesion.” The presentation of project results in the form of figures and statistics makes these outcomes appear unequivocal and irrefutable while diverting attention from the implicit assumptions underlying the presentation of educational quality in quantitative terms. At the same time, the concept of social cohesion is presented as something that can be operationalized in the form of measurable indicators and transferred easily from state to non-state actors such as NGOs.

Numbers and statistics shape not only the public communication of NGOs’ work in the field of forced migration and education but also the organizations’ understanding of their projects’ target groups. For example, in the interviews and on the websites of the NGOs analyzed here, reference is repeatedly made to the high number of “Syrian refugees” living in Turkey. This number precedes almost every project description.⁴⁰ The repeated use of this number seems to explain the primary orientation of NGOs’ educational activities toward the target group of Syrian refugees, as illustrated in the following quote: “And we have already started to implement these programs for Syrian refugees. – Interviewer: Only for Syrian refugees? – Yes, for Syrian refugees only. Because of the large population.”

This “large population” not only legitimizes the exclusive focus of NGOs’ projects on Syrian refugees but also results in the exclusion of non-Syrian children experiencing forced migration from consideration in these projects. This is true for most of the EU-funded education projects analyzed here. At the same time, the repeated use of the category “Syrian refugees”⁴¹ inscribes a homogeneous perception of the target group within the organizations’ programs, while multiple forms of belonging and (intersectional) exclusion are not addressed by the NGOs. This becomes very apparent with regard to the situation of young people in migration who identify as LGBTI+. Although some of the representatives of NGOs mentioned the need for specific support for the LGBTI+ community, the projects do not address this need directly. The explanation given was that the exact number of such children in the Turkish education system was not known. Thus, as argued by several NGOs, the existence of LGBTI+ refugee children in the Turkish school system cannot be statistically proven, and therefore, no funds can be raised for projects targeting the special needs of these children.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This policy brief aimed to illustrate some linkages between current developments in the global education system and local educational activities of NGOs in Turkey. As shown here, the logics of a New Educational Governance shape educational thinking and practice regarding students experiencing forced migration in various ways. The private sector is increasingly present in the education networks that have emerged in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement, and assessments of the quality of EU-supported education programs are made using statistics and quantitative data, conveying the assumption that the numbers speak for themselves. As a result, systemic aspects crucial to educational justice and a complex interplay of political, judicial and societal factors influencing the quality of education and that might uncover the need for different forms of intervention and collaboration between the EU, NGOs, and nation-state actors are relegated to the background. Thus, despite the emphasis on comprehensive approaches in many international agreements at the EU and UN levels, inclusive education as it applies to refugee children and youth, and particularly those who identify as LGBTI+, is largely relegated to the margins in the design of EU-funded education programs and projects. In fact, EU-funded projects partly promote a national education policy that largely excludes non-Syrian minors experiencing forced migration from the Turkish education system. This policy also risks promoting the assimilation of children experiencing forced migration into a mono-cultural Turkish education system⁴² as well as an anti-LGBTI+ discourse fostered by the governing parties in Turkey.

Addressing this problem will entail consistent incorporation of a comprehensive understanding of inclusive education, with sensitivity to intersectionality, in the conceptualization and funding stage of EU education projects for and involving refugees in Turkey. What is more, in the process of exploring the complex interconnections that influence the quality of inclusive educational processes, quantitative research methods should not take precedence over qualitative ones, despite the difficulty of communicating qualitative results to potential public and pri-

vate donors. In the matter of seeking partnerships between corporate and civil society sectors in education, comprehensive guidelines are needed to ensure a balance based on the needs of the recipients rather than on the preferences of donors.

It is important for the EU to continue its support of civil society actors such as NGOs in their engagement in the field of education. These civil society actors are crucial in “social mobilization and raising public awareness so that the voices of citizens (especially those facing discrimination) can be heard in policy development,” as well as in developing “innovative and complementary approaches that help promote the right to education, especially for the most excluded groups,” as stated in the UN Education 2030 framework.⁴³ In order for their critical voices to be heard with regard to current educational processes, NGOs need more freedom and scope to act within the Turkish education system. However, strong support for educational actors from civil society cannot lead to a withdrawal of the (supra-)national state, respectively the EU and the Turkish government, from its responsibility to create a just and barrier-free educational environment for all children. Creating a parallel system of education organized by NGOs and operating independently of the state education system would be problematic and would potentially have dramatic consequences once EU funds were withdrawn. That is why it is crucial to closely integrate the perspectives and activities of NGOs into the holistic development of an inclusive education system. In doing so, cooperation with NGOs must be made a prerequisite for EU financial support to state education actors in Turkey. Through this, as well as through a critical examination of the gap between the EU’s claim of inclusive education and the reality in the field of forced migration and education, the EU would show more responsibility in strengthening educational justice for all children in Turkey instead of outsourcing it.

Endnotes

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- 4 | In this policy brief the term “refugee” refers to all people who for various reasons were forced to flee their country of origin and cannot return safely. To emphasize the social constructional character of the category “refugee” when applied to individuals, I put the term in quotation marks here. Hereafter, even though I omit the quotation marks, the intended meaning is the same.
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- 9 | The findings presented in this policy brief are the initial results of the project “Voices of civil society actors on inclusive education in times of forced migration: Case studies

in Germany and Turkey,” which I conducted as part of my Mercator-IPC Fellowship in 2019/20. The empirical part of the research consisted of document analyses of policy agreements, programs, and project descriptions published by the European Commission and NGOs in the context of the EU-Turkey Statement, as well as qualitative interviews I conducted with representatives of NGOs and education initiatives working in the field of migration and education in Istanbul. For a more detailed analysis of the results presented here, cf. Ellen Kollender, „Es ist eher so, dass wir miteinander konkurrieren‘: Außerschulische Bildungsprojekte für ‚Geflüchtete‘ im Kontext von ‚EU-Türkei-Deal‘ und New Educational Governance,“ *Zeitschrift für erziehungswissenschaftliche Migrationsforschung*, 1/2022 (forthcoming).

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For a critical analysis of the EU-Turkey Statement from a human rights perspective, see, for example, Valeria Hänsel, “Gefangene des Deals: Die Erosion des europäischen Asylsystems auf der griechischen Hotspot-Insel Lesbos,” 2019, bordermonitoring.eu e.V.
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