

THE DESIRE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN TURKEY TO LIVE ABROAD: AN ANALYSIS OF RECENT SURVEYS ON YOUTH IN TURKEY

Demet Lüküslü





Introduction

During the last few years, public discussion in Turkey has focused on the overwhelming desire of young people to live abroad, particularly in Global North countries. As there is rising interest in this topic,¹ it is likely that we will continue to see a rising number of studies and debates on this topic in the near future.² While this topic has long been a heated debate in other Southeastern European (SEE) countries, as migration from this region to Central Europe is relatively common,³ this is a new issue for Turkish society.

The official statistics on international migration from Turkey in 2022⁴ demonstrate that there is a rising trend in migration from Turkey. For example, the number of people who emigrated from Turkey increased by 62.3% in 2022 compared to the previous year, which brought this number to a total of 466,914 emigrants. Among this number, 139,531 were citizens of the Republic of Turkey, whereas 327,383 were foreign nationals. It was also observed that the tendency to emigrate is greater among youth and young adults. The highest share of those emigrating is among the 25–29 age group, 15.8% of all emigrants, followed by 13.4% from the 30–34 age group, and 12.8% from ages 20–24. In total, approximately 42% of those who emigrated in 2022 are in the 20–34 age group. Therefore, it is crucial to reflect upon the age and generation factor in this migration trend.

The migration literature has long discussed how migration is the combined result of the desire/aspiration to migrate and the ability/capability to migrate.⁵ The emphasis in this analysis, however, is not on those who have realized their desires/aspirations and have already emigrated. Rather, this analysis will focus on the latest surveys on youth demonstrating the desire of young people

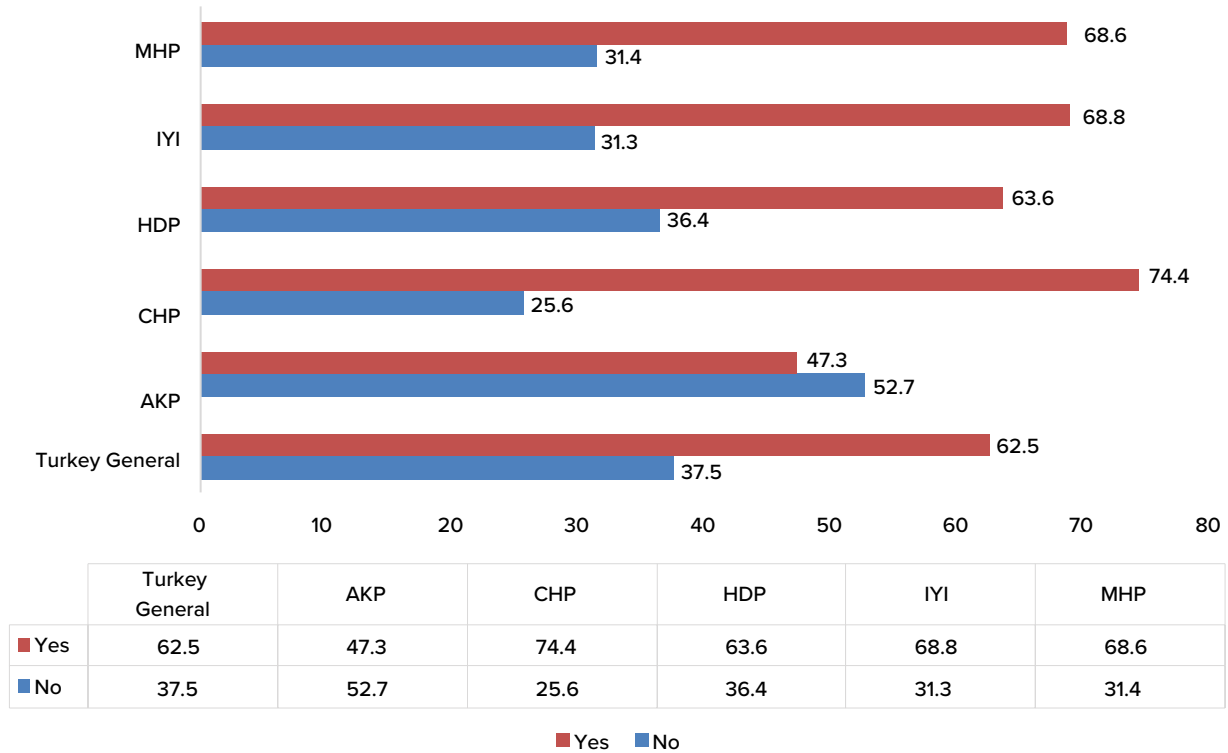
to live in other countries. It will scrutinize what these surveys reveal about young people in Turkey and their perceptions about Europe, their preferred destination according to the surveys.

What Do the Surveys on Young People in Turkey Tell Us about Their Desire to Live Abroad?

Recent surveys demonstrate that there is a strong desire to live abroad among young people in Turkey. A 2020 survey conducted by the Social Democracy Foundation (*Sosyal Demokrasi Vakfı*, SODEV) on young people aged 15–25 in 12 cities in Turkey demonstrated that 62.5% of young people would want to live in another country if they had the means to do so.⁶ The survey shows that although the percentage of those who would want to live in another country is higher among those who voted for opposition political parties—with this percentage rising to 74.4% among young people who voted for the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP)—this percentage is also significant (47%) among those who voted for the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP).



Would you like to live in another country if you had the means to do so?



Source: Türkiye'nin Gençliği Araştırması Raporu [Turkey's Youth Research Report], p. 17.

These findings were confirmed by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung's (KAS) two consecutive surveys on youth in Turkey. The first study from KAS, Turkish Youth Study 2021,⁷ surveyed young people between 18 and 25 years old from May–September 2021 in 28 provinces. According to the results, 27.1% of participants stated they are content and wished to stay in Turkey, whereas 72.9% stated that they would like to live in another country. At the top of the

list of countries where young people would like to live were several European countries (Germany, UK, and France), with 30.6% of survey participants expressing their desire to live there, followed by the United States (15%), Canada (12%), and Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, and Finland) (9.6%). The share of those who expressed their willingness to live in Arabic-speaking countries was only 1.1%.



Would you like to live in Turkey or in another country?

	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
I am content with my life and would like to live in Turkey.	876	27.1
I would like to live in a European country.	990	30.6
I would like to live in a Scandinavian country.	309	9.6
I would like to live in the United States.	485	15.0
I would like to live in Canada.	388	12.0
I would like to live in one of the Arab states.	35	1.1
I would like to live in one of the Balkan countries.	22	0.7
Other	128	4.0
TOTAL	3,233	100.0

Source: *Türkiye Gençlik Araştırması 2021* [Turkey Youth Research 2021], p. 111.

When asked the reasons behind participants' desire to move abroad, it was observed that the prospect of better living conditions (32.4%) and the higher possibility of finding employment (14.8%) in other countries, which were selected by almost half (47.2%) of participants, were common reasons for wanting to move abroad.

The perceptions that other countries had more respect for human rights (19.5%) and freedom (17.6%) were also stated as important reasons, with over one-third (37.1%) of participants selecting one of these reasons for wanting to move abroad.

The reasons behind the desire to live in another country

	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
I cannot find employment in Turkey; I think I can find employment more easily there [abroad].	696	14.8
I do not feel secure in Turkey.	602	12.8
There is more freedom there.	829	17.6
Human rights are more developed there.	920	19.5
The living conditions there are better than those in Turkey.	1,527	32.4
It is a better Muslim society.	29	0.6
Other	110	2.3
TOTAL	4,713	100.0

Source: *Türkiye Gençlik Araştırması 2021* [Turkey Youth Research 2021], p. 114.



The reasons behind the desire to live in another country

	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
I cannot find employment in Turkey; I think I can find employment more easily there [abroad].	328	14.7
I do not feel secure in Turkey.	373	16.8
There is more freedom there.	460	20.7
The living conditions there are better than those in Turkey.	1,065	47.8
TOTAL	2,226	100.0

Source: *Türkiye Gençlik Araştırması 2023* [Turkey Youth Research 2023], p. 50.

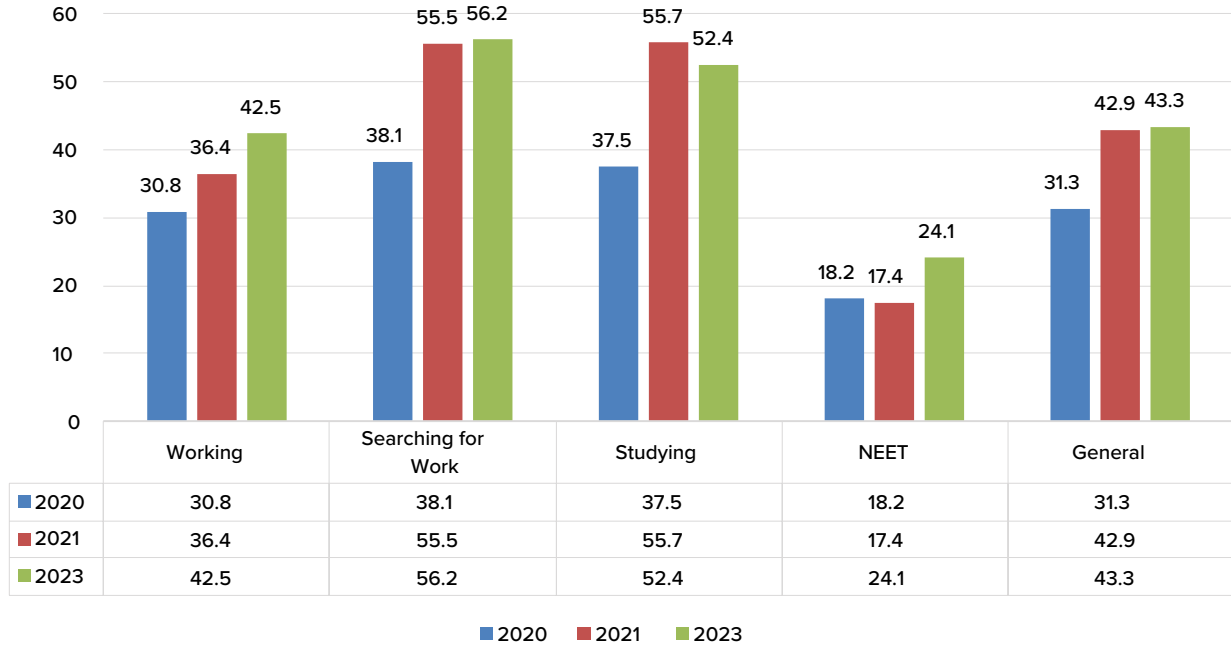
The second survey of KAS, in 2023, also confirmed these findings. According to the KAS survey, *Turkish Youth Study 2023*⁸—conducted between December 5, 2022 and January 20, 2023, with young people aged 18 to 25 from 16 different provinces—63% of young people stated that if they had the means, they would like to live in another country. The top choice of country was Germany, followed by the United States and the United Kingdom. When asked for the reasons behind their desire to move abroad, the desire to improve participants’ living conditions (47.8%) was at the top of the list. Approximately 20.7% of the survey participants underlined the importance of freedom and expressed that they believe there is more freedom in other countries, whereas 16.8% stated that they do not feel secure in Turkey and 14.7% stated that they cannot find employment in Turkey and that they would find employment more easily outside Turkey.

Although the surveys cited above give important insights about the desire among young people to live abroad, for a more detailed study, one needs to have longitudinal data in order to see the trends and differences among the different categories of youth, since youth is not a homogeneous category. Therefore, I examined the “Wellbeing of Youth in Turkey” surveys⁹

conducted by Habitat and Infakto Research, which surveyed young people between 18 and 29 years old in 2020, 2021, and 2023, to demonstrate the rise in the percentage of young people who would like to live abroad. Over these three years, the percentage of young people who would like to live abroad rose from 31.3% in 2020, to 42.9% in 2021, and to 43.3% in 2023. These surveys also show the differences between different categories of youth in relation to this desire to live abroad. The percentage of those who would like to live in another country was the highest among young people looking for work (38.1% in 2020, 55.5% in 2021, and 56.2% in 2023) and who attend university (37.5% in 2020, 55.7% in 2021, and 52.4% in 2023), compared to young people who are already employed (30.8% in 2020, 36.4% in 2021, and 42.5% in 2023) and compared to *ev genci*, the terminology used by the survey to describe the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) category (18.2% in 2020, 17.4% in 2021, and 24.1% in 2023). It seems that even though there is a general tendency among young people to want to live abroad, for the young people who are searching for work and those who are studying, this desire is even more prominent. It is also significant to point out that in the NEET category, even though



The desire to live abroad



Source: *Türkiye’de Gençlerin İyi Olma Hali Araştırma Raporu 5* [Wellbeing of Young People in Turkey Research Report], p. 24.

almost one in four of young NEETs expressed the desire to move abroad, the desire to move abroad among young women¹⁰ is much lower.

The Perception of Europe and the European Union among Young People in Turkey

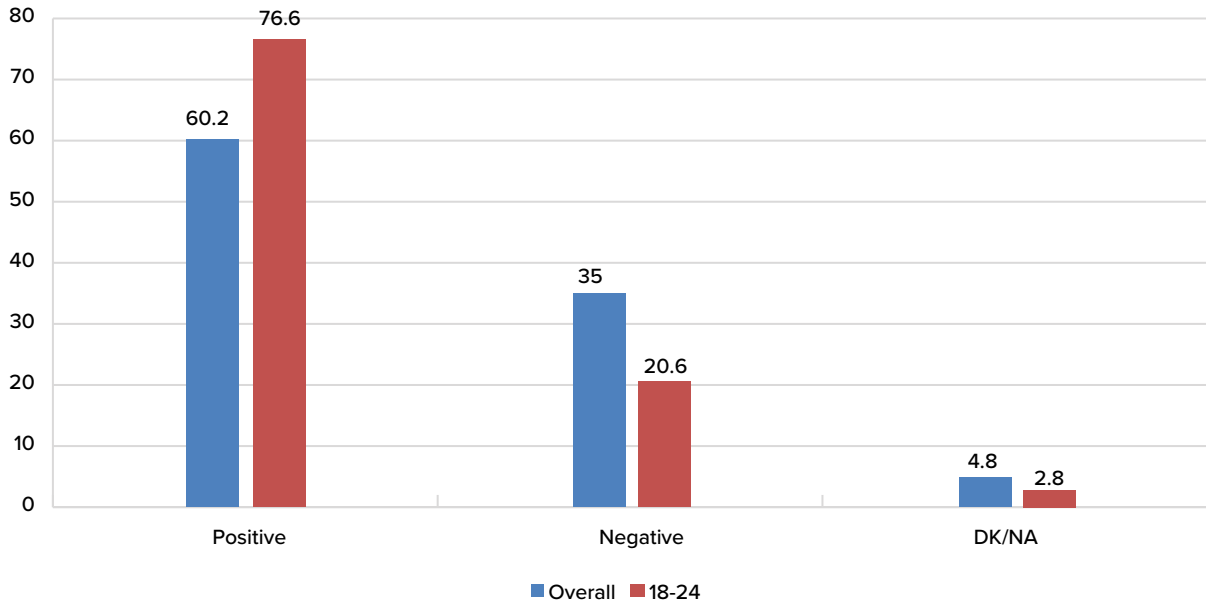
These survey results have triggered a political debate about why young people want to leave Turkey, which at times has resulted in blaming young people for not staying and fighting for change or in trying to convince young people to stay in the country. However, it is important to avoid such negative or positive views of young people and to reflect on the factors shaping this phenomenon. These survey results may be read as the desire of the younger generation to live in a country that can solve major socioeconomic

problems and offer better living standards and, therefore, can be seen as a way to rethink society.

The surveys reveal how European countries (especially Central European countries, with a particular interest in Germany at the top of the list of countries) are appealing to young people, which makes it necessary to reflect on what Europe represents for them. There is thus a need for research discussing this perception. The latest “Turkish Perceptions of the European Union 2022” survey,¹¹ conducted in March 2022 by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, confirmed the positive image of Europe and the European Union among young people in Turkey. The survey shows that individuals aged 18–24 had positive ideas about Europe/Europeans and the European Union, and 72.8% of those in this age group stated that they believed that EU membership would be good for Turkey, compared to 58.6% of the general



Attitude toward Europeans



Source: *Turkish Perceptions of the EU 2022*, p. 19.

population who expressed this view. However, it is important to note that confidence that Turkey will become an EU member is rather low. The support for the political reforms that Turkey needs to make in order to achieve visa liberalization with the European Union is also high and is steadily increasing. Additionally, the 18–24 age group appears to have a much more positive opinion of Europeans than the general population: 76.6% of the respondents in this age group had a positive opinion of Europeans, as opposed to 60.2% in the general population.

Based on survey results such as these, it can be said that young people in Turkey have strongly expressed their desire for better living conditions—including better economic conditions and living in a freer society—and for Turkey to become a “European” society that is well integrated into the European Union, even though they recognize that this will be difficult.

Concluding Remarks

For a more thorough discussion of the question of what this desire to live abroad really means, it is important to underline the complexity of this desire, which becomes even more complicated considering the heterogeneity and intersectionality aspects of the youth category. What is certain is that we need further research on the topic and to introduce not only quantitative data but also in-depth qualitative data for discussing this complex phenomenon. Furthermore, since young people consistently point at a certain destination—i.e., Europe, with Germany at the top of the list—it is also important to study what Europe, as well as different European countries and the European Union, means to them. This requires in-depth, interdisciplinary research combining youth and European studies, among other fields.



Notes

- 1 | For some of the most important journalistic works on this issue, see Ruşen Çakır, “Büyük Göç [Grand Migration], Medyascope, August 14, 2023, <https://medyascope.tv/2023/08/14/buyuk-goc-1-turkiyeden-gidenler-hikayelerini-rusen-cakira-anlatiyor-tanik-koruma-programina-girer-gibi-her-seyi-sifirliyorsunuz/>.
- 2 | For a pioneer collection of academic articles, see Didem Daniş, ed. *Gitmek ve Dönmek Arasında: Türkiye’de Yeni Nesil Beyin Göçü* (Ankara: Nika Yayınevi, 2024).
- 3 | See Miran Lavrič, Smiljka Tomanović, and Mirna Jusić, *Youth Study Southeast Europe 2018/2019* (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/15274-20190408.pdf>.
- 4 | “International Migration Statistics,” Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), last modified July 24, 2023, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=International-Migration-Statistics-2022-49457&dil=2#:~:text=TRKSTAT%20Corporate&text=ln%202022%2C%20number%20of%20immigrants,males%2C%20-47.1%25%20were%20females>.
- 5 | For a discussion see Jørgen Carling and Francis Collins, “Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 909–926; Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, “Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration,” in *Aspiration, Desire and the Drivers of Migration*, 37–55 (New York/London: Routledge, 2020).
- 6 | “Türkiye’nin Gençliği Araştırması Raporu [Turkey’s Youth Research Report],” Social Democracy Foundation (SODEV), last modified May 19, 2020, https://sodev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/detayli_rapor.pdf.
- 7 | *Türkiye Gençlik Araştırması 2021* [Turkey Youth Research 2021] (Ankara: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Türkiye Temsilciliği, 2022), https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/16886777/T%C3%BCrkiye+Gen%C3%A7lik+Ara%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rmas%C4%B1+2021_T%C3%BCrkce.pdf/fd08cee1-8d75-02bb-13cb-2bb341b8897d?version=1.2&t=1644871408910.
- 8 | *Türkiye Gençlik Araştırması 2023* [Turkey Youth Research 2023] (Ankara: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Türkiye Temsilciliği, 2023), <https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/24685727/T%C3%BCrkiye+Gen%C3%A7lik+Ara%C5%9Ft%C4%B1rmas%C4%B1+2023.pdf/8cc42a63-e829-0057-15a5-b03f36ed9a32?version=1.1&t=1685717349843>.
- 9 | “Türkiye’de Gençlerin İyi Olma Hali Araştırma Raporu 5 [Wellbeing of Young People in Turkey Research Report 5],” Habitat Association, last modified April 2023, <https://habitatdernegi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Turkiyede-Genclerin-Iyi-Olma-Hali-Raporu-5-Ozet-Rapor-Sunum.pdf>.
- 10 | On the gender aspect of the issue, see Demet Lüküslü and Kezban Çelik, “Gendering the NEET Category: Young NEET Women in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 2 (February 8, 2021): 200–222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2021.1882861>.
- 11 | “Turkish Perceptions of the European Union 2022,” The German Marshall Fund (GMF) of the United States, last modified April 14, 2022, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/Turkish%20Perceptions%20of%20the%20EU%202022%20English.pdf>.



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.

Demet Lüküslü is 2023/24 Mercator-IPC Fellow at Istanbul Policy Center.

The comments and conclusions in this analysis belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC's official position.

The Desire of Young People in Turkey to Live Abroad: An Analysis of Recent Surveys on Youth in Turkey

9 p.; 30 cm. - (Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative)

ISBN 978-625-6956-37-7

Cover Design and Page Layout: MYRA

Istanbul Policy Center

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-İstanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu



IPC

ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER

SABANCI UNIVERSITY

STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE