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“SPARKS” AND GLOBAL LEADERS: CIVIL INITIATIVES AS EMERGING ACTORS IN TURKEY’S DIASPORA GOVERNANCE

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Introduction

In November 2025, two events took place that, taken together, signal a shift in how, and by whom, Turkey's highly skilled diaspora is being engaged. On November 28, 2025, the Global Turks Foundation, "an independent, non-governmental and non-partisan platform that unites successful Turkish leaders and professionals worldwide," was formally launched in Istanbul, unveiling a global leadership academy aimed at cultivating what it calls the "Globally Successful Turkish Leader" brand.[1] One day earlier, Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım Derneği (A World Spark Association), a civil society organization of Turkish engineers and professionals living abroad whose name invokes an early Republican-era metaphor for students sent abroad as *kıvılcımlar* (sparks), convened its second online *Kıvılcım Zirvesi* (Sparks Summit), drawing around 2,000 participants particularly from Europe, North America, and the Gulf, around the theme "From Brain Drain to Brain Power."[2] Distinct in structure and objectives, these two initiatives nonetheless share a common ambition: to mobilize Turkey's highly skilled diaspora on terms that are neither defined nor mediated by the state.

Both organizations address a constituency that has remained largely peripheral to, and sometimes at odds with, Turkey's official diaspora engagement frameworks over the past decade: globally mobile and predominantly secular professionals. Both initiatives operate through professional networks, digital platforms, and a discourse of mutual benefits, positioning overseas expertise as a resource for Turkey's economic and technological development rather than as a cultural or political asset to be managed. Drawing on Ciszek's work in public relations scholarship, this analysis refers to these organizations' mode of operation as "transnational strategic communication"[3]: where communication functions as an instrument of engagement that operates across at least two cultural contexts simultaneously, addressing multiple audiences while drawing its legitimacy from international networks and frames of reference.

What explains the emergence of these organizations at this particular moment? At least part of the answer lies in the evolving landscape of Turkey's diaspora governance, a field that over the past two decades has shifted from reactive state practices toward an increasingly proactive and institutionalized model. The assertiveness of official policy since the mid-2010s has, paradoxically, contributed to its own limitations: by centering their engagement around ethnic solidarity, religious affiliation, or partisan loyalty, official diaspora policy has progressively narrowed the space for those who do not fit this sphere,[4] widening the distance between state frameworks and the transnational realities of a significant part of Turkey's population living abroad.[5] This narrowing of the Turkish state's engagement policies is one plausible explanation for the emergence of these civil initiatives, though it is not the only one: the growth of the emigrant population itself, the opportunity structures opened by digital organizing, and the professional motivations of the founders of these new organizations all contribute to a fuller picture. By developing their own platforms and terms of engagement, these organizations have begun to function as actors of diaspora governance without explicitly framing themselves as such. To understand what makes these initiatives significant, it is necessary to situate them within the broader trajectory of Turkey's diaspora engagement policies.

Turkey's Diaspora Engagement Policies and Highly Skilled Emigrants

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has undergone a marked shift in its approach toward emigrants, moving from a largely reactive or indifferent stance to an explicit policy of proactive diaspora engagement. This reorientation was institutionalized with the establishment of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) in 2010, operating first under the office of the Prime Minister and since 2018 under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. While affairs related to emigrants and diasporas had previously been managed primarily by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs alongside other relevant ministries, YTB introduced a new coordination model spanning various ministries and state institutions, funding diaspora-oriented civil society organizations and managing consultative relations with communities abroad.[6] This architecture was complemented by the expansion of specialized bodies including the Yunus Emre Institutes, the World Turkish Business Council (DTİK), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the overseas branch of Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and more recently the Maarif Foundation. Despite inclusive rhetoric from these organizations, this new institutionalization has been characterized by strong centralization, ideological selectivity, and a narrative of loyalty to one's homeland closely aligned with the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) broader political project, privileging conservative-nationalist networks and actors aligned with government priorities.[7]

Within this broader framework, policies toward highly skilled emigrants have remained limited and episodic for much of the Republic's history. In the early Republican period, state-funded education abroad under Law No. 1416 of 1929 was framed not merely as a technical instrument for skills acquisition but as a nation-building project centered on intelligentsia building,[8] one in which students sent abroad as *kıvılcımlar* were expected to return and serve the country's modernization objectives.[9] Anxieties in the mid-20th century over "brain drain" recast mobility as national loss, while subsequent attempts at "brain circulation" in the 2000s remained largely ad hoc. Across these phases, highly skilled emigration was alternately problematized or selectively instrumentalized for development and foreign policy objectives but rarely addressed through sustained or participatory frameworks that took into account emigrants' evolving professional trajectories and the structural conditions driving emigration from Turkey.[10]

In the post-2010 period, the intensification of what has been widely discussed as a "new brain drain," particularly among healthcare professionals, STEM workers, and students, amid deepening economic and political instability generated renewed yet ambivalent state attention. Throughout the second half of the 2010s, senior government figures, most notably Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, publicly downplayed rising professional emigration, declaring "*giderlerse gitsinler*"[11] ("if they leave, let them go"), framing mobility as an individual choice. It was only after 2022 that "brain drain" began to be more explicitly acknowledged in official discourse. This shift was most visibly illustrated by a public service announcement in which President Erdoğan called on doctors working abroad to return, stating "I invite you back to your home, to your country."[12] Under the state's International Leading Researchers program and the Return Home Projects launched in 2018, officials claim that some 6,000 scientists returned to Turkey between 2018 and 2023. These appeals were echoed institutionally as The Scientific

and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) and defense electronics company ASELSAN introduced targeted initiatives aimed at retaining or attracting highly skilled professionals.[13] Yet these efforts, while signaling growing recognition of rising emigration, have unfolded within an increasingly restrictive political environment and have continued to prioritize symbolic appeals to national duty over addressing the broader conditions driving sustained emigration.

Civil Initiatives as Emerging Actors in the Governance of Turkey's Highly Skilled Diaspora

Bİ' DÜNYA KIVILCIM AND THE KIVILCIM SUMMİT

Founded formally in 2023, Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım Derneği crystallized after seven years of informal networking among highly educated Turkish professionals working abroad, predominantly engineers trained at elite institutions such as Istanbul Technical University (ITU) and Middle East Technical University (METU). Drawing on Atatürk's well-known address to students sent abroad in the 1920s, "I am sending you out as sparks; you must return as flames," the association frames itself within a historical narrative of national development through international education. Yet it reinterprets this legacy through a contemporary transnational lens: rather than privileging physical return, it advances the idea that meaningful contributions to Turkey can also occur from abroad through knowledge exchange, mentorship, investment, and network-building, a form of "virtual return" enabled by digital connectivity and remote collaboration in the post-COVID 19 period.[14]

This transnational orientation became most visible with the Sparks Summit, first organized online in October 2024. The summit was conducted through a multi-actor partnership involving the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), and Istanbul Technical University Advanced Research and Innovation Technocity (ITU ARI Teknokent), with technical and infrastructural support provided by Moka United, a Turkey-based fintech company backed by Türkiye İş Bankası, and the Army Mutual Aid Association (*Ordu Yardımlaşma Kurumu*, OYAK). Designed to reframe highly skilled emigrants as a potential resource for urban problem-solving, the summit brought together academics, municipal officials, entrepreneurs, and professionals residing in 36 countries around nine thematic panels covering city-specific challenges and governance priorities, from sustainable development and disaster risk management to smart city technologies and strengthening the Istanbul brand. The involvement of senior municipal actors, including an opening address by then Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu, underscored the summit's anchoring in subnational governance rather than national diaspora policy frameworks, an orientation consolidated through a post-summit book launch, *Genç Cumhuriyetin Kıvılcımları* (Sparks of the Young Republic), hosted by IPA in Istanbul in late 2024.[15]

The 2025 Sparks Summit maintained its partnership with IPA despite heightened domestic political tension following legal proceedings targeting the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality leadership, signaling the resilience of this cooperation. Compared to 2024, the agenda shifted toward a more explicit emphasis on transnational human capital, global careers, and knowledge circulation, addressing multiple audiences simultaneously: professionals living abroad and their counterparts in Turkey's innovation and policy

ecosystems. Panels addressed themes such as building cooperative networks with professionals abroad, the role of overseas experts in technological transformation, and comparative perspectives on global brain migration, notably through a comparison between India and Turkey. The panel on "Active Turkish Societies Abroad" created a platform for horizontal exchange among civil actors rather than vertical coordination with the state. This orientation has since extended: in partnership with research company KONDA and other partners, Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım has launched what it describes as Turkey's first large-scale brain migration mapping, a survey study measuring the motivation and potential of highly educated emigrants to contribute to Turkey's development, with the dual aim of generating policy-relevant knowledge and creating a searchable platform of diaspora expertise.[16]

In terms of how it reaches the wider public, Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım acts as a transnational strategic communicator; while its activities may appear locally oriented, they fundamentally rely on international connections and frames of reference.[17] The report published following the summit features global interpretive frameworks such as "strengthening Istanbul's brand value," with specific comparisons to its international counterparts such as New York, London, and Berlin.[18] In this way, it positions the actors of the summit as communicators between these multiple cultural contexts.

GLOBAL TURKS FOUNDATION AND THE ISTANBUL LAUNCH EVENT

Another emerging actor addressing Turkey's highly skilled diaspora is the Global Turks Foundation. Following a period of mapping and profiling exceptional Turkish talent abroad, the initiative formally launched in 2021 with the Global Turks par Excellence project, which set out to build an original dataset on an initial cohort of 1,500 highly skilled Turkish expatriates, drawing on surveys and face-to-face interviews. Now covering around 3,000 individuals, the foundation has consolidated around three core goals: running a leadership training program that explicitly claims to "cultivate and develop the Turkish leader of the 21st century"; translating its existing dataset into a genuine, high-trust elite network; and instituting a "Global Turks for Global Good" movement to promote philanthropic initiatives.[19]

Similar to Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım Derneği, the Global Turks Foundation relies on a multi-actor partnership model. However, in contrast, this model is significantly less impacted by heightened domestic political tension. The foundation's launch event in Turkey on November 28, 2025, featured a lineup of keynote speakers from various government bodies and private sector entities, including Deputy Foreign Minister Levent Gümrükçü, Deputy President of the Investment and Finance Office of the Presidency of Türkiye Bekir Polat, and Doğan Holding Board Member Arzuhan Doğan Yalçındağ. Although the foundation declares itself independent and does not depend on financial benefactors, it works through a set of strategic and institutional collaborators. Sponsors of its launch events in Istanbul, New York, and Dubai included major Turkish business actors such as Nurol Holding, Garanti Bankası, Esas Holding, and Boyner Group, alongside international companies including Microsoft, Meta, and SOCAR. Strategic partners include Fiba and Eczacıbaşı Holding, two of Turkey's leading conglomerates, while the Investment and Finance Office of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey is listed as a strategic ally.[20] The Global Turks par Excellence research project received USD 140,000 in funding from the American Chamber of Commerce Türkiye (AmCham Turkey) and the International Investors'

Association (YASED), a longstanding Turkish business NGO.[21]

By systematically profiling global success stories, the Global Turks Foundation reframes "brain drain" not as a loss to be lamented but as a strategic asset, an external sphere of influence, and a potential coalition of expertise, capital, and networks. At the core of this effort is a simple denominator, "global success," as the primary criterion for convening.[22] Politically, the initiative's positioning remains ambiguous; culturally, however, its reference points appear closer to a Western-facing, secular orientation than the AKP's established diaspora infrastructure. More importantly, Global Turks anchors itself neither in national nor subnational diaspora policy frameworks. Its strictly professional and relational focus distances the initiative from the discursive repertoire typically associated with diaspora-building activities, as in the case of YTB. Instead, the Global Turks Foundation positions itself as an exclusive global leadership network; yet, precisely through this reframing, it continues to function by extension as a representative platform for Turkey's highly skilled diaspora.

Similar to Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım, the Global Turks Foundation illustrates how communication can operate as an instrument of public diplomacy beyond the state. By operating across at least two cultural contexts, primarily the United States and Turkey, Global Turks addresses multiple audiences at once, including the elite among Turkish emigrants, their global counterparts, and domestic business and policy circles. A close reading of its messaging suggests three dominant pillars. First, it adopts a language of identity construction and positioning anchored in national identity, through which it frames "Global Turkish Leaders" as a coherent, high-achieving transnational group and presents this as an asset for Turkey's international standing, staking a claim as a legitimate interlocutor whose perspective is significant enough to be treated as a matter of international relations rather than internal policy.[23] Second, it signals legitimacy through independence and nonpartisanship, visible in its foregrounding of organizational autonomy, declaring itself "free from ties to any institution, individual, political stance, or belief system."[24] In a politically restrictive and polarized climate where perceived affiliations may undermine credibility, this performance of neutrality becomes a central discursive resource.[25] Third, it describes itself as an ecosystem-builder: rather than presenting discrete services or activities, the foundation subscribes to the language of a "social network" and "a well-connected ecosystem,"[26] resonating with relational and networked approaches to public diplomacy that emphasize connectivity and sustained relationships as mechanisms of influence.[27] In this way, its discourse diverges significantly from state-led diaspora narratives of loyalty and cultural continuity, prioritizing instead civic contribution and global connection as the terms on which it stakes its claim to relevance.

Governance Beyond the State: New Modalities of Engagement and Their Limits

Taken together, the cases of Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım Derneği and the Global Turks Foundation suggest an emerging, if still tentative, shift: diaspora governance may no longer remain an exclusively state-managed domain. Professional associations and networks of Turkish emigrants have existed in the United States and Europe for decades, yet these earlier formations mostly tended to be locally anchored, oriented toward the professional integration of their members in countries of residence, and largely disengaged from explicit

agendas focused on their contributions to Turkey. What distinguishes the two initiatives examined here is their explicitly transnational orientation and their deliberate engagement with Turkey's economic, technological, and policy landscape, positioning overseas expertise not merely as a personal asset but as a transnational resource to be strategically mobilized. Both appear to be working outside Turkey's official diaspora framework, setting agendas, producing and classifying knowledge, distributing symbolic capital, and coordinating transnational professional networks through modalities that differ from those of the state. Through the *kıvılcım* metaphor's reinterpretation of a "virtual return" and the framing of "Global Turks" as strategic assets, they transform the narrative of brain drain from national loss into a transnational resource of symbolic capital. By operating at the intersection of municipal governance, private sector ecosystems, and elite professional networks, these initiatives have opened an alternative venue alongside traditional loyalty-based frameworks, one in which highly skilled emigrants are addressed in relation to their professional merit and transnational contribution rather than in relation to allegiance or loyalty.

Yet the significance of these initiatives should be read alongside the conditions and constraints that influence them. Neither organization claims to speak on behalf of the broader Turkish diaspora population, and both are deliberate in distancing themselves from traditional diaspora associations, addressing a relatively specific group of predominantly secular, highly skilled professionals. Their self-positioning as global professional networks rather than diaspora representatives reflects, in part, a response to a politically polarized environment in which claims to representation invite scrutiny and in which navigating sensitive terrain carefully appears to be a condition of maintaining relationships with both state institutions and corporate sponsors. Turkey's recent experience of shrinking civic space is a further reminder that the conditions enabling independent initiatives in the transnational field cannot be taken for granted. Still, at a moment when Turkey's official diaspora engagement frameworks have narrowed around a selective and increasingly contested vision of national belonging, Bi' Dünya Kıvılcım Derneği and the Global Turks Foundation have introduced new actors and new modalities. Whether these efforts will prove durable, and whether they will remain at the margins of Turkey's transnational field or gradually reshape its terms, are questions that only further research and time will answer.

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