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## **TURKEY FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

Political Perspectives of Turkish Youth (ages 18-25)

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Political Perspectives of Turkish Youth  
(ages 18-25)

**Center for Insights in Survey Research**  
**IRI.org**  
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*Turkey Focus Group Report: Political Perspectives of Turkish Youth (ages 18-25)*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted this focus group research in order to provide qualitative analysis of public opinion trends among the youth population (ages 18-25) of Turkey. This unique demographic, boosted by more than six million first-time voters by 2023, will present a sizable portion of Turkey's society and its voting universe. The research explores reasons for young people's pessimism over the direction of the country, the importance of the handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the economy, and their overall perspective about their own futures in Turkey. Additionally, the research seeks to uncover the reasons for the highly cynical attitude of this target group toward Turkey's political elites and the potential connections that some political actors could build with Turkish youth.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS:

- Turkish youth are pessimistic about their country's future and sees itself as a victim of the authorities' double standards in applying laws.
- Youth seem to be predominantly concerned about the lack of good alternatives for their current and future quality of life, due to perceived growing injustice.
- Turkish youth are generally cynical toward political elites, but some admire a small group of political figures.
- Youth are moderately informed about and interested in current political topics, even those with limited impact on their own lives.
- Turkey's youth are concerned about their own personal futures and the future of the country, and many see their lives taking place outside of Turkey.

# METHODOLOGY

From May 17 to June 11, 2021, a total of 28 focus group discussions were held in ten different cities (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bursa, Gaziantep, Samsun, Diyarbakir, Erzurum, Kayseri, and Adana) to identify the issues, problems, and expectations facing Turkish youth. Between seven and eight primary and two back-up discussants were selected for each group using a telephone screening method based on a recruitment screening questionnaire. Focus group discussions were held online via Zoom, and a total of 222 young people participated across the discussions. The discussions were simultaneously translated into English and audio/visually recorded for transcript production.

The participants were between 18 and 25 years old and had different levels of education. The discussants were somewhat interested in politics and inclined toward

various political parties, but were not fanatical about their party. In the provinces of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, where there were more than two focus groups per city, along with regular representative groups, groups based on support for the ruling Cumhur (People's) Alliance and the opposition Millet (Nation) Alliance were formed to clearly identify points of difference between the political inclinations of the two blocs. In the other provinces, discussants with varied political loyalties were mixed in groups and recruited based on the political parties they would vote for if there were an election on the coming Sunday. In line with standard practices, the discussants received a small financial token for their participation. As common with qualitative research, the opinions of the participants in this study are not necessarily representative of all Turkish youths.

## CONTEXT

The next general election cycle in Turkey is scheduled for 2023, on the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey. Around 13 million voters, approximately a fifth of the total eligible voters, will be between the ages of 18 and 25, often referred to as Generation Z, or Gen Z. Close to seven million of them will be going to the polls for the first time. Gen Z is a global group which shares common traits, habits, and ambitions; they are digital natives who have grown up with social media and common communication spaces which allow for an easy exchange of views and experiences. However, every country has its own political environment where these commonalities have different effects. Turkey has experienced a complex set of pressures in the last few years, ranging from the attempted coup d'état in 2016, to security and economic challenges, to deteriorating relations with several of its traditional Western partners, while at the same time political polarization became more dominant. These issues have affected public perspectives.

The majority of the public in Turkey has negatively evaluated the overall conditions in the country in recent years. Young people in Turkey have demonstrated certain traits, such as individualist decision-making in terms of their political preferences, a potential to agree on issues of interest across the political spectrum, and resistance to traditional societal divisions based on nationalism, religion, and secularism. These traits often broke some of the most stereotypical and traditional barriers in Turkish society. One of IRI's goals in its work in Turkey is to analyze the views of Gen Z (18 to 25 year-olds) on political developments in Turkey, the country's current condition and its economy, how they personally have been faring during the pandemic, their personal challenges, future expectations for both themselves and the country, and the appeal of the current political elites' agendas.

Province	Number of Groups	Gender	Education
Istanbul	6	26 female, 23 male	12 secondary school, 24 high school, 13 university
Ankara	4	18 female, 14 male	8 secondary school, 16 high school, 8 university
Izmir	4	17 female, 14 male	6 secondary school, 17 high school, 8 university
Bursa	2	8 female, 8 male	4 secondary school, 8 high school, 4 university
Gaziantep	2	8 female, 8 male	4 secondary school, 8 high school, 4 university
Samsun	2	9 female, 7 male	3 secondary school, 8 high school, 5 university
Diyarbakir	2	8 female, 8 male	3 secondary school, 9 high school, 4 university
Erzurum	2	9 female, 7 male	4 secondary school, 7 high school, 5 university
Kayseri	2	8 female, 8 male	4 secondary school, 7 high school, 5 university
Adana	2	5 female, 9 male	4 secondary school, 6 high school, 4 university

# ANALYSIS

Young people in Turkey are pessimistic about their country's future. In all focus groups discussions, most discussants expressed pessimism about Turkey's future. Initial comments about the situation in the country were mostly negative and focused on citizens' inability to improve the economic quality of their lives. Discussants resent what they perceive as authorities' double standards in their treatment of Turkish citizens and foreign tourists. They see Turkey's current economic problems as an opportunity for foreign tourists to take a cheap vacation, while they cannot afford such vacations themselves due to financial difficulties. Discussants often describe their position as "second-class," in that they cannot enjoy the potential of their own country. Additionally, considering that the discussions were conducted immediately following Turkey's longest COVID-19 lockdown, many participants emphasized the fact that while foreigners could freely travel within the country, Turkish citizens were barred from doing so because of the pandemic restrictions applicable only to citizens. Some discussants even described Turkish citizens as "third-class," stressing that even Syrian refugees are often treated better than Turkish citizens.

Discussants often argued that Syrian refugees are better positioned than they are because of government services that the Syrians receive for free of charge. The scope of those services is often believed to be greater than they are in reality.

**Young people seem to be predominantly concerned about a lack of good opportunities in the labor and education markets, and about their own futures due to their perception of growing societal and systemic injustices.**

For youth, Turkey's major problems fall into four different categories: the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic,

the economic crisis, problems with the education system, and the failure of the judicial system to provide justice.

“ I would tell a newcomer to the country that the economy is in ruins, and because of that, people are experiencing psychological breakdowns, losing their jobs, and more recently, tourists get to wander around while citizens must stay home. There is also the damage to the [country's] reputation resulting from the recently revealed mafia-state relationship.”<sup>1</sup>

— Male, 25, Izmir, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) supporter

## The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Government's Performance

All participants, without exception, agree that the COVID-19 outbreak is still not under control and is one of the most important issues facing Turkey. Most discussants think that, along with the inadequate response of the government, Turkish citizens' own non-compliance with the rules and their reckless behavior have caused the epidemic to get out of control.

<sup>1</sup> Quotes cited in this report have been translated from Turkish and may have been minimally edited for clarity. The speaker's original contributions—including any errors in word choice and grammar—have been preserved to the largest extent possible.

“ While everyone else was tackling the virus, our people did not believe in it. The rules were reasonable, but our people did not follow them. Even I don’t follow the rules from time to time. People don’t follow the rules because they are used to staying comfortable and living without following the rules.”

— Female, 23, Kayseri, MHP supporter

Most discussants thought that the government’s response worsened after the first months of the pandemic. Even discussants who lean toward the ruling coalition often criticized the government’s performance, especially regarding the shortage of vaccines (the focus group testing occurred before Turkey sped up vaccinations). Those who found the government’s COVID-19 response largely successful compared Turkey to those countries with rising infection rates (such as, at the time, the surge in India). They posited that Turkey’s healthcare system has not broken down under pressure from the pandemic, and thus should make citizens grateful for the overall conditions in the country.

However, when compared to more successful examples like Israel, the United Kingdom, and the United States, most saw Turkey as acting too slowly to obtain vaccines, especially from Western vaccine makers, which are seen as the most effective in combatting the virus. Most supporters of opposition parties claimed they had personal experience with the virus by contracting it themselves or family members being exposed to it, and they criticized Turkey’s healthcare services. The main complaints were that hospitals are crowded, hospitals do not accept patients in an orderly manner, ambulance services are almost impossible to secure, and those patients who were treated at home were not monitored to ensure they stayed quarantined.

A large portion of opposition-oriented discussants thought that the extraordinary efforts of health personnel, especially doctors and nurses, have been instrumental in the relative success in the fight against the virus.

“ The reason why our healthcare system works well is the fact that our healthcare workers are used to long work shifts. They are not used to working long hours in other countries, so their healthcare systems stumbled. We work like horses, and I receive a good amount of pay, but we never get to rest.”

— Female, 24, Ankara, Republican People’s Party (CHP) supporter

The discussants expressed an understanding of government-imposed COVID-19 mitigation measures, including lockdowns. Most said they have been uncomfortable with people who have not followed the rules.

Most discussants also thought that the government has generally been unsuccessful in combating the negative economic impact of the pandemic. Even among the voters who support the governing Cumhur Alliance, few people believe that the government has been successful in this area and those that do were generally those who received social aid. The main criticisms were that the government’s economic support has been insufficient, not distributed fairly, and that some social groups who have been most affected by the COVID response measures, like musicians, were excluded from the programs.

“ I don't think aid was provided in an orderly manner. For example, five people in the same household might receive aid while another household might receive none. But that household needs it more. This is a major problem.”

— Female, 18, Gaziantep,  
Undecided Voter

“ I believe that [Turkey] is a tolerant country whose economy has lately worsened, a country that became stronger in terms of military technologies but whose per capita domestic income has decreased. However, I think that Turkey is able to grow globally.”

— Male, Istanbul, 24, MHP supporter

### The Economic Crisis

Discussants almost unanimously agreed that the country is generally in a serious economic slump. The main difference between the pro-government and pro-opposition participants was about the sources of the crisis. Supporters of the ruling coalition argued that even though the economic downturn predated COVID-19, the pandemic exacerbated the country's poor economic situation. In that sense, Turkey is not much different than many other countries. These discussants also expressed the belief that things would get back on track after the pandemic, and emphasized Turkey's growing military industry as an important driver of an economic recovery.

Pro-opposition discussants, on the other hand, argued that the economic crisis began long before the pandemic and only worsened when COVID-19 hit. Since they do not believe the pandemic is the root cause of Turkey's economic troubles, they are skeptical that the economy will improve after the pandemic eases its grip. Throughout the conversations, mentions of unemployment, particularly the high unemployment rate for recent university graduates, and the high cost of living would spontaneously come up. In relation to complaints about the cost of living, participants often mentioned the scope and the level of the ÖTV (excise tax) and described it as one of the main roots of the problem.

“ I have to work while attending university, why do I have to do that? If a 16-17-year-old kid can buy a car abroad while I have to work 60-70 years for the same thing, then there is a problem.”

—Male, 20, Istanbul, İyi Party  
supporter

In terms of the economic crisis, participants also brought up rising prices, the drop in the sales facing almost all businesses, anecdotal stories about job losses, and the inability of college and university graduates to find jobs. A dramatic example that was often given was increasing suicide rates which most participants saw as affected by economic problems.



“ I am a healthcare worker and have been unemployed for two years. I work at a store to earn pocket money. I studied in the physiotherapy department. These departments are shut down now, so I don't have a chance to find a job.”

— Female, 19, Diyarbakir, HDP supporter

“ There are people around us committing suicide because of economic difficulties. Many of our friends had their phone subscriptions cancelled because they could not pay the bills. We can't contact them.”

— Female, 23, Istanbul, HDP supporter

### The Diminishing Quality of Education

Education issues loom large on Turkish youth's list of problems. The majority of discussants expressed overall dissatisfaction with Turkey's education system. The main problems expressed were the low quality of education, unqualified teachers, the inaccessibility of free education, a lack of sufficient technical equipment and infrastructure, and the lack of financial subsidies and assistance for private school fees during the pandemic. They also emphasized the exponential increase in the number of schools and universities in recent years, which they feel has reduced the overall quality of education.

Discussants who graduated in the past two academic years referred to themselves as “pandemic graduates”

and worried that the pandemic hurt the quality of their education. Although most discussants did not explicitly complain about nepotism with respect to job opportunities following university graduation, most indicated that merit does not matter most of the time in the public sector labor market. Recent graduates complained that they have not been able to enjoy their graduation because of pandemic restrictions and the anxiety brought on by lack of future opportunities.

“ We are going through a period in which we have unemployment problems. Education is another issue. I don't think online learning is efficient. Especially the people studying in more technical fields, they definitely didn't get an adequate education. These people will still graduate and start working. They will have to improve themselves further as they will face unemployment problems. They are even laying off employed people right now.”

— Female, 25, Istanbul, CHP supporter

### Confidence in the Judicial System

Discussants often expressed their belief that the justice system in Turkey does not work properly. Most indicated that they do not trust the police and courts to enforce justice. Pro-government discussants largely thought that problem dates back to the period before the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, the pre-AKP era, while the pro-opposition participants argued that the issue is a result of the current government's tight grip on the judicial system. The most frequently cited examples of injustice were cases of violence against women and children, and the crime-penalty mismatch in many of those cases. Most participants

referred to viral videos of violence circulating on social media and streaming platforms.

Supporters of opposition parties also expressed their concerns about the politization of the judicial system. Some discussants spontaneously brought up the testimonial videos of a fugitive crime boss Sedat Peker, released weekly between May-July 2021 on YouTube where he implicated high state officials, political decision-makers, and big business owners in serious criminal allegations. Though still unverified, Peker made revelatory accusations against Turkish politicians, including Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, about their alleged involvement in illegal activities ranging from drug trafficking and a murder cover-up to weapons transfers to Islamic militants. The discussants described the videos not only as part of their weekly entertainment (by June the videos had been viewed more than 75 million times), but also as another example of the broken justice system.

“If there really were [credible] judicial power, people who committed violence wouldn't be on the streets. I don't think there is justice.”

— Female, 24, Istanbul, Protest Voter

The videos raised public concerns about the alleged corruption associated with certain cabinet members and individuals closely aligned with the ruling AKP government. They also exposed alleged rifts between rival factions within the ruling party. Though opposition parties have demanded the resignations of implicated figures, it is not publicly known whether a full judicial inquiry has been initiated based on Peker's claims. The ruling coalition has also rejected calls for a parliamentary commission to investigate the allegations presented by Peker.

## Focus group participants expressed cynicism about the political environment and about elites' ability to effectively respond to the country's problems, though some participants said they admire a small group of politicians, particularly from the opposition political parties.

People in the discussion groups expressed their desire for solid policy proposals from political decision-makers. Discussants want to see proposals for a well-developed, equal and free education system that leads to secure jobs in their fields of academic expertise, with income levels that guarantee a decent quality of life. However, most participants agree these expectations are not being met by Turkey's leaders.

Participants feel that politicians have neither the interest nor the will to deal with the problems they face. The discussants said that most of the political elite prioritize their own interests, which rarely aligns with the interests of young people in Turkey. Most participants said they distrust political parties.

“No politicians are suitable for me. I even believe that anyone over 50 should not be involved in politics. Because I think current politicians are behind the times. Technology is advancing really fast.”

— Male, 22, Istanbul, HDP supporter

Regardless of their political views, most discussants mentioned Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkey's republic, as the embodiment of a true leader and civil servant. Most saw Atatürk as a model leader who they long for and admire, but who is not represented in the politics of Turkey today.

Pro-government discussants, who see Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as the most capable leader, did not shy away from criticizing the government and the ruling coalition. Their main argument is that they do not see a better figure than Erdoğan to lead the country. For the more religiously conservative pro-government participants, any choice other than the ruling establishment could also mean endangering their values and principles. They see Erdoğan as a shield protecting their way of life.

“It worries me that my working life, because of my headscarf, could end once another party comes to power.”

— Female, 23, Istanbul, AKP supporter

Some displayed an emotional component in their support for Erdoğan. They see the president as someone from the streets of Turkey who best understands the “common man,” unlike the distant social and political elites. However, these discussants generally agreed that no one in the ruling coalition communicates effectively with young people, and they cited a lack of political actors in communication spaces that they use most often (e.g., social networks, streaming platforms, etc.).

Many in the focus groups did express support for Mansur Yavas, Ankara’s mayor and a member of the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP). They liked what they said was Yavas’ unique political profile and fresh approach to administering the capital city. Yavas was the only politician mentioned positively by all ideological and voting groups in the discussion groups. Discussants cited Yavas as someone who, in his short time in office, has adopted the principles of transparency, accountability, and reliable budget management. Most also praised Yavas’ communication on social media, particularly on Twitch<sup>2</sup>, which they described as a positive attempt to appeal to the youth.

<sup>2</sup> Twitch is a live video streaming service that has gained significant fanbase among the youth in Turkey. Recently the platform has provided an alternative space for sociopolitical discourse. With its growing popularity, well-liked politicians (e.g., the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul) have started accounts on Twitch and even the leader of the main opposition party (CHP) did an interview on it.

“There is a saying by Prophet Ali that goes, “the state’s religion is justice.” That’s what matters to me. I look for transparency and there is just one person who I can see who is transparent, Mansur Yavas.”

— Male, 22, Diyarbakir, Protest Voter

“He [Yavas] covers the education expenses of our people in rural areas. Apart from that, it is also nice that he responds well to dissatisfied people in council meetings and reduces the unnecessary expenses of our city. For example, before the pandemic began, I saw while I was going to work that he was distributing soup for free. I liked that a lot.”

— Male, 21, Ankara, Non-Voter

Ekrem Imamoglu, Istanbul’s mayor, was the second most frequently praised politician and is another member of the opposition party CHP. Even though Imamoglu’s popularity since the election in 2019 has been gradually dropping, as he is seen as more “political” than Yavas and a potential challenger to Erdoğan, he was still described by most, including some of the pro-government participants, as someone who has been trying to focus on his mayoral duties. Both Imamoglu and Yavas were seen as officials who can not only propose projects but also successfully execute them. Imamoglu was also praised as a leader

who interacts well with young people, particularly through social media and platforms like Twitch. Most discussants said they want leaders who share their experiences, speak a shared language, and communicate with them in “their playgrounds.”

“Lately, Ekrem Imamoglu and Mansur Yavas gave hope to many people. They also gave hope to me, maybe because Imamoglu appeals to slightly different segments of society. For example, he was active during the May 1 Labor Day celebrations, this is a plus for Kurdish people. Since he has his roots in ANAP<sup>3</sup>, he also embraces the right-wing and political Islamists. It gives me hope. [Imamoglu] is a person who is in touch with different segments, he helps me look to the future with hope.”

— Male, 22, Diyarbakir, Protest Voter

The Iyi Party chairwoman, Meral Aksener, and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) chairman Ali Babacan were also parts of the small group of politicians from opposition political parties (along with Yavas and Imamoglu) who were occasionally mentioned by the respondents as potential positive change agents.

**Many of the focus group participants were motivated by topics of particular interest, such as concerns about violence against women. These issues seem to have potential to affect their voting preferences.**

## The Indictment Against the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP)

In March 2021, a state prosecutor filed a case accusing the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) of collaborating with Kurdish terrorist organizations, namely PKK. The HDP, which is the third-largest party in Turkey’s parliament and is supportive of Kurdish minority in Turkey, denies links to PKK. Aside from supporters of the HDP, most discussants were not categorically against the potential closure of the HDP. There was a very clear conviction of ties between HDP and PKK among pro-government discussants. While pro-opposition participants were hesitant to jump to such conclusions, they did not express strong opposition to the closure of the party.

Despite some token statements and positions against the closure of the HDP because of the effects on the overall health of Turkey’s democracy, most of the participants opposed to the potential closure argued that it would not accomplish anything, as they expect that a new party would be formed immediately to succeed the HDP. There seems to have been a consensus in all groups that in the event of the closure, HDP’s votes would most likely find a new home in the opposition bloc.

“I don’t think it should be banned. They had another party called the BDP before this one, they come back stronger and are more harmful when they’re banned. They just change their name and appear again, so it doesn’t make sense to ban them. It should be solved from the roots, but how? Those who are in contact with the PKK should be identified and they should be banned from establishing a new party.”

— Male, 19, Ankara, CHP supporter

<sup>3</sup> Anavatan Partisi or ANAP (Motherland Party) was a center-right political center-right party that governed Turkey from 1983 to 1991. Some of its important political actors later moved to positions in the AKP, as the center-right parties dissolved in the political spectrum in 2000s.

## Perspectives on the Government's Proposition for a New Constitution

Regarding public discussions about a new constitution in Turkey, participants expressed little understanding of the constitutional foundation of Turkey's legal framework, and frequently lacked even a basic knowledge of what a constitution is. A new constitution is not a priority for this group. In the minds of the participants, real power lies in what they see as straightforward legal solutions to the problems they have been observing. However, most participants expressed skepticism that the power of the constitution can in any way deter the ongoing centralization of decision-making through presidential executive orders.

“ I think nothing will change [in the country] no matter how much we change the constitution, if it is overruled whenever the president issues a decree.”

— Female, 21, Bursa, Non-Voter

“ It can be changed according to the necessities of the age, so there is a need for a new constitution.”

— Male, 21, Izmir, AKP supporter

Despite a general lack of knowledge about Turkey's constitution, most participants were familiar with a set of unchangeable articles it contains, which pertain to the creation of the country as a republic based on laws and respect for human rights. Even without knowing most of the content of the articles, participants felt that they should be left alone and not part of the discussion. Some supporters of a full constitutional makeover

rationalized their position by citing the necessity for frequent constitutional change, or by expectations of more severe punishments for those criminal offenses they are most bothered by, including violence against women, children and animals. Participants in big cities, like Istanbul and Izmir, demonstrated the lowest level of knowledge and interest about the constitution, while in smaller places, like Diyarbakir and Samsun, the discussants expressed better understanding and working knowledge of potential constitutional changes.

“ Of course, some articles shouldn't be amended. Main articles shouldn't be touched, the first four articles shouldn't be touched.”

— Male, 20, Istanbul, CHP supporter

“ I mean, particularly changing things like the [national] flag doesn't make sense, it shouldn't even be debated.”

— Male, 18, Izmir, CHP supporter

## Violence Against Women and the Istanbul Convention

Most participants, regardless of political preference, did not support, or expressed strong opposition to, Turkey's withdrawal from the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, known as the Istanbul Convention. Discussants spontaneously brought up the issue of violence against women as one of the country's top problems and referred to the rising number of cases, and even femicide, as an indicator of the seriousness of the issue. For most participants,

withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention would only exacerbate the problem. Most participants cited inadequate punishment and loose application of laws, which allow perpetrators of crimes, even murder, to feel comfortable that they will not face justice. Many discussants referred to viral videos of violence against women that they saw on social networks as a proof that the problem is escalating. An indicator of how seriously most discussants view this problem was a frequent comment in most groups that special, harsh punishment should be introduced for crimes of violence against women, including the death penalty.<sup>4</sup>

“ I want people who commit violence against women to be directly put to death. My downstairs neighbor killed his wife. He’s still out in the street.”

— Male, 19, Bursa, Undecided

“ I think capital punishment should be brought back. Fines and imprisonment won’t cut it, capital punishment should also be applied for violence against animals and child abuse.”

— Female, 20, Bursa, Undecided

“ They don’t punish those who commit violence, but those who stand up against it. I don’t recall the name right now, but that sort of thing happened where someone protecting a woman got punished. Education or anything else won’t do.”

— Female, 22, Adana, MHP supporter

### New Laws on Social Media

Internet and social media usage are instrumental for communication in this target group. Most participants described their daily communication as mainly tied to online platforms. However, traditional media outlets, particularly their online accounts, also seem to be relevant when it comes to news and political information. Most discussants said they usually refrain from expressing their political views on social media, and many said that some level of government control over content on social media would be welcome. Discussants support the protection of minors on social media and the eradication of sexually explicit and illegal content. Personal attacks and insults were also seen as red lines for most participants in the groups. These were the main reasons why most participants did not express much opposition to state control of social networks, but most pro-opposition discussants expressed concern that the new social media law would allow the government to legally crack down on online communication it finds politically threatening.

<sup>4</sup> The death penalty was abolished in Turkey in 2004 as part of the E.U. accession process.

“ They freely share some incidents of harassment; this negatively affects the psychology of people and their families. These should be restricted. They share images that they shouldn't. If this is freedom, this should be limited. People hack into some celebrities' phones and share their private photographs.”

— Male, 22, Istanbul, MHP supporter

“ On one hand, I support it. There are some people who open fake accounts and harass people. For example, we see swearing at someone's mother or their sibling. This should be prevented. On the other hand, why don't I support it? It feels like it's against freedom, so I'm undecided on this topic. I think there is both good and harm in it.”

— Female, 21, Istanbul, CHP supporter

“ Children use social media at a very young age now, contents that harm moral values should be restricted.”

— Female, 24, Ankara, AKP supporter

“ For example, if we're talking about Instagram, some accounts should be banned if they damage religion or the state. I already fully respect every opinion as long as it doesn't hurt other people.”

— Female, 24, Istanbul, AKP supporter

### The Canal Istanbul Project

The majority of participants showed little knowledge about the Canal Istanbul Project, a state-sponsored artificial waterway that is planned to run 28 miles long parallel to the Bosphorus Strait. The project has been a controversial topic in national politics. For most participants, the initiative initially sounded like something which could bring benefits to Turkey. Many pro-government participants said the project would boost the Turkish economy and provide relief to shipping traffic between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. On the other hand, a majority of the pro-opposition participants expressed concern that Canal Istanbul would simply give a green light to corruption in a small, privileged circle of decision-makers. Even with some opposing views between different political sides, there was a general agreement that the project is currently not a priority for Turkey. Environmental concerns did not come up spontaneously, but once brought up, were also noted by the project's skeptics.

“ It may bring benefits in the future, but there are more important topics right now. For example, it would be much better to invest in education, production, housing, and also, all investments go to Istanbul. I think there are more important matters when some places in the country aren't even connected to the Internet.”

— Male, 23, Ankara, CHP supporter

“ I don't think such a project is necessary, it's a waste of money. I think it'll worsen the economy; it will lead to massive expenditures when we don't have any money. The Istanbul Canal will be of no use to us.”

— Female, 18, Gaziantep, Undecided

The discussants who expressed scepticism over the necessity or efficacy of Canal Istanbul underlined the government's expenditures of taxpayers' money on previous state-sponsored transportation projects, such as the Osmangazi Bridge. The bridge was sold to benefit the public, but it consumed a far larger portion of state treasury and was less popular than expected. Those who oppose Canal Istanbul project fear another failed government investment and insufficient use of taxpayer's money.

<sup>5</sup> The Osmangazi Bridge is a suspension bridge spanning the Gulf of Izmir that was constructed between 2013-2016 as a public-private partnership (PPP) investment project. The Osmangazi Bridge has long been a subject of public debate, since it is operated by a private contractor under a build-operate-transfer contract, which charges the government a fee of 35 dollars (plus VAT per vehicle) for a guaranteed number of vehicle passage annually. However, in 2020 alone, the Turkish government paid approximately a total of 355 million dollars, as the vehicle passes remained significantly below the guaranteed limit. As Canal Istanbul will be built under a similar PPP model and passage guarantee limits, it has raised the concerns that if the canal does not meet its purpose, taxpayers will have to pay for the canal being underused.

“ The situation with the Osmangazi Bridge<sup>5</sup> is plain as day. They said we [taxpayers] will gain a lot; the state won't spend a penny on this. I think there isn't even a single car passing through the Osmangazi Bridge. Why would someone use the Canal instead of the Bosphorus now? When it comes to the Istanbul Canal, it can be built if they can guarantee that, but it shouldn't be built if we'll have to pay for it again.”

— Male, 18, Istanbul, AKP supporter

### **Turkey's youth are concerned about their personal futures and the future of the country as a whole. The majority see the possibility for the realization of their ambitions outside of Turkey.**

Almost all participants shared their concerns about their future. Their concerns range from the rising rate of youth unemployment, to the unsatisfying quality of education, to the exponential increase in the basic living expenses because of high inflation. Most participants also underlined what they saw as widespread nepotism as one of the major reasons for the high unemployment rate and their difficulties finding expertise-based jobs.



“Positive developments could occur if we really wanted them to. Better things could happen through merit by giving tasks to competent people. Because ours is truly a beautiful country, we can be back on our feet in a short time. They just need to not hinder the youth and let merit take priority.”

— Male, 22, Diyarbakir, Protest Voter

Almost to a person, discussants said that they would consider leaving Turkey in order to build a life they consider satisfying. This willingness to leave Turkey is all the more remarkable in light of the recruitment criteria for this study, which screened out anyone with already firm intentions of emigrating. Western countries, particularly Germany and the Scandinavian countries, stood out as highly preferable destinations. Discussants mentioned that these countries provide high levels of freedom and uphold the basic values of democracy. The prevailing perception was that they provide an adequate living standard, strong social safety nets, and a stable social security system.

“I see my future as living abroad. The economy is not as bad as Turkey. They respect women. There is no respect for women in Turkey, everything is restricted. The way you walk, look around, even your clothing becomes a problem. There are no problems with women [in Western Countries], they can live freely.”

— Female, 19, Izmir, CHP supporter

“I don't think I'll be able to practice my profession here. I want to leave for some place where I will be rewarded for my efforts.”

— Female, 20, Samsun, Iyi Party supporter

“Of course, I'd like to live abroad, for example in the U.S.A. People live freely, think freely.”

— Female, 25, Kayseri, Iyi Party supporter

“Recently there has emerged a segment of people who love their country but don't think that this country is liveable. I agree with this. I couldn't say of anyone who's leaving the country they're leaving because they don't like it. I wouldn't and couldn't leave, but I understand those who want to leave.”

— Female, 24, Ankara, MHP supporter

# CONCLUSION

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The focus group discussions underscored a strong sense of pessimism among Turkish youth about the direction in which the country is moving. These sentiments are rooted in economic anxieties, concerns over the inadequacy of the education system, worries about a lack of professional opportunities, and the ongoing perception that, due to COVID-19 measures, Turkish authorities have imposed double standards on Turkish citizens versus on foreign tourists.

Most discussants shared personal experiences of how their lives were affected by economic hardship. They often tied this to what they perceived as the deteriorating state of Turkey's education system. They are also concerned about the free and fair operation of the justice system, as well as all aspects of life in Turkey. Focus group participants often touched on the rise in cases of violence against women. Most saw an unjust and sometimes improper application of legal penalties for the perpetrators of violence. Besides this, many discussants mentioned violence against animals as another area for concern, one that also needs stronger and more uniform legal penalties.

Unsurprisingly, this target group showed strong affinities for social media and digital platforms as their primary source of information and everyday communication. They also liked politicians who use these platforms, namely Mansur Yavaş and Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayors of Ankara and Istanbul respectively. Most of the pro-government discussants said that President Erdoğan has not demonstrated that he fully understands, and can effectively communicate with, young people about their priorities.

Turkish youth are moderately well informed about, and interested in, most current events. The topics which directly align with their concerns, for example, Turkey's pullout from the Istanbul Convention, and which are presented in videos or on social media tend to win the most attention. That said, many support the idea of government of regulation of online speech, and many already refrain from making public political comments. Most see online oversight as a necessity to protect the most vulnerable, like minors, and to ensure that the online world is not filled with insults, slurs, and false claims. Finally, even though the discussants were pre-screened to assess whether they wanted to emigrate from Turkey, most focus group participants expressed an interest in finding better opportunities in some other country.

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