



TURKEY AND EUROPE

CHALLENGING PARTNERS

DIALOGUE AND TRUST BUILDING AMONG YOUTH AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF THE EU AND TURKEY

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DIALOGUE AND TRUST BUILDING AMONG YOUTH AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF THE EU AND TURKEY

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Since the start of Turkey's accession process, Turkey has been perceived as a challenge by the European Union (EU) and its member states, in terms of security. The prevailing atmosphere of economic, social, and political crises in European states over the last few years have contributed to existing distrust with Turkey, as Ankara has also been slowly evolving into a more autonomous foreign policy actor at the same time, with a diverging normative framework. Despite the existence of an enduring lack of trust, the EU has not stopped perceiving Turkey as a strategic partner. Based on the 'problematique' of Turkey as a partner and simultaneously a challenge for European security, this paper evaluates the challenges, opportunities and prospects for trust building and dialogue between the EU and Turkey, with a particular focus on the youth and civil society.

Building trust need not be the exclusive domain of state-to-state relationships. Unofficial people-to-people connections and non-governmental networks are also crucial in building trust between people and nations. Aware of the need for a legitimate dialogue between Turkey and the EU, the latter has operationalized

various means to nurture trust and empathy through communication, as evidenced via its civil society dialogue and Erasmus+ programs. Accordingly, in the context of trust building and dialogue between the youth and civil society, this paper seeks to assess the impact of youth and civil society dialogue on EU-Turkey relations.

Both the youth and civil society potentially support EU integration and related reforms, through increasing engagement for trust building and enhancing dialogue and cooperation. Engagement among these specific groups through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and the Erasmus programs are beneficial for both sides to build more sustainable civil society dialogue and trust. This micro-level dialogue could transform itself into serious leverage in order to moderate the differences at the macro level, if the opportunity presents itself. Thus, this paper supports the enhancement of dialogue mechanisms at the micro level by focusing on target groups such as the youth and civil society, as they all play a key role in the EU integration process.

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Following a brief background section that examines the existing crisis of trust, the paper will explore youth engagement between Turkey and the EU, by focusing on the Erasmus+ program; then will turn its attention to the civil society dialogue between the two emanating from the IPA programs. The paper argues that there is a need for diversification and improvement of the existing dialogue mechanisms through these programs, in order to create sustainable dialogue and continuation of trust building. The concrete instances identified in the paper confirm that these programs could play a significant role in terms of enabling a more stable relationship between the EU and Turkey, through multiple engagements at the micro level.

Trust and Dialogue in EU-Turkey Relations

Kelman (2005) suggests that trust is a central element for peaceful and effective management of relationships at all levels, including between individuals, groups, societies, and states. Although the issue of trust is part of conflict resolution methodologies, it is also essential to build a strong dialogue and relationship between the parties involved. In the international community, building trust does not need to be the exclusive domain of state-to-state relations. Other unofficial or non-formal people-to-people connections and non-governmental networks are also crucial in building trust between peoples and nations.

Distrust and/or mistrust of the other can originate from various sources. Even though it is difficult to identify all the sources of distrust, it is possible to list a myriad of factors, such as

historical and socio-cultural dynamics, misunderstanding and/or perception of the “other”, that distrust is based on (Kelman 2005; Gillespie 2007; Psaltis 2012). As Kelman (2005: 641) has argued, distrust has a self-perpetuating quality, and it keeps the parties from engaging in various types of interaction. There are at least three drivers of mistrust (Wheeler, 2012) that can be applied to Turkey’s relations with the European Union: (1) the security dilemma; (2) the challenge of peaceful/defensive self-images; and (3) ambiguous symbolism.

Trust is an emotional state where the feelings of individuals influence their interpretation of another’s behavior (Mercer, 2005: 95), while mistrust is the state of the lack of trust. Mistrust is one of the challenges that heavily pervade the relations between the EU and Turkey. These feelings of mistrust have been articulated, consolidated and perpetuated through various communicative practices such as diplomatic exchanges, negotiations, public discourses, and the media (Head, 2012). Turkish public opinion is very sensitive to the political developments between Turkey and the EU. As studies show, trust in the EU has been steadily eroding among Turkish public opinion (Şenyuva, 2018a: 2019). In a similar vein, EU public opinion toward Turkey’s EU membership has also been declining. Particularly, “northwestern EU member state populations are more skeptical compared to those of newer more south-eastern members” (Lindgaard, 2018: 1). These relations have evolved under the shadow of past experiences and memory for all parties.

Turkey’s relationship with the EU dates to the early 1960s, when the institutional

framework between the two was established with the Ankara Agreement. The accession negotiations were finally launched in 2005, though little progress has been made since. The long-lasting relationship between the two sides has been affected by several factors such as economic crises, domestic issues, new interests and alignments in their foreign policies, migration flows, inter alia, over the last decade, which have caused significant damage to the relationship. In fact, the accession process and negotiations between Turkey and the EU came to a halt, with relations having entered upon a turbulent period. There were blockages to the opening of chapters as early as 2007-08. By 2011, 8 chapters were effectively blocked from being opened, and the rest were closed. In return, Turkey stopped implementing any reforms. The Gezi protests of May-June 2013, and the government's response to these protests, caused the EU to question Turkey's compliance with the political criteria. Despite some gradual optimism over the EU-Turkey migration deal of January 2016, the EU's perceived slow reaction to condemn the failed coup attempt of July 2016, EU leaders' reactions to the ensuing purges, and diplomatic rows between several EU member states and Turkey, have heightened tensions and reinforced the mistrust between Turkey and the European Union and its members states (Zihnioglu, 2019).

More recently, despite the intention on the part of the EU to initiate a positive agenda with Turkey, the European Council (EUCO) Statement of March 2021 called for Turkey "to abstain from renewed provocations or unilateral actions in breach of international law", and highlighted

that the "rule of law and fundamental rights [in Turkey] remain a key concern" (European Council, 2021). While calls made in the European Parliament and in several EU capitals to freeze and even end the accession process officially have been left unanswered, relations have deteriorated further over the past few years.[1]

All these challenges and divergences at the macro level have been reflected at the micro level as well. Particularly, on the Turkish side, public support toward EU membership has been ebbing and waning in parallel with the developments at the macro level. While 47.5 percent of the Turkish public supported Turkey's EU membership in 2013, support rose to 61.8 percent in 2016 after the migration deal, but once again decreased to 48.4 percent in 2017 following the deterioration in the relations between the two sides (Aydın et al., 2020: 37). According to the *Public Perception on Turkish Foreign Policy* survey in 2021, the current support toward Turkey's EU membership is 59.3 percent. About 7 out of 10 people stated that they do not support the establishment of a different model between Turkey and the EU other than full membership (Aydın et al., 2021: 70). While the belief that Turkey's EU membership has been blocked had decreased to 43.7 percent in 2021 (as opposed to 55.6 percent in 2020), most of the respondents still thought that Turkey's membership had been blocked because of the "differences in religion and identity." Nevertheless, in the *Turkish Perceptions of the European Union* survey by the German Marshall Fund (2021), most of the respondents (37%) chose "countries of the European Union" to answer the question "Whom should Turkey cooperate most closely with on international issues?"

[1] Most recently in May 2021, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Turkey by 480 votes in favor, 64 against and 150 abstentions, stating that "in recent years the government of Turkey has distanced itself from EU values and standards. Relations have reached a historic low point, and the state of the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights are of particular concern. MEPs insist that if Turkey does not reverse this current negative trend, the Commission should recommend that the accession negotiations be formally suspended." (European Parliament 2021).

All these survey results point to the necessity of another dialogue mechanism between the EU and Turkey to sustain the relationship, despite its apparent stagnation at the macro level. On the other hand, at the micro level, EU officials have been declaring their will to mend ties with Turkey and work toward a positive agenda. As Joseph Borrell, High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission, underlined, after a year of constant confrontation, the EU wishes to turn the dynamics of mistrust into relations based on cooperation (EEAS, 2020). What is different this time is the growth in the pro-EU trend in Turkish public opinion, which is accompanied by the EU's willingness to engage with Turkey, under the proviso that Turkey moderates its unilateral actions and caters to the rule of law and fundamental rights concerns within the country.

Youth Engagement between the European Union and Turkey

Today, people under the age of 30 represent one third of the EU population and 46.3 percent of the Turkish population. These figures change when one focuses on the exact definition of 'youth'. If we take the definition used by the EU as those aged between 15 and 29, the young constitute 17 percent of the EU population and 23.2 percent of the Turkish population (Eurostat, 2019; TUIK, 2019). Thus, it is possible to argue that young people represent an important demographic dividend both for Turkey and the EU. Their perceptions in favor of integration, diversity, intercultural exchange, etc. might trigger a positive change on both sides.

Earlier studies (Flash Eurobarometer, 2009: 12) show that young people in the EU have focused on the more positive consequences of integration, such as the spread of democratic values, the protection of human rights or the increase in the EU's global role. Likewise, young people in Turkey are much more in favor of Turkey's membership of the EU compared to other age groups. In fact, in 2021, 61.4 percent of young people (aged between 18-34) supported Turkey's membership of the EU in contrast to 59.3 percent overall (Aydın et al., 2021: 49). This support is important, considering the fact that over two thirds of the Turkish public believes that Turkey will never become a full member of the Union, primarily because of religious and identity differences (Aydın et al., 2021: 51-53). When asked, in general, about how Turkey would benefit from EU membership, the Turkish public's responses focused on improvements in their economic standards (72.8%), human rights (60.7%) and democracy (58.8%). In return, the respondents thought that the EU would mainly benefit from a young labor force (58.3%), multiculturalism (55.5%) and the enlargement of the market (53.6%) (Aydın et al., 2021: 56-59).

These positive figures provide a hint regarding how the relationship between the EU and Turkey might be transformed more constructively if the two sides can focus on mutual benefits rather than differences. In Particular, young people's attitudes might trigger a significant role in terms of changing the perceptions in all spheres of social, economic, cultural, and political life, on both sides, through their involvement in dialogue and exchange programs. As also reflected in the abovementioned survey, 42.9 percent of respondents think that the EU's social-

cultural and education programs – following deeper economic trade ties centered around the Customs Union – should be prioritized in a new model of relations between Turkey and the EU (Aydın et al., 2021: 70). In this regard, the Erasmus program has been a particularly effective instrument in promoting common European values, fostering social integration, enhancing intercultural dialogue, and preventing radicalization. (Erasmus+, 2020: 5).

Since the establishment of the Erasmus Program in 1987, more than 9 million people from 34 countries[2] have benefitted from the opportunity to study, teach, train, volunteer, and gain experience abroad. Although the program was only focused on student mobility at first, its nature has broadened over time, with the inclusion of staff, trainees, teachers, volunteers, and others from all over the world. The program was then renamed Erasmus+ [3] for the period 2014-2020, and combined all the existing EU schemes for education, training, youth, and sport. Under the slogan of “changing lives, opening minds”, the Erasmus Program continues to serve as the “most successful program in terms of European integration and international outreach” (Helm and van der Velden, 2019). Turkey, as one of the non-EU countries involved in the program, has participated actively in the EU’s flagship Erasmus program since 2004 and, as reflected in the statistics, has benefited from the program with the participation of over 106,000 individuals, and was awarded grants of almost €248 million between 2007 and 2013 (EU Delegation to Turkey, 2020). As seen in Table 1, between 2014 and 2019, over 255,000 individuals benefitted from the program in Turkey, with a total grant amount of €462 million. Even though these figures include people of all ages, young people (youth) represent the overwhelming majority of those that benefitted from these programs.

Table 1. Implementation of Erasmus+ in Turkey

		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Learning Abroad	Projects	987	906	991	1304	1417	1333
	Participants	40,432	40,353	41,275	43,097	44,930	44,953
	Grants (million)	€68.73	€73.92	€75.75	€76.73	€83.96	€83.00
Strategic	Projects	103	106	158	178	183	203
Partnerships	Organizations	620	674	952	1057	1045	1209
	Grants (million)	€19.89	€22.11	€25.55	€27.69	€27.07	€31.80

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the country factsheets on Turkey and Erasmus+ at <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets#fsTitle>

[2] The Erasmus program countries are the 27 EU member states, North Macedonia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Serbia, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (as of 31 January 2020).

[3] The Erasmus+ Program integrated the previous programs implemented by the European Commission in the fields of education, training, and youth during the period 2007-2013. These programs include the “Lifelong Learning Program”, “Youth in Action Program”, “Erasmus Mundus Program”, “Tempus”, “Alfa”, and “Edulink” (Erasmus+, 2020: 6).

Besides the mobility programs, the framework of strategic partnerships also “aim to support the development, transfer and/or implementation of innovative practices as well as the implementation of joint initiatives promoting cooperation, peer learning and exchanges of experience at European level”, between schools, universities, youth organizations, public authorities, and enterprises under the Erasmus+ Program. During the 2014-2019 period (see Table 1), a total grant amount of €154.11 million was allocated to Turkey for 903 projects for strategic partnerships. While these programs enable participating organizations to gain international experience and strengthen their capacities, they also facilitate the integration process around transnational learning, teaching, and training activities.

Even though many recipients in Turkey have participated in mobility programs, and moved abroad for educational or training reasons, it is obvious from the figures that Turkey has not been a popular destination for foreign students, mainly because of the lack of foreign language skills and attractive courses for foreign students in Turkey (European Stability Initiative, 2014: 9-21; Öner, 2015: 116). As reflected in Table 2, between 2014 and 2019, around 34,000 students and over 9,000 staff came to Turkey under the Erasmus+ Program. The number of students and staff is quite low compared to the Turkish students and staff that went abroad during the same period. Only in 2019, 44,953 recipients from Turkey benefited from the mobility programs, a number that is higher than the total number of incoming students and staff from program and partner countries between 2014 and 2019.

Table 2. Incoming Students (Students + Traineeships) and Staff

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Students	6818	7943	7496	3563	3521	4579
Staff	2261	2206	1521	1199	2288	-

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the country factsheets on Turkey and Erasmus+ at <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/about/factsheets#fsTitle> .

Regardless of the number of people involved, these engagements contribute to the intercultural dialogue that plays an important role in building trust among the young and shaping their perceptions in favor of integration. This is particularly important during times of waning public support in Turkey in favor of EU membership, in parallel with the stagnation of the dialogue between Turkey and the EU. Despite the deadlock at the macro level, the engagement of young people with each other through these programs has helped consolidate sustainable support for the EU among the Turkish youth over the years.

Earlier studies show that the Erasmus programs have a transformative influence on the participants in reducing or even eradicating their prejudices and stereotypes, increasing mutual understanding and tolerance, as well as helping them become more open-minded (Krzaklewska and Krupnik, 2008; Mutlu, Alacahan, and Erdil, 2010; Aydın, 2012; Mitchell, 2012; Tekin and Hiç Gencer, 2013; Oborune, 2013; Öner, 2015; Şenyuva, 2018b). For instance, a comparative study between students from EU member states and Turkey (Mutlu, Alacahan, and Erdil, 2010: 38-41) concludes that there is a significant change, which is slightly higher among Turkish students, in terms of prejudices, tolerance and openness after their Erasmus experience. An overwhelming majority of students from both Turkey (88%) and EU member states (70.1%) reported that following the Erasmus program, their philosophy of life was influenced by different cultures and peoples (Mutlu, Alacahan, and Erdil 2010: 41). A more comprehensive research-based analysis report[4] that focuses on the young people who participated in the Youth in Action Program in Turkey shows that these programs ultimately have a positive impact on their perceptions toward the EU, different peoples and cultures (Şenyuva, 2018). According to the research findings, 63.5 percent of the project participants reported that their image of the EU improved after their involvement in the project, while 94.7 percent stated that they became better at relating to people who are different from them (Şenyuva, 2018: 53-64). Therefore, the existence of such programs that are

targeted toward youth is quite important in building trust, as well as in enabling more sustainable support toward. It is a well-known fact that the Erasmus+ programs aim at promoting the common values of freedom, inclusion, tolerance, and non-discrimination, in line with the Paris Declaration of March 2015. [5]

This is quite important, considering the underprivileged groups within society as young people become more aware of fighting against stereotypes, facilitating the integration of migrants, and promoting gender equality and diversity through education. As stressed by Şenyuva (2018: 42), based on the findings of the RAY-MON project, 74.8 percent of the respondents said that they learned something new about “cultural diversity”, while almost half (47.4%) reported that they learned about “discrimination and non-discrimination (i.e., because of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, disability, nationality etc.)”. In other words, participation in these programs has a positive impact on young people’s understanding of and respect for people from different backgrounds.

The aforementioned instances from different studies confirm that there is a need for an effective mechanism for dialogue and cooperation among both program and partner countries. The encouragement and diversification of these programs that are targeting the young would provide mutual benefits for both sides. The regular exchange of knowledge regarding successful mobility strategies could play a crucial role,

[4] This report reflects the findings of one of the *Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action Programme – RAY NETWORK’s projects entitled RAY-MON*, which is “specifically designed to explore a broad scope of activities for/with young people, youth workers and youth leaders in Erasmus+ and Youth in Action (E+/YiA) apart from Strategic Partnership projects” (Şenyuva, 2018: 19). The findings are based on two online questionnaires, implemented in October 2017 and April 2018, with a sample of 2,045 participants, presenting the impact of the Youth in Action Programme on the young people in Turkey (Şenyuva, 2018: 27).

[5] See the “Declaration on Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education” of EU Education Ministers (Paris, 17 March 2015) at http://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/01__janvier/79/4/declaration_on_promoting_citizenship_527794.pdf.

particularly for countries like Turkey, to improve the conditions to enhance more mobility by young people from other countries, which will help them, in turn, to reduce their prejudices regarding Turkey. As reflected in the numbers, a growing number of young Turkish people have participated in these programs to gain experience abroad and to learn new things that eventually transform their attitudes. Therefore, an increase in the number of participants benefiting from these programs could have a positive impact on the relationship between Turkey and the EU.

The Civil Society Dialogue between European Union and Turkey

Another driving force in terms of integration is, undoubtedly, the civil society organizations (CSOs), which are key actors in any democratic system, providing a space for dialogue, delivering the needs of society to governments, as well as enabling inclusive policymaking by shaping government policies (Turner, 2016; Buzasu, 2020; Kövér, 2021). As Zihnioğlu (2020) argues, CSOs can be considered as important actors in Turkey's adaptation of EU norms and values, despite all the difficulties in the relationship between Turkey and the EU.

In this context, from the very beginning of the accession negotiations, the "strengthening of political and cultural dialogue through civil society in Turkey and the EU" has become one of the three pillars of the accession strategy. It is argued that civil society involvement enables work on the sensitive issues driving Europe and Turkey apart, when

formal bilateral relations and high-level political dialogue are stalled and complicated. In other words, as high-level dialogue and contacts can be negatively affected by sudden changes in the political environment, civil society dialogue is seen as a convenient tool to break the deadlock in Turkey-EU relations (Kaya and Marchetti, 2014; Zihnioğlu, 2019). As stated by Kaya and Marchetti (2014: 3), the civil society organizations are intermediaries, but at the same time they are constitutive of the social cement underpinning any political endeavor. A civil society dialogue "aiming at improving mutual knowledge and encouraging a debate on perceptions regarding society and political issues on both sides" is deemed important by the European Commission. Bilateral exchange projects between Turkish and European civil societies ensures collaboration through exchanges of best practices (Commission of the European Communities, 2005: 9). Exchanges with European civil society helps Turkish CSOs participate more actively in EU debates (Commission of the European Communities, 2005).

As civil society is considered as a public sphere model, which "focuses on the communicative activity generated by civil society's groups and on its potential to strengthen democracy" (Crocker as quoted by Duthie, 2009: 5), it can be understood why the EU has highlighted civil society dialogue as the steppingstone to foster trust and social cooperation. As stated by Christian Berger, the former head of the Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, engaging in civil society is one of the main principles of the EU. Berger sees CSOs as key actors that can stimulate and expand the space for dialogue and cooperation on matters of public interest, including the EU accession process (CSD

Newsletter, 2019: 22). Berger underlines the fact that “the EU pursues this principle in its own work; to support human rights organizations, civil society organizations and any other organizations that deal with the daily problems of the people...involving civil society in what we are doing as the EU, and of course we hope that civil society has a similar reception in third countries: that the CSOs are getting involved in preparing decisions that concern them” (CSD Newsletter, 2017a).

The European Commission adopted a Communication in this context in 2005, establishing the objectives and priorities for further development of a civil society dialogue between the EU and candidate countries, including Turkey (European Commission, 2005). The Council of the European Union lent support to this dialogue by stipulating that “parallel to Accession negotiations, the Union will engage with every candidate country in an intensive political and cultural dialogue. The long-term objective of the dialogue is to prepare civil society from the EU and candidate countries for future enlargement” (European Commission, 2005).

Dialogue plays significant roles in enhancing the disposition of societies to cooperate. Within the process of dialogue, knowing each other helps to create empathy, and allows people to perceive themselves through the eyes of others. The reflexive capacities of dialogue, empathy and trust may act as transitional processes through which relationships and interactions can be transformed. Through the implementation of its civil society dialogue programs, the EU aims at enhancing mutual understanding amongst the societies

of both Turkey and the EU. It also aims to bring different cultures, political and economic systems closer, in order to achieve better mutual understanding. It is expected that dialogue programs help both sides to develop a stronger awareness of the opportunities as well as the challenges of accession. In support of this dialogue process, the Turkish Secretariat General for EU Affairs (EUSG) designed an initiative entitled “Promotion of the Civil Society Dialogue between European Union and Turkey” in 2008 (European Economic and Social Committee, 2008). The specific objectives of this dialogue were:

- to strengthen contacts and mutual exchange of experience between civil society in the EU and Turkey;
- to ensure a better knowledge and understanding of Turkey within the EU, including Turkish history and culture, thus allowing for a better awareness of the opportunities and challenges of future enlargement; and
- to ensure a better knowledge and understanding of the EU within Turkey, including the values on which it is founded, its functioning and its policies.

For the first phase of the initiative implemented between 2008 to 2009 and financed by the EU under Turkey’s 2006 National Program, the EUSG targeted four specific sectors of civil society: towns and municipalities, professional organizations, universities, and youth initiatives. These sectors were selected either due to their specific importance in the accession process, or because of their strong capacity for mobilizing further resources to the process. The Civil Society Dialogue Programme was co-financed by the EU and Turkey, under the Instrument for

Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).[6] The Directorate for EU Affairs at the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the institution responsible for the technical implementation of the program, while the Central Finance and Contracts Unit is its Contracting Authority.

Between 2008 and 2020, 391 projects were funded, with a total budget of €49.6 million under the five phases of civil society dialogue between Turkey and the EU. In addition to these projects, 392 partnerships were established between CSOs. All these ties show the extensive instruments that enabled “different modes of integration, where a non-member opts in and adopts European policies” between Turkey and the EU (Müftüler Baç, 2017: 9).

However, the impact of Turkish civil society and CSOs has been minimized since the Gezi Park protests in 2013, hence impacting negatively on their potential to influence public opinion in favor of closer cooperation between the EU and Turkey. According to Zihnioğlu (2019a), Turkish civil society alone cannot revitalize the relations between Turkey and the EU. Without high-level political will, civil society dialogue cannot on its own improve Turkey’s relations with Europe. While there are 122,228 active civil society associations in Turkey, as of June 2021[7], the EU had only reached around 1,600 CSOs (less than 10% of the number of CSOs in Turkey) by the end of 2020. In particular, the civil society dialogue program’s reach outside the major cities has been limited. Members of Turkish civil society, particularly the ones

located in remote provinces, argue that the EU should broaden its civil society engagement beyond its traditional partners, which are concentrated in major urban centers. However, the dialogue programs have succeeded in bringing participants from Turkey and European countries together, to communicate with and get to know each other at a personal level. It is argued that “mere participation can have a galvanizing and trust-building effect” (Center for American Progress, 2017: 34). In this context, the EU’s efforts to develop and strengthen dialogue between Turkish and European civil society have been essential to the development of mutual understanding. In his statement on the Civil Society Dialogue, Ambassador Selim Yenel, the undersecretary of the Ministry for EU Affairs at the time, reaffirmed, in 2017, the importance of dialogue between Turkish and European civil societies:

“As the representatives of the state, we go there (the EU) to attend meetings and represent our country. But, even if we tell the truth, this is considered by our response as ‘the opinion of the state or the views of the government’ within the framework of a particular perspective. However, the contacts to be established by civil society organizations, the issues or, maybe, self-criticism to be expressed by these groups may prove to be more valuable. In this sense, it is paramount that civil society organizations reach the areas we fail to reach. Of course, as the state and the government, we need to support these civil society groups. We need to provide them with necessary information.” (CSD Newsletter, 2017b: 9).

[6] The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance’s (IPA-I) first cycle covers the period between 2007-2013. The EU had allocated €4.4 billion for IPA-I under five components, namely: transition assistance and institution-building, cross-border cooperation, regional development, human resource development, and rural development. The second cycle of IPA (IPA-II) for the period 2014-2020 with a €4.4 billion budget focuses on sectors including democracy and governance, the rule of law and fundamental rights, the environment and climate action, transport, energy, competitiveness and innovation, education, employment and social policies, agriculture and rural development, and regional and territorial cooperation. See <https://www.avrupa.info.tr/en/instrument-pre-accession-assistance-ipa-880>.

In a similar vein, Christian Berger highlighted the crucial role of civil society in terms of neutralizing negative feelings on both sides:

“What civil society can do here to break that dangerous cycle is to say: “No! We have a strong cooperation. We understand each other, we work with each other, we work on overcoming all these biased views of the other side. And we can also show the work that we are doing, supporting this cooperation is fruitful and useful and it leads to something.” (CSD Newsletter, 2017a: 5).

The perpetuation of civil society dialogue programs has helped Turkish civil society become instrumental on issues that support societal dialogue. Despite the debates on the limits and depoliticizing effects of EU aid on Turkish civil society (Zihnioğlu, 2019b), participants in dialogue programs underlined the fact that “they were very pleased with the role played by the Civil Society Dialogue Programme in uniting institutions from other countries with common objectives and establishing partnerships” (CSD Newsletter, 2017b: 6). Many of the beneficiaries of civil society dialogue grants worked with a partner from Turkey or the EU for the first time, thereby establishing sustainable connections and networks.

Conclusion

It is difficult to argue that Turkey and the EU have had a difficult relationship with many ups and downs, although the determination of the parties has helped to keep it on track despite the multitude of challenges. These vacillations at the macro level also have repercussions at the micro level. Besides the fluctuation in the level of public support for Turkey’s membership

to the EU, more than half of the Turkish public does not find the EU to be a reliable and sincere partner (Aydın et al., 2021: 63). Conversely, the same might apply to perceptions within the EU regarding Turkey’s slow reform process. EU citizens are divided into two camps in terms of the enlargement process: 46 percent are in favor of enlargement, while 42 percent are against it (BiEGAP, 2019: 4). In fact, public opinion in countries like Austria, Germany and Belgium is against Turkey’s full accession to the EU (DW, 2017). All these difficulties, along with the mistrust between the parties, necessitate alternative means of dialogue for a more sustainable relationship. As Müftüler Baç (2017: 19) states, “a more constructive political dialogue from both parties stressing the mutual benefits of enhancing their cooperation – even in the absence of a formal accession– is essential for its perpetuation”. In Particular, the engagement and dialogue among the youth and CSOs through the Erasmus and IPA programs provide alternative channels that help build trust and enhance cooperation. This micro-level dialogue has the potential to transform itself into serious leverage, in order to moderate the differences at the macro level, if necessary.

Turkey, as an active partner since 2004, has benefited from the Erasmus program, even though it is not a popular destination for incoming participants. The gradual increase in the number of people, especially young ones, participating in these programs, should have a positive impact on relations, considering the transformative power of the Erasmus program on participants, in terms of building trust and enhancing dialogue among the young through education, training, and volunteering. The promotion

of the common values under the Paris Declaration has also helped to raise awareness among young people about “discrimination and non-discrimination”, which is important in respecting and fostering underprivileged groups within society.

The engagement of youth in these programs as well as active dialogue would pave the way for increasing mutual understanding and tolerance that also reduce mistrust. Early research has already shown that intergroup contact is associated with positive outcomes including prejudice reduction, trust-building, and willingness for a peaceful coexistence (Yücel and Psaltis, 2020: 579-590). The increase in contact among the youth under exchange programs, therefore, would be an added value for sustainable dialogue and integration.

Likewise, the dialogue between CSOs is another driving force in terms of integration. The current engagement level between the CSOs of Turkey and the EU is not at the desired level, however the existence of IPA programs has helped Turkish civil society to become instrumental on issues that support societal dialogue. Even though civil society organizations may not have the potential to revitalize the relations between Turkey and the EU without the requisite political will at the macro level (Zihnioğlu, 2019), they are still key actors in establishing partnerships, sustainable connections, and networks.

In conclusion, enhancing alternative dialogue mechanisms in Turkey-EU relations would definitely have an important impact in building trust between the two sides. Both youth and civil society organizations have the potential to

contribute to this positive change in Turkey, considering the several concrete examples mentioned in this paper. This dimension of the impact of civil society and youth programs, projects, and exchanges needs to be better assessed by both EU and Turkish policymakers and incorporated as a substantive part of the positive agenda rather than added as an afterthought. As such, both the EU and Turkey need to find ways to encourage and diversify alternative dialogue mechanisms targeted at youth and civil society, to build a sustainable relationship despite the periodic crises that influence the relationship. These alternative dialogue mechanisms can provide much added value to strengthening EU-Turkey ties.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations are listed below for the EU and Turkey to develop dialogue and trust-building among youth and civil society:

- The impact of civil society and youth programs, projects, and exchanges need to be incorporated into the positive aspects of the agenda between the EU and Turkey.
- If alternative dialogue mechanisms targeted at youth and civil society are developed, both parties can build a sustainable relationship.
- Encouragement and diversification of mobility programs targeting young people would enhance the mutual benefits for both sides.
- To reduce prejudices and stereotypes regarding Turkey, more European youth can be encouraged to take part in regular exchanges. Promoting Turkey as a potential destination for young Europeans would have a positive impact in the long run.

- If the funds and budgets allocated for these programs increase, the number of participants benefiting from taking part in these programs will increase.
- New media tools provide a suitable and easy means for engagement. Therefore, more CSO and youth dialogue programs might be encouraged via online platforms for further dialogue and cooperation.
- As the dialogue between Turkish and European societies is essential for changing negative public opinion, the funds allocated for civil society dialogue programs should be increased, to enable the participation of more people in these programs.
- Civil society dialogue programs often encourage Turkish civil society representatives to visit their partner organizations in Europe. However, to reduce prejudices and stereotypes about Turkey, more European participants need to participate in exchanges. Hence, the promotion of Turkish CSOs as potential partners for European civil society would have a positive impact in the long run.
- There needs to be a more systematic emphasis on studies evaluating and monitoring the relationship between youth and civil society dialogue programs and the prospects for EU-Turkey relations. In other words, there is a need for targeted funding of joint research by Turkish and EU-based experts, CSOs, think tanks, and academia on the state of dialogue and trust building among youth and civil society and its correlation on the political dialogue between the two parties, and vice versa.

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TURKEY AND EUROPE

CHALLENGING PARTNERS

TURKEY AS A PARTNER

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