FIELDWORK BRIEF

MIGRATION AND THE POLITICAL ELITE IN TÜRKİYE

Authors: Roberta Maria Aricò and Deniz Pelek

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of the MIGRADEMO project, this brief presents selected descriptive findings from our research on how members of Parliament connect their international migration experience to their political perspectives and work in their respective homeland parliaments. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with individuals who returned to Türkiye and were active in national politics during the 2018-2023 legislative term. Our initial analysis suggests that, in addition to political affiliation and family background, the migration experience plays a role in shaping these politicians' views and behaviours, although its impact is recognised in varying degrees among the interviewees. Many participants draw on their experiences abroad to inform their parliamentary agenda, resorting to legislative proposals, parliamentary questions, and transnational connections to disseminate their ideas. However, they report facing significant obstacles related to, among other issues, legislative infrastructure and polarisation around a series of themes in Turkish politics.

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their home countries through the remittance of both money and newfound ideas about democracy from afar or through return. The MIGRADEMO project seeks to unpack these processes at different levels, including the political elite, civil society, and among households in regions with high levels of outmigration. This brief focuses on **members of the Turkish Parliament who have returned from abroad**.

Our research addresses a gap in the existing literature, which is mostly quantitative and focused on heads of state, by examining how the migration experience of these politicians influenced their perspectives and their activities both within and outside the Parliament.

To investigate the influence of international migration on political elites, our research team conducted and analysed **16 semi-structured interviews** (4 women, 12 men) involving 15 members of Parliament elected for the 2018-2023 legislative term and 1 politician from the party headquarters. The chart below (Fig. 1) shows participants' different party affiliations, which try to mirror the complexity of the Turkish political arena.

The fieldwork was carried out between **February 2022 and January 2023** in **Istanbul and Ankara**, with most of the interviews conducted either in the party headquarters or at the Turkish Parliament. Still, five interviews took place online. Dr Deniz Pelek, who conducted the fieldwork, reached out to participants via mail, phone calls, or through in-person visits.

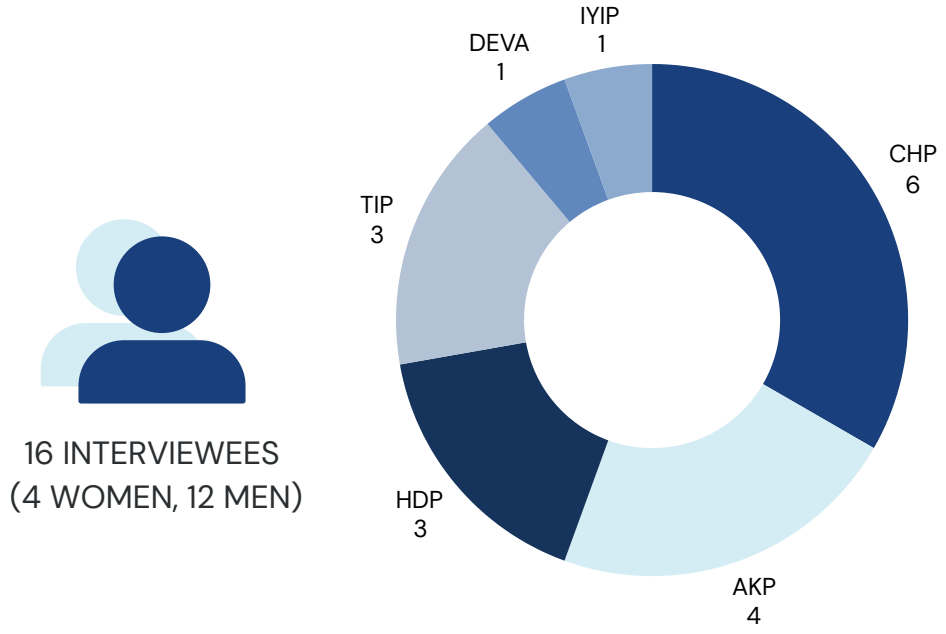

Fig. 1. Interviewees and party distribution. The acronyms stand for *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP), *Halkların Demokratik Partisi (HDP), Türkiye İşçi Partisi* (TIP), *Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi* (DEVA), and *İYİ Parti* (IYIP)

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Based on the interviews, participants mainly decided to migrate to join **higher education programmes** abroad. Besides this primary motivation, many interviewees linked their migration experience to different rationales. Some participants mentioned political and professional reasons as the main drivers for leaving Türkiye, and a few others were born abroad.

Compared to the most general emigration trends registered in Türkiye, where people settle for longer stays in European countries like Germany, participants in this study spent **less time abroad** and chose different destination countries.

Given their education-driven mobility pattern, most participants moved to the **United States** and the **United Kingdom,** taking advantage of specific university agreements and their familiarity with English acquired in the Turkish schooling system.

Among the main reasons for returning, many interviewees mentioned a sense of **longing for their country and family**, coupled with obstacles to adapting to a foreign context and a desire to support their homeland with the expertise gained abroad. Some participants also referred to the **rise of employment opportunities** in their home country, which eventually triggered their decision to return.

(RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

Living abroad exposed participants to new habits, behaviours, and ideas, often leading to a change in their political outlook. This **resocialisation process** has been facilitated by several mechanisms, which vary according to their reason for migrating, the duration of the migration experience, the destination country, and their personal characteristics.

Political and social events emerge as key drivers for resocialisation. However, those who migrated to continue their studies recount limited occasions to participate in such activities due to the short duration of their experience outside Türkiye and their financial constraints as international students living abroad. Still, some exceptions stand out, although these forms of engagement **relate mostly to the Turkish context** rather than that of the country of residence. For instance, one interviewee mentioned his participation in events hosted by the Turkish consulate, and some others reported their involvement in diaspora-led organisations and Turkish student associations. Another participant recalled his interest in the host country's national politics, even if he mainly campaigned for the conditions of a Turkish religious minority living there.

> ***I think it is a tremendous experience for a person who has professions [...] related to people. [...] Living alone in a different country makes you mature, changes your perspective on life, changes your relationships with people, and makes you question yourself, see your talents, and struggle.***
>
> Interview with a returnee member of Parliament

Temporal junctures and historical events also play an essential role in influencing this resocialisation process. For instance, one interviewee participated in solidarity campaigns as a response to the Bosnian war and took a critical stance against Armenian genocide claims through collective letter-writing and other similar initiatives. Similarly, another participant intensified his civil commitment against islamophobia following the 09/11 terrorist attacks.

Direct and indirect **interactions with the local society** in the host countries contributed to forging participants' views and attitudes as well.

One interviewee affirmed that witnessing local demonstrations and their impact on political decisions made him understand the power behind each individual. Other participants praised the **multicultural social environment** experienced abroad, which enhanced their understanding of different traditions and lifestyles, as well as their appreciation for living as a minority in an egalitarian and pluralistic society.

MIGRATION AND PERCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY AND IMMIGRATION

According to the interviews, the migration experience contributed to shaping participants' opinions on a wide array of social issues, such as **democracy and immigration**. However, their **political affiliation** seems to be the determining factor, leading to significant differences in how they perceive the impact of their time abroad on their ideas.

For instance, interviewees from the ruling party state that their stay in a foreign country had little to no effect on their views on **democracy and elections**. Instead, they highlight the progress that Türkiye has made in these areas under the current leadership. Two participants also recognised that comparing governments of different countries is futile since every nation has its own political history, customs, and laws. On the contrary, interviewees affiliated with opposition parties often compare Türkiye with the US and Europe, seeing the latter as a source of inspiration for the future of the country.

In this context, they express frustration about the obstacles they face in forwarding critical opinions in the political debate in Türkiye.

When discussing **immigration**, almost all participants addressed the issue of the reception of Syrian refugees. Interviewees from the ruling party praised Türkiye's open border policy and criticised Europe's double-standard approach, which favours Ukrainian refugees over Syrians. In contrast, opposition representatives consistently pointed out the shortcomings of Türkiye's immigration policy measures over the years and advocated for a better-structured legal framework.

Regardless of their party affiliation, many interviewees acknowledged the greater empathy towards migrants gained during their own time abroad, emphasising the importance of integrating them.

However, a few others highlighted some key differences between **their migration experiences and those of individuals moving to Türkiye**, as the latter are often irregular migrants and victims of forced displacement. Despite recognising their enhanced vulnerability, some of the main concerns that emerged during the interviews mostly focused on the economic value of migrants. A few participants mentioned the importance of regularising Syrian refugees and integrating them into the national labour market, which could be beneficial for Türkiye.

MIGRATION AND THE ENTRY INTO POLITICS

Although interviewees acknowledge the influence of migration on their political attitudes and ideas, they rarely consider their time abroad as a direct driver for entering national politics. Instead, most participants refer to the influence exerted by their families, who played a significant role in shaping their political preferences for a specific party. **Migration mainly reinforced their existing political identities**, with some participants beginning their engagement in national politics from afar. For instance, one interviewee supported an organisation affiliated with a Turkish political party while abroad, and later decided to run for national parliamentary elections as a candidate within the same party. Similarly, another participant connected with his current party when he was still a member of a diaspora-led organisation abroad.

Based on the interviews, party leaderships in Türkiye tend to value people's education and professional background more than their migration experience *per se* during the candidate selection process. Indeed, only a few participants openly referred to their migration experience as a **positive asset for their political and parliamentary careers**, as it resulted in increased respect from their peers and greater acceptance from the voters. Moreover, some interviewees reportedly gained some valuable skills during their time outside Türkiye, which they also applied as politicians. For instance, one participant honed his communication and interpersonal skills while abroad, which proved beneficial in his political activities. While participants' migration experience does not significantly impact their intra-party relations, it plays a key role in their appointment to international commissions and transnational friendship groups over other party members due to their proficiency in a **foreign language and multicultural background**.

due to their demographic profile (i.e., mostly young men) and cheaper workforce. Since migrants are primarily seen as economic assets, their inactivity is strongly condemned, with one participant agreeing that those who only receive assistance without working should be forcibly returned.

Fig. 2. Photo of a Turkish voting card. for the national elections

LINKING MIGRATION EXPERIENCE WITH PARLIAMENTARY ACTIVITY

Interviewees tend to connect their migration experience to their parliamentary activities, using the knowledge and approaches they gained abroad and incorporating these aspects into their work in Türkiye.

Among the various channels of diffusion mentioned in the interviews, only a couple of participants resort to **parliamentary questions and legislative proposals** as tools to apply their migration-related expertise. For example, one interviewee claimed that his first-hand experience as an immigrant in Europe has provided him with insights into the challenges faced by migrants, enabling him to effectively advocate for their concerns in the Turkish Parliament through questions and legislative proposals.

Migration is often seen as a valuable source of expertise when it comes to **international committees** and **extra-parliamentary institutional assemblies**. Many participants stressed how their ability to speak multiple languages and their familiarity with different social and cultural contexts helped them interact with foreign representatives (including those from their former host countries) and steer international cooperation. In addition to these institutional transnational interactions, participants also maintain connections with **Turkish diaspora organisations** abroad, incorporating diaspora concerns into their parliamentary initiatives based on their personal experiences as former diaspora members.

Despite these examples, a few interviewees believe that their migration background had a **limited impact on their political activities**.

Fig. 3. Photo of the inside of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye.

For instance, one participant attributes her parliamentary agenda more to her personal interest in journalism and individual concerns about freedom of expression and environmental issues rather than her stay abroad. Another interviewee emphasises that his extended period of living in Türkiye, rather than their brief stay abroad, forged his social ideas and democratic values.

Participants also identify some **persistent obstacles** that hinder their parliamentary activities and the diffusion of their migration-related knowledge.

Most interviews express their concerns about the **legislative infrastructure**, with some opposition representatives criticising the current leadership for this hurdle. One participant highlights the failure to institutionalise measures in support of Turks living abroad, citing unfulfilled promises and stressing the structural deficiencies of migration and diaspora policies in Türkiye.

A couple of interviewees also expressed their frustration with the **polarisation** characterising the Turkish Parliament, which hampers any possibility of constructive debate.

Intra-party dynamics also emerged as another recurrent issue. For example, one participant complains about the ineffective selection of representatives for transnational parliamentary commissions, which failed to consider his migration experience and placed him in a sector unrelated to his expertise.

Two interviewees also emphasise the role of **gender discrimination** as a barrier to women's effective participation in national politics, advocating for social and legislative changes.

Fig. 4. Photo of the outside of the Grand National Assembly of Türkiye

MIGRADEMO is a European Research Council (ERC) funded project which examines the impact of migration on democratic participation and processes in countries of origin. It is hosted by the Department of Political Science at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.

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