FIELDWORK BRIEF

MIGRATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY LEADERS IN TURKEY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the context of the MIGRADEMO project, this report presents selected descriptive findings from our research on the extent to and ways in which the role of returnee leaders of associations link their international migration experience to their entry into and engagement with civil society. A core component of this research is 10 semi-structured interviews with returnees working with civil society organisations in Turkey, coupled with an additional set of 12 conversations with local-level associations in Uşak and Konya. Our preliminary analysis suggests that the time spent abroad contributes to shaping interviewees' perceptions, knowledge, skills, and transnational network upon their return to Turkey. Although some of them can implement what they learned and observed abroad, participants also reflect on the obstacles they face in doing so.

INTRODUCTION

Both international migration and democratic development are important contemporary academic and policy concerns. Recent studies of transnational migrant practices have uncovered how migrants influence democratic participation in their homelands 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 the level of the political elite, civil society, and among households in regions of high outmigration. This brief deals with the level of **civil society in Turkey**. Our research focuses on how the migration experience of heads of civil society associations influences their entry to and engagement with civil society.

Our research team conducted a total of **10 semi-structured interviews with civil society representatives at the national level**, including 8 women and 2 men. As the chart below illustrates (Fig. 1), our study targeted participants from national organisations with different thematic agendas and missions (i.e., human rights, migration, gender, and environmental issues). The rationale behind this choice was to provide a broader picture of the vast array of activities arising from the civil society in Turkey.

As an intersection with the community-based qualitative fieldwork held in Uşak and Konya, we also interviewed **12 representatives engaged in local associations**. Given the limited dimension of the districts under scrutiny, our research team focused on local civil society organisations in general, regardless of their thematic purpose.

Due to their specificity, the findings that emerged from these observations will be summarised in a separate concluding paragraph.

The fieldwork, held between **March and September 2022**, was built on both in-person and online interviews. Dr Deniz Pelek, who carried out the fieldwork, conducted a thorough screening of local and national organisations online to identify potential interviewees. Other sampling methods include snowballing. After this preliminary phase of the research, she reached out to participants via email, phone calls, and in-person visits.

10 INTERVIEWEES FROM NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS (8 WOMEN, 2 MEN)

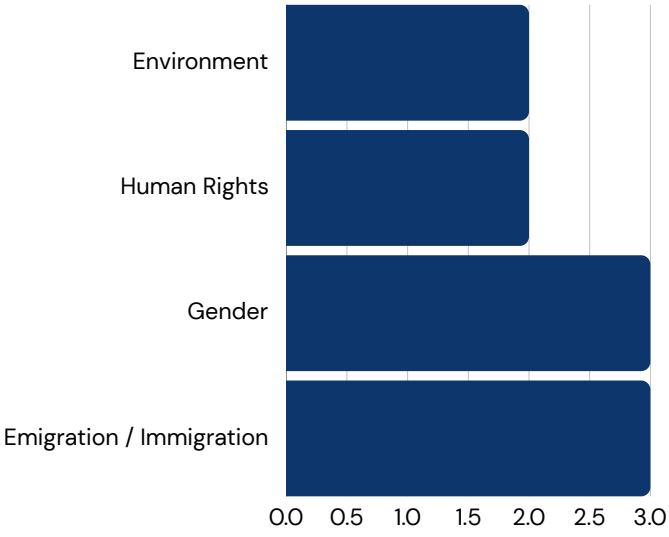


Fig. 1. Themes of civil society associations

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE

Based on our research, the great majority of participants left Turkey to **study abroad**. However, there are several **other rationales** behind this choice, which can be personal (e.g., marriage) and professional (e.g., training opportunities). It is also worth considering that a few interviewees were already born abroad.

Participants chose **different destinations**, with the majority moving to either the UK, the US, or some other European countries (e.g, Germany, France, and the Netherlands).

The **duration** of their migration experiences also varied greatly, ranging from a few months to over a decade.

Interviewees shared their **reasons for returning to Turkey** as well. While many expressed their desire to **actively contribute to the improvement of their home country**, others decided to return due to their feelings of **nostalgia** and other **challenges they encountered in adapting to a foreign society**.

(RE)SOCIALISATION ABROAD

Most participants recognise that their migration experience exposed them to **new habits, ideas, and behaviours**, triggering a change in their attitudes. This resocialisation process abroad has generally been facilitated by three main mechanisms.

Civic engagement arises as the primary caterer for resocialisation. Many participants mention their membership to rights-driven associations as students abroad, where they developed or strengthened their commitment to creating a better society. However, not all these experiences were positive. For instance, one participant joined an LGBT+ student association but eventually left due to its lack of inclusivity. Another interviewee participated in a project to support detainees during her time in the US but soon stopped her involvement because she felt unable to form close relationships with the beneficiaries due to her different cultural background.

Direct and indirect exposure to national politics reportedly influenced this process of resocialisation as well. For instance, one participant attended the US presidential de-

-bates in a nearby theatre to better understand the positioning of socialists in the national electoral arena. Another interviewee joined the national branches of the Green Party in the UK and France during his time there. Participants also recount their involvement in multilateral political platforms, which contributed to shaping their civic agendas. One interviewee participated in an event at the Council of Europe, where she learned about the concept of "zero tolerance for violence against women" and incorporated this idea into her initiatives in Turkey.

In a few cases, **professional opportunities** also played a significant role in facilitating the participants' resocialisation. For example, one interviewee stated that her job as a kindergarten teacher for immigrant children in Germany served as a springboard for her subsequent civic engagement in Turkey.

MIGRATION EXPERIENCE AND WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

Based on the interviews, participants usually link their migration experience to their subsequent activity in Turkish civil society. Indeed, many interviewees gained substantial knowledge about **operational aspects of their work** in no-profit organisations, which they often put into practice upon return. For example, one participant learned about the funding models characterising the relationship between donors and local associations in Latin America, expressing his desire to replicate them in Turkey. Another interviewee worked in a civil society organisation in Italy, honing her monitoring, evaluation, and management skills and applying them once she returned to Turkey.

That said, participants identified **persistent challenges** in the diffusion of their migration-related experience. In particular, many interviewees faced obstacles when dealing with local and national authorities due to their lack of cooperation.

For example, one participant reportedly felt pressured by the local municipality not to organise urban protests. Others expressed frustration about more **structural issues**, such as inadequate law enforcement. One civil society representative interviewed, who is engaged in the fight against sexual harassment, complained about perpetrators' impunity, which shields them from any practical consequences for their actions.

The **red tape** also emerges as a constraint, with one participant mentioning the lengthy bureaucratic procedures to get official permits. A couple of interviewees also reported experiencing gender discrimination, as their activities were undervalued or even challenged due to the predominance of women in their association's staff.

TRANSNATONAL LINKS

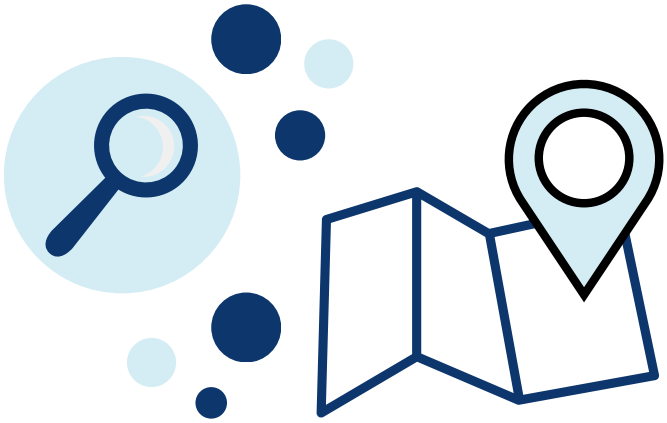
Many interviewees refer to their **networks of contacts and organisations abroad**, which they often tap into for their projects and activities. Despite some exceptions, most of them recognise the influence of their migration experience in establishing these ties. In particular, their ability to speak multiple languages and knowledge of foreign associations and potential funding agencies served as social capital for initiating or strengthening their transnational relationships.

Still, other factors are equally crucial in forging these collaborations. One of them is being a member of a **transnational platform**. For instance, one participant works in a Turkish emigrant association affiliated with a transnational confederation of similar associations across Europe. This platform has been organising yearly events to connect its members, and thus, the interviewee and his organisation could create strong links with other associations in the same sector. In other cases, interviewees' associations were not part of a broader umbrella of civil society organisations. Still, some participants reportedly established valuable relationships for their associations thanks to thematic meetings and projects promoted by supranational institutions, such as the United Nations and the European Union. Sometimes, these collaborations proved particularly bene-

-ficial as they gave access to external funding supporting participants' civil society organisations and their initiatives in Turkey. Interviewees also mention the interactions between their associations and Turks living abroad. In particular, they refer to individual donations coming from diaspora members, which are crucial for ensuring the independence of civil organisations.

ZOOMING IN: LOCAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS

Concerning our local-level analysis, civil organisation representatives in **Uşak and Konya** show some differences compared to their counterparts at the national level. First, we found very few activists who were also returnees. As a result, we also interviewed other members without direct migration experience and asked them about the influence of returnees and emigrants on their associations.



Given the small-scale nature of these associations, the transfer of skills and knowledge appears to be **less straightforward** compared to national organisations. However, some returnees and expatriates have been able to influence the launch of valuable projects. For example, one interviewee mentioned that his association requested a significant amount of land from the district governorship to cultivate lavender, based on the suggestion of a fellow national living abroad. Another participant stated that his organisation overcame a period of financial instability thanks to advice from a diaspora member, who recommended selling local products to increase the overall budget. Nonetheless, the contributions from diaspora members are also subject to criticism. One interviewee dismissed the positive influence of suggestions from Turks living abroad, arguing that they have a limited understanding of the local dynamics. Another core difference regards the resocialisation process. While the majority of participants have never migrated, those who did have no experience of civic engagement abroad.

Despite these differences, **a few similarities also stand out**. As in the case of national organisations, there is substantial evidence of financial support received from abroad. In fact, interviewees mention that some diaspora members regularly send money to local cooperatives. However, one participant highlights a common misunderstanding among expatriates, who sometimes view local cooperatives as profit-driven companies and fuel economic expectations that may eventually be unmet.

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