POWER2YOUTH

Youth Exclusion and the Transformative Impact of Organized Youth in Turkey

Ali Alper Akyüz, **Pınar Gümüş**, **Volkan Yılmaz**, **Ferhat Mahir Çakaloz** and **Nurhan Yentürk**, Youth Studies Unit, Istanbul Bilgi University

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview of youth organizations in Turkey, focusing in particular on the perception of youth organizations and the concepts of "youth" and "youth participation and exclusion" as well as the impact of youth organizations on policy making and society. The first section performs a literature review on the historical development of youth organizations in Turkey and employs existing databases to analyse present circumstances affecting these movements. The backbone of the study, which is presented in the second section, is made up of field research conducted via three focus groups and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of youth organizations and movements in Turkey. The aim is to understand how these organizations and movements perceive and frame the challenge of youth exclusion in Turkey as well as their potential to have a transformative impact on these challenges.

Keywords: Turkey | Youth | Political parties | Political movements | NGOs

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF YOUTH INCLUSION AND ORGANIZATIONS

Young people of contemporary Turkey are characterized by low levels of organization. According to a recent survey held with 2,508 individuals who are 18-24 years old (Konda 2014b), 22.1 percent identified themselves as a member or volunteer of some form of civil society organization (including student clubs) and 9 percent as a member of a political party.[2] Rates of young people in active executive posts are even lower; the rate of board members aged 15-30 among overall board members of Turkish associations is 4.98 percent (295,961 out of 5,933,615) according to the official statistics published by the Department of Association of the Ministry of Interior.[3] There are no provincial or county level presidents of mainstream political parties aged below 30 among those identified in a recent and extensive

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[1] Ali Alper Akyüz is assistant professor at Istanbul Bilgi University and a researcher at the Center for Civil Society Studies (STÇM), Istanbul Bilgi University. Pınar Gümüş is an instructor and researcher at the Youth Studies Unit of STÇM. Volkan Yılmaz is assistant professor of Social Policy at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul. Ferhat Mahir Çakaloz is training support specialist at Turkish Cultural Foundation. Nurhan Yentürk is professor at Istanbul Bilgi University and Director of STÇM.

[2] "Civil society organizations" are defined as student clubs, associations, occupational/professional organizations, foundations, trade unions, platforms/initiatives, cooperatives and others. Many other surveys on youth in Turkey indicate lower rates of membership, particularly because they exclude informal and unconventional forms of organizing.

[3] This figure only includes formal registered associations, thereby excluding informal and unconventional organizations, a category which most youth-led organizations prefer. Turkish Ministry of Interior-Department of Association, *Organlara Seçilen Üyelere Ait Yaş Bilgileri*, http://www.dernekler.gov.tr/tr/AnasayfaLinkler/organ-uye-yas.aspx.

study conducted by Uysal and Topak (2010). University students form the vast majority of all young members/participants of youth-led or youth-related organizations (Sütlü 2011); also 44 percent of organized youth interviewed in Konda (2014b) are members of student clubs or communities. This also results in a high turnover rate (because of participation being limited to the university term) and problems in sustaining organizational knowhow (gap between human capital of organizational generations). On the other hand, organizations are dominated by the same (adult) executives not leaving their positions to younger generations.

Literature on youth (led or targeting) organizations in Turkey is also limited, and existing works mainly focus on individuals in the organizations. Numbers are uncertain and difficult to obtain due to a diversity in legal status (or lack thereof) and temporary features of youth organizations.

This study aims at providing a brief overview of the youth organizational field, with particular focus on perceptions of youth organizations on the concept of "youth" and "youth participation and exclusion" as well as impact of youth organizations in policy making and society. The first section provides a historical overview of the development of the youth organizational field through a literature review and an analysis of the current situation using existing databases. The backbone of the study, which is presented in the second section, is the field research conducted via three focus groups and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of youth organizations and movements in Turkey, aiming to understand how organized youth in Turkey perceive and frame youth exclusion as well as their transformative impact on their problems. Twenty-four participants from 20 organizations in Istanbul attended the focus groups; 13 of these organizations were NGOs, five were unconventional organizations and two were political parties. Among the 30 interviewees, 23 of them were from NGOs (of different political inclinations), two from youth branches of political parties and five from unconventional forms of organizing.

1.1 A Brief Look at the Youth Organizational Field in Turkey

In order to understand the current situation, it is necessary to start with the historical development of the youth organizational field. Although the history of political parties and NGOs dates back to the Ottoman Empire, there have been surges in numbers, both down and up, around certain breaking points, namely establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, military interventions in 1960, 1971 and 1980, and finally liberalization of the Law of Associations and Law of Foundations in 2004 due to European Union adaptation reforms. Accordingly, while there were approximately 5,000 foundations inherited by the Republic from the Ottoman Empire, there were only 57 associations in 1923 (down from 153 in 1907) and 17 in 1925 (Çelik 2013:23). This number then surged up throughout the Republic to 17,000 in 1960, 72,500 in 2000 and 109,600 in 2016.[4] This trend also holds true for political parties. After transition to a multiparty system in 1946, there have been ruptures during the above-mentioned military interventions, with forced closing of political parties, and currently there are 96 registered political parties.[5] The number of foundations is approximately 5,000, with

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[4] Official statistics provided by Turkish Ministry of Interior-Department of Association, *Number of Active Associations by Years*, https://www.dernekler.gov.tr/en/home-links/Number-Active-Associations.aspx.
[5] Official list of political parties with active status provided by Chief Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, *Siyasi Partiler ve Tüzükler*, http://www.yargitaycb.gov.tr/sayfa/siyasi-partiler-ve-tuzukler/1093.

4,511 new foundations (up from 600 in 1980), 283 appendant and 161 minority community foundations.[6]

The exact number of currently active youth associations is, however, uncertain as the Department of Association has removed "Youth" from the list of activity fields in its official statistics of registered associations. Previously, in 2010, the number of youth associations in Department statistics was reported as 581 (out of 89,000) (Şener 2014:78). The Directorate General of Foundations also categorizes foundations according to their target groups and main aims. According to this categorization, in 2015 out of 4,771 new foundations, 3,561 mention children/young people (as a single category) among their target groups.[7] A vast majority of foundations mention "social protection" and "education" as their main purpose; therefore it can be assumed that most of the children/youth-targeting foundations aim either at social protection or at education. In any case, as foundations are composed of capital rather than real persons, they cannot be deemed as "youth-led" apart from hybrid structures that include mechanisms to involve young volunteers in their board, such as the Community Volunteers Foundation.

There have been some efforts to build databases and maps of organizations active in the civil society field since the early 1990s. One extensive and still active database of civil society organizations developed by the Civil Society Development Center (with voluntary inclusion of organizations in the database) provides a list of 411 organizations that include "youth" among their respective activity fields (out of 9,356 organizations in total[8]). Another recent attempt by the Community Volunteers Foundation (*Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı*, TOG) and Youth Services Center (*Gençlik Servisleri Merkezi*, GSM) to map an exclusively youth organizational field (again with voluntary participation) has succeeded in involving 467 organizations all over Turkey in its searchable database according to region and activity field. This map also provides statistics about the participants and a survey applied among participating organizations.[9] Among these organizations, 197 are organized in the form of associations, 107 as university student clubs and 58 as informal youth groups.[10]

Youth branches of political parties organize either formally within the party – as in the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) or main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), as well as some other small opposition parties such as Saadet Party), or informally – as in Youth Coordination of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), or Houses of Idealists of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Due to the high level of informality, it has not been possible to identify the exact number of political parties with a youth organization.

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[6] Turkish Prime Ministry-Directorate General of Foundations, *Our History*, http://www.vgm.gov.tr/sayfa.aspx?Id=78.
[7] Turkish Prime Ministry-Directorate General of Foundations, *Vakif bazinda yeni vakiflarin hedef kitlesine göre dağilimi (2015)*, http://www.vgm.gov.tr/icerik.aspx?Id=192.
[8] See Civil Society Development Center database of NGOs: http://www.stgm.org.tr/en/stoveritabani.
[9] See Gençlik Alanı Haritası (Youth Map) website: http://www.genclikharitasi.org.
[10] See Gençlik Alanı Haritası (Youth Map) website: *Gençlik Haritası Genel İstatistiksel Bilgiler*, http://www.genclikharitasi.org/istatistik-s4.html.

1.2 Recent Historical Development of the Youth Organizational Field in Turkey

In order to comprehend these numbers and qualitative factors of the youth organizational field, one should also take into account the historical development of the field. Nemutlu (2008) categorizes the historical development of youth work and organizations within civil society in Turkey as periods of "youth tourism (1979-1995)," "youth and participation (1996-1998)," "dissemination of international youth work (1999-2001)," "diffusion of youth work and non-formal learning and initiatives for a National Youth Council (2002-2004)" and "development of youth policies (2005-2007)." One should not treat these as solid and distinct periods; on the contrary, many overlapping features exist among the periods.

Nemutlu's timeline exhibits international and particularly European influence on youth organizations through both official policies such as funding programmes (Euromed Youth Programme and EU Youth Programme) and participation in European networks and European Youth Forum as a reference point for national and international umbrella organizations. Youth work within the framework of the Council of Europe also had a substantial impact on non-formal and peer learning methodologies, with a particular emphasis on rights and empowerment of young people. Nemutlu points to the 1999-2001 period as a critical turning point which led to the appearance and meeting of influential figures and youth trainers in the field of youth work in Turkey, particularly within the meetings organized for the launch of EuroMediterranean Youth Programme, the first funding programme available exclusively for youth organizations. This period also saw: a) the first attempts on the part of the state to control these organizations by establishing a funding programme subject to re-registration of already legally existing organizations in the General Directorate of Youth and Sports, b) unprecedented advocacy activities of independent youth organizations in shaping the administrative structures of youth-specific funding programmes (Euromediterranean Youth Programme and National Agency responsible for EU Education and Youth Programmes) and development of youth policy proposals (including for the establishment of an independent National Youth Council as a representative umbrella organization). The next period saw the establishment of new actors with new organizational structures and cultures, such as the Community Volunteers Foundation which is still influential today, and a boom in new small organizations using funding from European youth programmes. Youth work has been introduced and developed in Turkey mainly by civil society actors with international links in the last 20 years rather than public institutions (Nemutlu 2008). Particularly, European influence on policy and organizations has been a determining factor in a variety of ways. Nemutlu and Kurtaran (2008:36) observe that funding via EU Youth Programmes has resulted in a sort of isomorphism of projects/activities of youth organizations by financially supporting activities rather than needs, leading "to a gap between the raison d'être of the organization and its state of affairs." Furthermore, organizations established solely in order to benefit from existing funds and dependent on their continued availability are vulnerable against lack of these funds or a change in conditions to receive them.

1.3 Hegemony and Gezi Park Protests

After 2008, no narrative about historical development of the youth field has been written. Nemutlu (2008) comments on first half of the 2000s as expansion of the civil society field and widening of opportunities, while the second half is characterized by diversification of organizations, but narrowing of rights (particularly of expression and organization). The

period from 2008 on could be characterized by attempts to build up the hegemony of a single-party led state (also in the youth field) and resistance against this hegemony. Establishment of a Ministry of Youth and Sports have been a major step towards this attempt, and policy instruments such as state funding for youth organizations have been criticized for increasing lack of transparency and accountability, with a concern for politically driven selective funding for organizations. Research on youth organizations should also investigate this tendency which causes a polarization throughout the civil society.

Finally, the widespread Gezi Park protests in May-June 2013 and emerging literature about these events should be mentioned as another significant turning point for the whole civil society and the social movements field, with a special emphasis on youth. According to on-site research, the vast majority of protesters and occupiers were young (average age was 28 with more than 70 percent of protesters under 30) and approximately 80 percent of them were not part of any formal or informal organization (or were not there, in the park, as members or mobilized by any organization) (Konda 2014a:8-9 and 16). Use of social media, humour and involvement of unconventional groups like football fan clubs played a vital role in mobilization and persistence of protesters. This profile of protesters was a blow up of the discourse of an "apolitical youth" as well as established organizations as the ultimate mobilizers of social change (while in the case of Gezi, organizations from a wide political spectrum were followers of the crowd). Finally, Gezi protests were also unprecedented in pluralism of participating organizations and peaceful coexistence of these potentially conflicting groups (Örs and Turan 2015). After the police raid against the occupiers of Gezi Park on 18 June 2013, Gezi protests spread to other parks all over Istanbul and other cities as forums – themselves an experimentation in direct democracy. Some of these forums have evolved into urban solidarity/defence movements, informal organizations resisting urban projects of creating private profit out of public spaces, plundering of the environment or gentrification. In response to this unique phenomenon with a lived "spirit" of direct and deliberative democracy and a turning point for social movements in Turkey (Özbank 2013), literature on the Gezi protests has been quick and already wide, although still immature. However, despite recognizing the young age and youthfulness of the movement, few analyse it as a youth movement or youth political activism, as concrete demands of protests are not directly related to youth in its narrow sense. Among them, the field study carried out by Gümüş and Yılmaz (2015) is an exception. Their study is based on comparison of field studies conducted before and after Gezi, and they reached the conclusion that young people already participating in social movements and NGOs were determining factors by using and transferring their organizational experience, political discourse and solidarity networks in a crowd without such experience.

1.4 Review on Impact of Youth Organizations

Numbers and impact (capacity) of civil society actors at large in Turkey are known to be limited and geographically condensed in metropolitan areas due to a strong and centralized state and political culture. Youth organizations are no exception; organizational numbers and capabilities have been found to differ between metropolitan-based (Istanbul and Ankara) organizations and others, as well as between professional youth-related and volunteer-based, youth-led organizations (Sütlü 2011). Capabilities of youth-led organizations and/or those functioning outside of these metropolitan areas are particularly limited in use of proper methods and schemes for impact evaluation, mostly due to donor requirements. According

to the survey accompanying the above-mentioned youth organizations' map developed by TOG and GSM, a vast majority of participating youth organizations perceive their impact on policy processes to be between none and medium, for actual impact rate (80 percent for local governments and 87.45 percent for central government) and for capacity to have an impact (70 percent for local level and 79 percent for central government).[11]

Supporting this perception on the part of organizations regarding the impact of youth organizations on policies, one can only find a few specific campaigns on youth-relevant issues. Campaigns on youth participation have been included in compilations of best practices from the civil society field, such as by Ataman and Yamak (2009). A successful campaign of collaboration of various youth organizations, *Seçilmek Istiyorum* (I Wanna Get Elected, in 2006), resulted in the reduction of the age threshold for being elected to the national parliament, from 30 to 25. However, follow-up campaigns organized by the National Youth Parliament on the occasion of the elections[12] failed to achieve any measurable results.

Another campaign mentioned in such compilations concerns the establishment of a National Youth Council (and formation of a national youth policy). This initiative aimed at establishing an independent National Youth Council parallel to its existing counterparts in most European countries and represented in the European Youth Forum. Starting in the 1990s, various attempts have received guidance from the European Youth Forum and funding from European Commission, but failed to establish cooperation among youth organizations and youth branches of political parties, or to receive government support (in recognition and funding) for this purpose. Recently, the Ministry of Youth and Sports (itself founded in 2011) has established a government-led Youth Council of Turkey through a bylaw; this status is clearly not in compliance with the European standards of independence from government, and thus is ineligible for membership in the European Youth Forum. Youth organizations have responded by gathering in a forum with the name *Gençlik Örgütleri Forumu* (Youth Organizations Forum).[13]

Finally, one success of youth movements has been the elimination of university fees in state universities in 2012. However, this was not the result of a single campaign, but of a wide and dispersed wave of protests by leftist organizations; the government has declared its 2012 decision as a move to get rid of a persistent point of objection "abused by marginal groups."

No specific campaigns on youth social inclusion and employment have been reported in any resource, apart from dispersed protests against fees for state universities; rather, researchers have presented recommendations for NGOs in Turkey to get involved in these issues to provide a platform of expression and self-realization for socially excluded young people (Yentürk and Başlevent 2008, Yurttagüler 2008, Uyan-Semerci 2008). Nonexistence or invisibility of specific advocacy organizations or campaigns in the field of social exclusion or poverty of

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[11] See Gençlik Alanı Haritası (Youth Map) website: *Gençlik Haritası Genel İstatistiksel Bilgiler*, http://www.genclikharitasi.org/istatistik-s4.html.

[12] "*Her Meclise Bir Gençlik Temsilcisi*" (One Youth Representative for Each [Local] Parliament) in 2009 for local elections, and "*Geç değil Genç*" (Young, Not Late) in 2011 for general elections.

[13] A list of members of the forum (35 at the moment) can be found in the "Your Right, Youth Right" project website: http://www.genchakli.org/en/55/Forum-Members.html.

young people or youth unemployment (apart from aid and scholarships) is a point worthy of discussion, as Turkey has long suffered from high levels of youth unemployment and, even worse, participation in neither education nor workforce (known as "neither in employment, education or training", NEET).

As can be observed from the non-functioning websites of various campaigns (and even those with follow-up campaigns), projects and activities designed according to donor requirements haven't been sustained after the funding term is over.[14]

2. FIELD RESEARCH ON ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSION OF YOUTH AND EXCLUSION

Field research on the meso-level (organizational dimension) of the Power2Youth project in Turkey has been conducted via three focus groups and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of youth organizations and movements, with the aim of understanding how organized youth in Turkey perceive and frame youth exclusion as well as their transformative impact on their problems.

The participants of focus groups and interviews have been selected to include political parties, civil society organizations, women's groups, religious organizations and protest movements from diverse political and socio-economic backgrounds. Contextualizing these categories within the socio-political atmosphere of Turkey, the final design of the focus group meetings has been made so as to reflect the political polarization in the country. Therefore, the first focus group was conducted with the youth branch of the political party in power, AKP, as well as civil society organizations and groups with religious tendencies and close to AKP government in terms of political understanding. The second focus group was organized with the youth branch of the main opposition party, CHP, and also with civil society organizations and youth groups with secular nationalist and Kemalist tendencies. The last focus group was conducted with young people from independent NGOs and new social movements, most of which appeared or grew more significantly after the Gezi protests. These include city movements and neighbourhood solidarities, as well as the LGBTI movement, the women's movement and young people from religious, cultural and ethnic groups which have extensively felt under pressure under the current government's policies. Overall, 24 participants from 20 organizations in Istanbul attended the focus groups; 13 of these organizations were NGOs, five unconventional organizations and two political parties. Gender imbalance was significant except the final focus group; in general, the attendance ratio was 18 young men to seven young women, with only one women out of seven participants in each of the first two focus groups.[15]

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[14] See compilation by Sütlü (2011).
[15] The invitations for the focus groups did not condition a gender criteria, therefore, the gender profile of the focus groups have been the result of the participant groups own decisions on who will represent them in the focus group meetings.

Using this method for forming the focus groups worked out in two ways throughout this phase of the research. First, the participants were familiar and comfortable with the other participants around the table and this paved the way for a more lively discussion and active participation of nearly all of the participants. Furthermore, taking into account the current polarization of the political scene as a crucial factor in putting together the focus groups enabled the researchers to investigate how the political tendencies relate to the ways young people in Turkey describe youth exclusion as well as their potentials for social transformation.

Parallel to this process, in-depth interviews with members of 30 different organizations and/or initiations were conducted. These organizations were from different and diverse backgrounds in terms of thematic orientation, geographical distribution, level of organization from local to national or international, and being youth-led, youth-focused or youth-related. Twenty-three of the organizations were NGOs (although some operate in government or municipality bodies), two of them youth wings of political parties and five unconventional forms of organizing. Six of the interviewees were from Istanbul, ten from Ankara, eight from Diyarbakır and the remaining six from various other towns. Thus, the selection of interviewees was designed to compensate for the geographical concentration of organizations attending the focus groups. Contrary to gender imbalance in focus group participants, 13 out of 30 interviewees were women as the participants for interviewees were selected by the research team.

Each interview lasted about an hour and interviewees were asked questions aiming to examine "youth exclusion" with its various dimensions.

Both the interviews and the focus groups were mainly held during the June-August 2015 period which fell in between two general elections (7 June and 1 November), a tense and turbulent political atmosphere marked by the loss of the single party majority (regained in the renewed elections in November), escalating violence against HDP – a party of alliance between Kurdish and leftist social movements which gained an unexpected success in overcoming the 10 percent threshold, causing a major loss for AKP) and resumed violent conflict between the guerrilla forces of the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) and state forces. Most of the interviews and two of the focus groups (apart from the pro-government one) were held after 20 July, the date when a suicide bomber related to the Islamic State (IS) committed a homicide killing 30 youth activists of a socialist organization in Suruç, gathered to collect and submit aid for children of Kobane, a Syrian Kurdish town just across the border which had just previously been regained from IS siege. This resulted in the postponement of one focus group scheduled to take place on 22 July, and the eventual merging of two different focus groups involving organizations of political, ethnic and cultural opposition, most with an inclination towards supporting HDP, and unconventional groups of new social movements. Still, there was a significant loss of participating organizations in focus groups; this gap was then covered by interview participants.

Outcomes of focus groups and interviews should be analysed according to this polarized and traumatized political atmosphere, which was a main point of discussion infusing itself into the mood of the whole dialogue.

2.1 How Do Youth Organizations and Movements Conceptualize Problems of Youth and Youth Exclusion?

The analysis of the data collected through field research aims at mapping the main framework of the young people's problems in Turkey as they are described by youth organizations. Moreover, to discover how youth organizations differ in their ways of defining the problems of young people is also crucial in terms of this research. Youth exclusion is held mostly as an inherent topic within problems of youth, and in that sense reflects the experiences of exclusion on the part of the participants and organizations themselves. Other than this, youth exclusion is also discussed through a reflective approach, trying to understand how and which young people have been included or excluded by the youth organizations.

During the focus groups, responding to the question about the problems of young people in Turkey, one of the participants stated that young people are unable to deal with their own problems because of "being stuck within the chaotic political agenda" of Turkey. He says that:

> In my opinion, the main problem of youth in Turkey is that youth don't have time to see their own problems. [...] For instance, Gezi was practically about a tree, but it wasn't about youth; it was about freedom, not about lack of education or lack of something economic. Our original problem is that we can't get to our own problems. We have to struggle with other problems first.[16]

This quotation very clearly points out young people's feeling of being overwhelmed under the heavy burden of the socio-political problems of the country. It can be argued that nearly all of the participants in the focus group with activists from new social movements share this feeling concerning the socio-political situation in Turkey.

Another participant described how young people are disappointed about the socio-economic conditions that they are living through, and underlined how this disappointment turned into the anger that triggered the Gezi protests:

> For instance, so many people are going to resist [at Gezi Park] after work, why? Because they were brought into life and were promised the world to study I don't know how many years, then went to a college that they didn't want, did things they didn't want, working in horrible conditions in Istanbul which seems only enough to pay your bills, so isn't this a problem of youth? What you have waited for all your life was actually never there, you are falling in the middle of a fairy-tale. This was one of the main reasons for the hate in Gezi.[17]

Even if the political tendencies and organizational structures of the youth organizations participating in the focus groups differ in many ways, the young people in the focus groups pointed out many common themes, their collective grievances, as the problems of youth in Turkey. The most common concern is that they are struggling to survive within a socio-economic structure that leaves young people without support in many areas, that they are

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[16] Focus group 3, Caferağa Solidarity activist.
[17] Focus group 3, Northern Forests Defence activist.

feeling insecure in their present conditions and they are worried about their future. In relation to insecurity, they especially underlined problems in the education system, lack of autonomy, problems of communication and generational conflicts.

This point was raised as a shared concern among the interviewees as well. In accordance, many activists mentioned that the common problem (of youth) is "not having any (youth-specific problems)." Particularly among those who focus on youth intercultural exchanges, not being able to determine a common future because of solely personal or individual careerist goals seemed like a common problem.

A focus group participant underscored the lack of quality in the education system in Turkey, which is incapable of providing young people with real professions. The university education fails to prepare young people for the job market; therefore huge numbers of university graduates in Turkey either join the unemployed, or work in very poor conditions.

> There are 182 universities and 5.5 million university students in Turkey. But it is still a question, what is the percentage of students who will become proficient at work after graduation? University graduation has turned into high school graduation. [...] "I have finished college but I am still unemployed. I have finished college but I still work for minimum wage." These kinds of questions become the main problems of youth.[18]

One of the participants emphasized the lack of autonomy of young people in choosing their areas of study and how they become unhappy as they recognize that their choice, which will directly affect their professional life, was wrong:

> One of the significant problems today is that youth don't recognize their potential and themselves. When they start their university education, they always choose according to their family's direction. In their third and fourth year, they become unhappy people with diplomas.[19]

As we have situated above, the collective grievances of young people differ in their framings and nuances in accordance with the youth organization's political positioning. For example, a participant from a youth group of the Kemalist opposition describes the issue of insecurity and anxiety about the future as a direct result of AKP government's policies. Moreover, he refers to the erosion in Kemalist values as an important factor for the decrease in the quality of education.

> Anxiety about future is very prominent. As it is commonly said, we were born into 12 years of shortness of breath with AKP and we live in it. The lack of quality of education, lack of quality in life standards, lack of job security, and seeing the central politics as the main source of these problems is one of the main problems of youth. In associations like ours, all these reasons become connected. Here we address the concept of anti-imperialism. The reason for this is the decrease in the quality of

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[18] Focus group 1, Turkish Students' Council representative.
[19] Focus group 1, Anatolian youth organization activist.

education, education being shaped by certain norms, erosion in certain values, which we rely on.[20]

A young representative from AKP youth branch underlined the fact that young people do not feel free to express their ideas explicitly because they feel insecure about their place in the job market. Rather, they limit their thoughts and attitudes in order not to do something wrong that can "influence" their career. This quotation depicts how young people adjust and regulate the way they express themselves, in an attempt to secure their future. What is more striking is that even this young participant from the ruling party, who would have been feeling more secure than the others, is under or at least aware of this pressure. He says:

> Young people want to feel safe. When their speech, attitude, behaviours start to be seen as things which can influence their careers, they avoid speaking their mind. So why is this avoidance at very high levels currently? Because, career-wise, no path is offered to the youth. If institutions could lead the way for youth in accordance with their tendencies and education, and if the young person has enough self-confidence, then he or she won't hesitate to be critical about the condition of society, to write about and discuss all this. Young people only want to take the side of what is righteous.[21]

Insecurity and the problems concerning the job market and the education system are beyond any doubt the results of a rapid and continuous change in social, political and economic spheres governed by neoliberal policies. One of the representatives of AKP youth branch emphasized the issue of social change as a process that young people go through with some difficulty, as well as one that they have to govern and lead. Therefore, for this youth organization, young people have a mission for leading the social transformation.

> We have a rapidly changing social structure. […] There is an estrangement between earlier and following generations. Social associations, social processes are not organized with regard to these estrangements. […] Of course, this has an impact on many aspects of the country. It affects the political processes. It affects the working life of people. It affects the education life. […] We have to lead the whole major transformation. […] A simple example is that today we have to live in bigger cities in Turkey. As a result, we have to live a more money-dependent life. On the other hand, the age when people start to make money is increasing due to modernization. […] Changes in the structure of capital, working hours, flexible hours, etc. Youth stands in the middle of a process where many new things come into play. We, the youth, have to experience this transformation. Therefore, instead of an uncertainty, there is a challenge that we face. Life is challenging the individual. Young people feel this at a high level.[22]

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[20] Focus group 2, Youth Union of Turkey representative.
[21] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.
[22] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.

Under-representation was also stated as a problem of young people in Turkey. Representation was discussed in reference to several levels throughout the focus groups, such as the political party, the parliamentary or the larger political sphere. At all levels, lack of representation of young people points to certain examples of youth exclusion. Young people from the youth organizations of the political parties shared their concerns about the difficulty of being able to represent themselves even within their party. A participant from CHP youth branch underlines that young people do not have a strong constitutional legal basis for representation and they are under-represented in many fields in the society. He sees older people's insistence on keeping their positions as one of the main reasons for the lack of representation of young people.

> Representation is a big problem. But everyone wants to represent, not to be represented. Article 58 of the Constitution states concerning youth: "The state has the responsibility to keep [youth] away from gambling, drugs, bad habits." But this has never gone further. In only one article you are addressing the whole youth of a country with a population of 70-something million. You don't give them the right to represent. [...] When you consider a country with parliamentary rule, how many young members do you see? Or how many young people are there in some of the most prominent NGOs, professional associations, industry chambers etc., and in which positions? This is actually because some people who are getting older and also struggling to endure are pushing away the youth.[23]

This was also a theme appearing throughout the interviews. The youth branches of political parties are seen as lacking initiative and power, with limited functions of distributing leaflets and notices and putting up posters before elections. While only partially confirmed by the participants from AKP and CHP youth branches in focus groups, one counter-example to this perception was the initiative HDP gave to youth before the general elections in June 2015. It was stated by many youth interviewees that HDP actually supports youth participation, beyond discourse.

Apart from representation, the interviewees defined "youth activism" as participation in the society, democracy, expressing ideas, active citizenship, sensitivity to public events and agenda, taking part in a collective struggle, having something to say, moving together, rights-based work, trying to create space for self, class struggle, revolt against the system and pursuit of solutions. According to interviewees, when talking about "activism," "youth" or "young people" are recalled instantly, even if the case is not about youth-specific issues, but a diverse range of identity problems coinciding with the youth problem. People who are active with different identities or belongings are considered at the same time as youth activists, and the act of organizing evokes the notion of youth. It is claimed that, as well as Gezi, many demonstrations were organized by youth. Interviewees who are politically active/who are focused on organizations of various movements tend to self-criticize about the quality of activism. They prefer neither momentary street demonstrations nor inaction, but persistence of activism, a holistic and a sustainable culture of activism. But on the other hand, interviewees who focus more on projects try to keep themselves away from politics, and more conservative ones have a different point of view; especially in Kurdish regions of south-

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[23] Focus group 2, CHP youth organization representative.

east Anatolia, youth is perceived to be overly politicized and these participants criticized the fact that youth activism is intertwined with political struggles at large. They claim that there is much less space and opportunity for social and cultural activities than for political ones.

In general, the participants of the youth organizations are aware of the differences within youth such as gender, class, ethnicity, rural-urban origin, etc. However, ways of approaching these social divisions differentiate. In the focus group with pro-government youth groups, the gender dimension was brought forward referring to women's position in organizations mostly as a sub-group who are only capable of communicating suggestions to the main (male) decision-makers circles. In the focus group with youth groups of the Kemalist opposition, gender issues and young women's problems were discussed in a broader sense, and governments' conservative policies deepening gender discrimination were criticized. One of the representatives of CHP's youth organization stated that:

> If we outline the general approach to women in Turkey, we should remember that we live with a prime minister, a president who says, "I don't know if she is a woman, or a girl [virgin]," people who say, "A woman without the veil is like a house without a curtain: it is either for sale or for rent," and a minister of health who says, "Anyone who has been raped should give birth, the state will take care of the child." In this kind of paternalistic, capitalist state reality, of course the condition of women is grave. Although our party tries to do its best about this issue, as youth, we still don't think it is enough. I want the state to actively develop policies that protect, watch over women and enable them to be active participants of production in the country. We covered this issue largely in our own statement. We believe that they should see that the courts are only paving the way for new murderers when they reduce the punishment of murderers who rape women and say, she had a piercing, she was wearing jeans, she looked at me and all.[24]

The young participant from the main opposition party makes a strong statement about the gender issue in Turkey. This depicts that the opposition party and especially the youth branch have concerns about young women's problems, representation and political participation.

The focus group with young activists from new social movements differed in the way gender was discussed. The gender discussion was handled both in terms of being a young woman and also being a young LGBTI individual in a conservative patriarchal and homophobic social structure. A young woman from an Alevi foundation, who is continuing her graduate studies in social sciences, describes her experience of being a young woman in Turkey in the intersection of many social, economic and political factors as such:

> We don't feel young. It is about class, gender. As a girl, and the only granddaughter, I grew up in a very controlling family. We experience a feminist attitude in the Sociology department at college. Then I go home and face something completely opposite. Theory doesn't work in reality. I went to Sweden, there I was coming [home] and going anytime I want. I felt that I was young for the first time in my life. They are individuals, but we can't be individuals, both because of the family and the education

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[24] Focus group 2, CHP youth organization representative.

system. We don't question, we don't stand up to our families. We don't struggle to be individuals. When I came back here, I started to struggle. But here, there is a constant competition, will we find a job, will we always study, the work conditions are not letting you. I started working in the municipality, we are working 24/7, even on Sundays. [...] You don't have experience, they gave you the job just for mercy's sake. If you are young, you have to work, no salary, everything is about experience, so we have to be grateful and ask no more. It is difficult to be young in Turkey. It is very difficult depending on your class too. Everyone experiences youth in a different way.[25]

The generation gap and communication problems, especially with adults, were also highlighted as one of the common concerns of young people throughout the focus groups and interviews. The way that the adults relate to young people, which fails to see them as full and mature individuals (related, but not limited to their organizational involvements as well) was criticized sharply, and indicated as the main source of the problems participants have with older generations. An LGBTI activist describes how young people are restricted within their families; they are seen just as ones who should obey the social rules, nothing more. Moreover, the only way that a young person is accepted as an individual is his/her ability to enter the job market with a good position. He said:

I see a serious age hierarchy in Turkey. We can't break this. None of us can communicate well with our families. Leaving aside our political view, we can't even share our personal lives. Young people work in organizations but all decision-makers are over 50 years old. We constantly try to explain our problems to some uncles with moustaches. It all starts from the family. "Be respectful to elders, don't laugh next to him, don't smoke, don't drink, don't say this, serve well," etc. since a young age. We become activists but still try to solve our problems by serving them. They don't see us as individuals. If you don't graduate, find a job, make 3000 TL [per month], then you are not an individual.[26]

Another participant also emphasized the adult view on young people which frames youth just as a temporary period in one's lifetime, and therefore ignores the thoughts and actions as well as the needs of young people. He stated:

The cause of all our actions is seen as our youth. Youth is regarded as a period of transition. It won't be like this after you get married and have three kids. This has been the same throughout the history of the Republic. As adults are used to this, they also go on with this situation. There is a policy paper for youth, but no law, no code. Only the 8th Article of the Constitution: "We should protect youth from drugs etc." Youth will be deceived to go bad easily, so we should protect them. There is no such view that youth may have needs.[27]

In the focus group with young people from new social movements, the bad connotation of being politically organized, which is quite common throughout the society, is also raised as

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[25] Focus group 3, Activist from an Alevi foundation.
[26] Focus group 3, LGBTI activist.
[27] Focus group 3, Youth Organizations Forum.

a problem that is specifically faced by young people who are organized in unconventional groups. An activist shared how she was treated while distributing brochures on neighbourhood solidarity:

> Sadly the accessibility and visibility of an organization is already a problem as it is perceived in a negative way. When there was this solidarity [meeting] in Yoğurtçu Park, I went there to give out brochures on neighbourhood solidarity. A man said "Don't make me break my fast" to me. [...] When people hear Gezi, Yoğurtçu Park and all, they perceive it as an organization and some people treat those who use these words as aliens or something. This is the reaction. Unfortunately many people perceive us negatively.[28]

According to the interviewees, the government's activities also seek to create a similar kind of "ideal youth." For example, the interviewee from Diyarbakır Youth Centre (a state-run youth centre), in talking about youth participation, spoke only about a youth that practices folk dance and goes on trips; she considers these activities as sufficient participation. Interviewees that are close to the government insist that there is no exclusion. They say that the youth might feel excluded during their transition periods (for example during adolescence), but in reality there is no such thing as exclusion. They say that despite some pressure which is coming from the families, young people start to feel better whenever they participate in social activities like folk dance. According to this view, the reason for feeling excluded is that young people from a lower socio-economic background have difficulties in expressing themselves. They imply that taking the youth to sports and leisure activities is a sufficient means for their reintegration. They indicate that they embrace such youth in the youth centres; thus, the youth feel relieved and become active. These participants point out that there might be exclusion in the economic sphere, but say that the free courses at the youth centres play the role of a sufficient inclusion policy.

During the interviews, participants from dissident groups such as Kurds, Alevites, LGBTI, women, poor people and political minorities not approved by the government reported confrontations with the state and the society as long as they tried to express themselves openly, despite the majority discourse that after the 90s different identities became more apparent and could express themselves, and that civil society is more open to youth participation.

According to the interviewees who were critical of government, state institutions' perception of and approach towards young people involves not only protection of them, but also control and domination of young people. According to the state, the concept of youth has a negative connotation, young people being "ignorant" or "open for abuse and/or manipulation;" the state wants "a dutiful child, a soldier and a worker that doesn't cause any problems." Therefore, even organized young people have to spend extra effort to explain that they are not dangerous. Even the interviewees who are closer to the government criticize the state policies from an economic point of view by indicating that "the state says that it grants money, but this discourse doesn't reflect reality."

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[28] Focus group 3, Activist from an Alevi foundation.

One of the main (and rhetorical) questions asked in the interviews was whether sports (which consumes an overwhelmingly major part of both work and budget) should be separated in the activities of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, to focus on and favour other organized youth activities. The response of interviewees was that despite a positive discourse after the 80s about citizens' organizations, the state is not actually fond of such forms of organization and particularly wants the youth to be apolitical. Interviewees from socialist left organizations claim that the state not only supports its own youth but also attacks the youth it defines as "other." But, while doing so, it awakens the passive crowd; then it comes under counter-attack. Unintentionally, the state provides those it wants to oppress the chance to be on the agenda.

On the other hand, interviewees from more liberal organizations don't see this as the result of an authoritarian and ideological intention, but of an incompetence or simple unwillingness on the part of the state. For example, some projects get permission from ministries, but the local government officer objects and raises difficulties.

The interviewees from the east and southeast of the country, where Kurdish populations are a majority, observe the situation to be radically different from the west, where youth are able to organize more easily (despite a dynamic youth political movement that is incomparably more active than western peers). One of the main issues mentioned in the east is that there is no space for self-expression; they claim that people don't accept each other the way they are. However, common problems remain: age hierarchy, traditionalism in society, definition of an "ideal youth" that obeys the dominant ideology and fulfils what is expected of it, unemployment, economic worries and the questionable support that civil society gets.

The perception of youth exclusion among the representatives of new social movements differed starkly from that of the government in the sense that their perception gives reference to social and economic changes that marginalize young people as well as to disadvantaged groups that are invisible in the government's approach to social exclusion. One of the groups that underlined the exclusionary dynamics that urban regeneration processes create was Caferağa Solidarity. This horizontally organized neighbourhood solidarity group was one of the many solidarity groups established during the Gezi Park protests. A representative from this group stated: "Rents are rising in Istanbul in general, and neither students nor retired persons can live in Kadıköy anymore, and something should be said about this. I live in the same neighbourhood for 20 years and it is also painful to see that everyone is leaving."[29]

As the respondent suggested above, she is concerned about the rising rents in Istanbul in general and in Kadıköy, a district that university students prefer especially due to its central location, good transportation connections with the rest of the city and relatively low rents. However, as part of the urban regeneration processes, rents are increasing rapidly in these neighbourhoods. Our respondent sees this trend as detrimental for the lives of young people, particularly university students.

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[29] Focus group 3, Caferağa Solidarity activist.

The respondent affiliated with Northern Forests Defence included young people's disillusionment with their living conditions in explaining his understanding of social exclusion, in a quote given earlier. As the quote displays, young activists' alternative understanding of social exclusion of young people includes a sense of "wasted youthfulness" and "disillusionment with their current living conditions." In fact, it is important to note that this understanding of social exclusion of young people does not limit such exclusion to those denied access to university education and a job. On the contrary, it even includes the experiences of young people who graduated from university and did get a job. Noting that even these young people are not satisfied with their living conditions due to high living costs and low income as well as the sense of pursuing a life not of their own choice, our respondent underlines how experience of social exclusion may actually not be a minority experience for young people.

Young activists, especially those participating in the focus group for representatives of new social movements, specifically mentioned disadvantaged subgroups within young people, which are invisible in the government's perception of youth. For instance, two young activists declared the following: "I am trying to help the refugees. For instance, due to the prejudice towards Arabs, which has risen in recent times, there are people who are insulting Arabs. I am trying to protect Arabs at those times."[30]

> Because people come to our association [Lambdaistanbul LGBTI Association] with hesitation, and we welcome them cheerfully. "I am feeling like this, am I sick?;" "My parents learned about it and they will kill me, can you help me?" or some people call to say, "I caught my partner in such a situation, what should I do?" We get plenty of weird phone calls and emails, and those people don't know that they aren't wrong or alone. I started [to work] in order to help them.[31]

In the quotes above, both of the young activists mention disadvantaged groups of young people: Syrian refugee youth and LGBTI youth. Both of these groups of young people are largely absent in the government's perception of young people and its understanding of youth exclusion.

Unlike urban issues, family planning and migration (other than Syrian refugees) are mentioned only among reasons for unemployment (even by the representatives of specific organizations on these issues). Although economic problems bring a lack of participation in social, artistic and cultural activities, youth organizations in Turkey rarely conduct activities on these issues.

2.2 Are Youth Movements and Organizations Able to Influence the Mainstream Political Discourse? Are Organized Youth Able to Influence Policy Making?

According to the Turkish Law of Associations, young people can legally join organizations starting from the age of 15 for children's associations, and 18 for all organizations. However, interviewees mentioned that young people either do not prefer to be a member because of the fear of being labelled (even if they participate in activities), or they cannot have much say or impact on organizational decision processes because of hierarchy based on age. Although ability to participate increases with the educational level, a common organizational practice

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[30] Focus group 3, Hevi LGBTI Association activist.
[31] Focus group 3, Lambdaistanbul LGBTI Association activist.

in regard to youth is non-delegation of tasks and authority due to their "lack of experience." Consequently, either not much responsibility is given or some small responsibilities are given just as a display or instrumentalization of youth participation for other purposes. According to interviewees, the youth branches of a political party cannot influence party policy; their role is that of supporter, and policies are determined at the higher levels of the party. In organizations like political parties or trade unions, youth lack the power to cause or trigger a structural transformation. But in small places and in small-scale organizations, their significant participation is much more possible. As a general impression, interviewees think young people are neither able to penetrate mainstream organizations to influence policy or politics, nor have capacity to go beyond these organizations and develop their own initiatives to actively change politics or policies beyond the mainstream.

According to the discussions among focus group participants, not all youth movements and organizations that participated had an alternative political discourse and willingness to influence the mainstream political discourse. The representatives of new social movements (women's rights groups, LGBTI rights groups, minority rights groups, urban movements, etc.) had the most alternative political visions and had the willingness to change the mainstream political discourse according to these visions. Focus group work with the representatives of youth movements and organizations suggests that the ability of youth movements and feminicide organizations to influence the mainstream political discourse is dependent upon their organizational capacity as well as their campaign skills (including their ability to reach out to media and Members of Parliament) – as well as the media response to their campaign.

One of the two notable success stories presented in the field research was claimed by the women's rights movement working on female murders. According to the young feminist activist participant:

> When we started our [advocacy] work, even most of the women's associations were saying "Is there femicide? Only a few." Whereas, at this moment we can say there is femicide and there should be a law against it. The most basic right of women is the right to live, so when we focus on one issue, like sharpening the tip of an arrow, then it becomes more central and result-oriented.[32]

As our respondent stated above, We Will Stop Femicide Platform's campaign on female murders changed the discourse about female murders. While female murders were portrayed as a social problem before the launch of the We Will Stop Femicide campaign, this campaign successfully framed the issue as "femicide," which underlines the systematic murder of women by men and the close link between these murders and the patriarchal social structure. This new frame, introduced by the We Will Stop Femicide Platform, started to articulate the grievances of women from diverse backgrounds into a common discourse.

The representative of an Istanbul-based LGBTI rights group, namely the Social Policies, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association, also brought forward a success story. A young LGBTI rights activist made the following statement:

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[32] Focus group 3, We Will Stop Femicide Platform activist.

> In the new constitution-writing process, we organized a campaign to introduce gender identity and sexual orientation in the antidiscrimination clause. That campaign made quite a lot of noise. It was discussed with the support of CHP and HDP but was not accepted after AKP and MHP objected. It became one of the main issues which blocked the process of new constitution making.[33]

As the quote above suggests, young LGBTI activists were able to make LGBTI rights a current issue in one of the highest level political debates in the country. One should note that different sections of LGBTI rights groups put together this political agenda long before the new constitution-making process that started in 2011, having articulated LGBTI rights demands as a constitutional issue and established contacts with different political parties since the 1990s. The above-mentioned campaign successfully identified the new constitution-making process as a strategic moment to mobilize the LGBTI rights movement's contacts with two opposition political parties and put pressure on these parties not to give away their commitment to LGBTI equality in the new constitution-making process.

More stories of success or failure from all levels of organization were revealed during the interviews as well. An interviewee from a local association (Uçarlı Youth Association) from Diyarbakır reported that this organization started in a small village called Uçarlı and now they have members in 61 different cities. There were also other good examples like an initiative for women-friendly cities, youth parliaments of municipalities, a campaign for the minimum age for being elected to be reduced to 25, the "not late but young" campaign and the "age is no guarantee of wisdom" campaign, among others. There are significant campaigns concerning women, environment and sexuality, mentioned with the reservation that discourses are hard to change. The interviewee from TAPV (Turkish Family and Health Planning Foundation) mentioned that the subject of reproduction and reproductive health had been deliberately removed from the textbooks by the Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Health consultation centres were abolished. Therefore it was said that there is not much gain, in fact there are losses for some issues. LGBTI interviewees gave the then recent example of the "R.Ç." case (of a young gay killed by close family members), whose murder was initially on the news, next there was silence, but then slogans, litigation, campaign, active participation and obstinacy appeared and the case was put forward on the agenda as a "leading case." During the case there were obstacles, molestations, fights and provocation; but the young activists didn't give up and the case was made visible in social media as part of an "I'm a follower of the R.Ç. case" campaign, where artists, academicians and some politicians gave their support. Also, the resistance for the "Hevsel Gardens" in Diyarbakır was carried out mainly by youth activists. In the Gezi protests, again it was the youth who transformed the agenda. The shared perception is that during Gezi, common problems were defined and expressed by a variety of different organizations.

Therefore, the general impression was stated as "when there is resistance, change can happen; but again, it's not the government policies that change, but only the public agenda," or, "in Turkey it is almost impossible to change the mainstream politics." In a state of hegemony, even the political parties, if they are not part of the government, cannot influence policy. Civil society has only a little influence on the oppositional parties, but these are impotent and

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[33] Focus group 3, Social Policies, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Studies Association activist.

inefficient. The interviewee from Eğitim-Sen (a trade union of school and university teachers) said that the government "is not receptive to any feedback, not from the youth, not from anyone. Those who want to raise their voices and raise awareness find themselves face-to-face with the police." Unless the government so decides, some problems never change – no matter how often they appear in the news. Even being part of a decision-making commission or parliament might not change a thing; sometimes even if the law changes, it is not applied in practice. Therefore, it is claimed that for political structure to change, social and public perceptions must change as a prerequisite – but this doesn't seem possible in the short run. On the other hand, polarization and distrust were mentioned as having reached an unprecedented level in society. Left-wing youth organizations cannot propose to right-wing youth organizations "to work together against unemployment," for example. Therefore, it doesn't seem possible to reach common ground, to work together on a common problem, to effect change.

A different perception of youth exclusion among the representatives of new social movements from that of the government shapes their understanding of a fair political system and decision-making structure as well. One of the key issues where this difference manifested itself was the establishment of a national youth council in Turkey. Turkey was among three countries within the Council of Europe where there was no national youth council. Many experienced youth organizations (e.g., Community Volunteers Foundation and Habitat Youth Association) were willing to work with the government in establishing a national youth council. However, the government established an "official" national youth council without collaborating with any of these organizations. In response, youth organizations willing to establish a civilian and autonomous national youth council came together and established the Youth Organizations Forum. The representative of the Youth Organizations Forum explained how their perception of youth exclusion and thus their understanding of a fair youth policy-making structure differ from those of the government:

> Turkey needs a youth council. There have been attempts before, but it has to be civilian, independent, participatory, pluralist, inclusive. A council structure established by the Ministry can't be a national youth council. It can't represent the opinions of young people in Turkey, because the Ministry officer is at the top, he will lead it as "we are paying for you, so you have to do what we want, you can't do anything that we don't agree with." This is not my statement, this is the result of the meetings we had with the coordinator and the expert officer at the Ministry of Youth and Sports. After seeing that this sort of structure won't happen, we started working in 2013. First, of course, lobbying with the Ministry of Sports and Youth, saying it won't work like this, it should be like this, we should do it together or we can do it on our own, or give support, such as cooperative talks and all. Then we had a meeting with the Council of Ministers. It fell to our lot when there were talks about the establishment of a youth council in Turkey. So all organizations, student associations, NGOs with young people with a concern about youth can be part of it. We started building a kind of national youth council that includes all of them. Currently we have 50 different members from civil society, most of them are associations.[34]

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[34] Focus group 3, Youth Organizations Forum activist.

As is seen in the quote above, the single-party AKP government established a government-led national youth council. As a result of the Turkish political system that makes it possible for a single-party government to establish its own hegemony over the whole political system, a government-led national youth council is not expected to be "civilian, independent, participatory, pluralist and inclusive." In response, as the representative from the Youth Organizations Forum suggested, youth organizations that do not have direct links with the governing party started working towards the establishment of an alternative national youth council.

Willingness of organized youth in influencing policy-making differs among different youth organizations. Not all organized youth see their role in politics as an interest group pushing for young people's demands. A statement from the representative of AKP youth branch exemplifies this point:

> This isn't only about collecting demands from the bottom and conveying them to the top. Sometimes we also have to convey the basic policy changes to the bottom. This is two-sided. This is eventually a mass party. In our organization there are Kurds, youth who can choose to be in HDP tomorrow, or in MHP. We have to keep all of them together. As a result, we have to make sure that both groups are addressed when we are explaining a policy.[35]

This quote provides an insight into how this young activist from AKP youth branch perceives the role of the party's youth branch, and accordingly his own role. From his perspective, neither Kurdish youth nor Turkish nationalist youth in AKP youth branch are part of the core group in the youth branch, as they can easily switch sides. His statement implies that there is actually a core group that includes himself, and this group has a special role in keeping different sectors of young people in the youth branch together. In performing this role, this core group of young activists is responsible for conveying the party administration's policies to others. Therefore, it could be argued that this core group of young activists feel more allegiance to the party administration than to other young people in the youth branch.

Respondents from AKP youth branch had considerable awareness of the intersectionality of different identities among the youth. However, this awareness does not seem to provide them with a vision of more participatory and inclusive decision-making mechanism for the youth branch. For instance, one of the respondents from AKP youth branch declared:

> When we talk about youth, we talk about a woman, student, worker, person with disabilities. In fact youth is a special identity which cuts across other social identities, it involves all of them. When we study youth, we can't think of it separately from women studies, disability studies or the struggle for economic rights. What are we doing here as the youth branches? We work through our divisions in all these fields. Our economic affairs division makes projects at the entrepreneurship level and also about career choices of people. There is a coordination centre for disabled people in our party. All issues regarding disabled people are administrated here. Likewise, studies about how women's potential can be revealed in university and working life

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[35] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.

are conducted here.[36]

As it is seen in the quote above, the respondent referred to multiple identities that a young person can have and underlined the heterogeneity of young people. However, his acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of young people does not bring together a political vision of a more participatory and inclusive decision-making mechanism that would facilitate the participation of young women, young people with limited economic resources and young people with disabilities into the youth branch. Alternatively, the respondent portrays these sub-groups of young people as the beneficiary target groups of social support programs that AKP administers. In other words, the respondent's discourse towards young women, young people with limited economic resources and young people with disabilities does not acknowledge them as political agents.

There is one group of young people which almost all respondents from organized youth were silent about: young people who are neither in employment nor in education. Both the respondent from the Youth Union of Turkey (*Türkiye Gençlik Birliği*, TGB) and the respondent from AKP youth organization argued below that this group is invisible in their organizations: "As TGB, we can't organize youth who are neither working nor studying, because we are all university students. There are a few people who aren't university students. Our relationship with them is only through representing their problems."[37] "Currently, we can't see these groups [either in education or in employment] that much. But especially one month before the elections, people leave work and school for a month or two and carry on only political work."[38]

Both sections of organized youth acknowledged the fact that young people who are neither in employment nor in education are invisible in the political debate. In fact, with the one exception of the Life in May Cooperative based in working-class neighbourhoods of Istanbul, all respondents from organized youth shared the view that this group of young people is totally absent in their youth organizations. This population, as the Youth Union of Turkey representative argued, is portrayed as a group to be "represented" or – as the respondent from AKP youth organization suggested – appears during election campaigns and does the manual campaigning work.

The ability of organized youth to influence policy making depends on the availability of institutional mechanisms through which they can do so. In Turkey's political structure, these institutional mechanisms for young people are quite limited (as confirmed by most of the interviewees as well). One such rare institutional mechanism through which organized youth can deliver their messages to the administration is the Turkish Students' Council. This is the highest student council, composed of student representatives elected democratically from all universities in Turkey, despite candidacy restrictions that have resulted in the election of government-inclined candidates as a majority. One respondent who was part of the executive board of the Turkish Students' Council suggested the following:

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[36] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.
[37] Focus group 2, Youth Union of Turkey representative.
[38] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.

> Regarding the problem with [removal of the right to] make-up examinations, we managed to convince the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) with an effective communication strategy. Same thing with the university fees. For example, student documents were given with a payment before, now they are accessible for free on the Internet. This is the result of a process. Your strength here is the power of representation, which is evaluated based on how familiar you are with the field, and how you reflect your work. Until now, all demands were expressed with street protests, shouting out slogans and as a result, decision makers gave a negative reaction to these demands. However, I believe that it would be easier to solve the problems of youth by forming appropriate environments.[39]

In this case, the Turkish Students' Council was able to make changes in the higher education system mainly to the benefit of the university students (i.e., the elimination of university fees for public universities and the recognition of university students' right to re-sit exams in all universities). However, it should be noted that there are at least two reasons why this example cannot be generalized for other organised youth. First, the Turkish Students' Council is a state-organized representation mechanism that excludes other more participatory and inclusionary forms of democratic engagement; as a result many organized youth groups do not find it politically legitimate to take part. In addition, the current members of the executive board have been sympathetic to the governing party, which increases the leverage of the Council vis-à-vis the policy makers. Secondly, as the above statement by the representative of the Turkish Students' Council implies, their discourse has been reconciliatory and openly confronts other forms of advocacy including street protests, which are largely used by organized youth on the left side of the political spectrum.

Similarly, a respondent from AKP youth branch stated that they feel influential vis-à-vis their party's policies as well as government policies. He declared:

> First of all, the president of our youth section is the vice president of the party and member of the Central Executive Commission. Hence, he is one of the main actors in every administrative mechanism. For this reason, he is in a position which can make policies and closely observe the current policies. In this context, we see that most of the decisions we take in cities are put into action. If you ask for a concrete example, youth had a significant impact at the time when military service by payment was on the agenda. Or when elimination of the university fees was being discussed, youth had a major impact.[40]

As is seen in the quote above, AKP youth branch is represented by their head in the main executive commission of the party. It could be argued that the hierarchical organization of the party finds its echo among its youth branch. Some policy issues that the respondent from AKP youth branch thought they were influential in are same ones that the Turkish Students' Council representative mentioned. However, the respondent from AKP youth branch did not mention any policy issues that caused a controversy between the youth branch and the main administration of the party.

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[39] Focus group 1, Turkish Students' Council representative.
[40] Focus group 1, AKP youth organization representative.

Respondents from CHP youth branch framed their relationship with the party administration in a different way compared to AKP youth branch. A respondent from CHP youth branch explained their relationship with the party administration by referring to a controversial issue:

> For instance, our party also makes mistakes. There was this incident when subcontractors were laid off from [one] municipality [under the same party's rule]. After the contract with the subcontractor company was over, the workers were dismissed. At that time, the meetings between the mayor and the worker representatives were still going on. If it was another party, it wouldn't have criticized its own municipality, but from the cognizance we have from our history, just like the time when the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) was in power and we brought the Istanbul Water and Sewerage Administration (ISKI) corruption case and our own mayors to the court, we wanted to remind people that we are a party which aims to protect the rights of the workers in that municipality, and said we should protect the rights of the workers until the end. We stood against the municipality there. This was a great example which showed that the youth branches of CHP can stand against even the main party level when it is necessary.[41]

As the case above suggests, CHP youth branch underlines the fact that they do not hold back from clashing with those people in power in their own party, especially if they find the party's decision under scrutiny is not in accordance with its political principles. In this regard, it is important to note that the respondent refers to social democratic principles in challenging the decision of the municipality.

Although organized youth that does not have links with the governing party can hardly influence policies of the government, some of our participants explained that they can make an impact on university policies if they are well organized in a particular university. For instance, as a respondent from the Youth Union of Turkey explained:

> Except that, more locally, the Bologna process in universities is going on.[42] The Rectorate is taking a step back after the demonstration we held. Also in Çapa Medical Faculty of Istanbul University, there is talk of moving the school, we are showing a common platform, and now demands coming from the platform are being recognized and they are taking a step back. The Bologna process took place in Sakarya University, there they also took a step back. There was a problem with the cafeteria at Istanbul University, a cafeteria was built following our insistence. We had more [positive] results in this kind of local politics.[43]

As the respondent suggested above, the ability of the Youth Union of Turkey to influence policy-making increases in local contexts where they are better organized and more visible. Without doubt, the issues that they can influence in the local context does not constitute

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[41] Focus group 2, CHP youth organization representative.
[42] The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications.
[43] Focus group 2, Youth Union of Turkey representative.

high-level political issues influencing young people (specifically university students in this context), and these issues do not lie at the centre of their political causes.

Similar to the case of organized youth within the Kemalist movement, the ability of organized youth in new social movements to influence policy-making is also quite limited. One of our respondents from the Northern Forests Defence suggested the following:

> We have almost no influence on the construction of the Third Bridge on the Bosporus, the Third airport and Kanal Istanbul projects. All court appeals rebounded, including ones by Chambers. [...] Other than that, it is like an ant is shouting at me. But we can have an influence on Sarıyer Municipality because we have a direct relationship with its voters. For instance, there will be money coming to the Municipality through the Fatih Forest issue. "So will you sign it? So? You won't do it, right?" And what you get is silence. [...] Here, our influence is shaped by how strong the other side is. We couldn't do anything about [a certain luxury housing] project and the constructor poured down the cement in the forest.[44]

Northern Forests Defence organizes to protect the ecological balance of Istanbul. Therefore, one of their main political causes is to stop gigantic construction projects that will harm Istanbul's ecological balance, including but not limited to the construction of the Third Bridge on the Bosporus and Kanal Istanbul. The limited ability of Northern Forests Defence, as the respondent stated above, is due to the power imbalance between this youth organization and the government. However, as the respondent underlined, they might be effective in realizing their political cause at the local level vis-à-vis the municipal administrations, depending on the importance of the project under consideration and the ability of Northern Forests Defence to draw the public attention to the project's possible harmful effects on people's livelihood.

During the interviews, interviewees particularly mentioned the Kurdish political movement as a good example of youth inclusion in the movement; even though there is a patriarchal culture in the area, youth are encouraged to take initiative. In the party, others listen to young people and encourage them to take the lead. The fact that youth are becoming nominees for parliament shows that young people are influential not only in discourse, but also in practice. Also interviewees say that thanks to HDP, the groups who have problems with the state unite; and different oppressed groups and youth can create transformation together. Nowadays, it is said that Kurdish youth are the most aware and organized youth population. Unfortunately, they often and systematically find themselves in situations of violence due to oppression and lack of space and medium for self-expression; whenever they initiate peaceful protests, they find the police and its violence in front of them. Still, expressions of other identities can be problematic for Kurdish youth. It is hard for a Kurdish gay to express himself, even though they constitute a part of the political movement through their own organizations.

Other best practices of youth involvement were cited as the Community Volunteers Foundation (TOG), by its participatory networking and empowerment approach, and the "Vote and Beyond" initiative, which appeared as a citizens' monitoring system for elections and was successful in involving, mobilizing and training tens of thousands of volunteers in a very short

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[44] Focus group 3, Northern Forests Defence activist.

period. Both of these examples demonstrate best practices of youth being encouraged to take action by themselves via establishment of an enabling system.

Other interviewees from well-established NGOs indicated that they give consultancy on policy processes by writing reports and providing recommendations on what the state's role or policies should be on many issues and occasions. Unfortunately, they admit that they are not taken seriously and they remain impotent and inefficient. The state either doesn't use the reports or, in the cases where they are used, names of NGOs are not referred to and the views are claimed as belonging to the state or government officials.

On the question of when some organizations or movements become "oppositional" and how class, gender and rural/urban location affect the inclination of a youth movement to be or become more radical and oppositional, almost all the interviewees say that the state's practices of discriminating against and ignoring them act as the main causes. Politically more active and left-inclined interviewees especially point out that organizing or active participation in the public life and civil society are already perceived as acts of opposition. According to them, civil society has to be oppositional because the agenda has to be about "change," to transform the existing power structures. In a conservative medium where there is no opportunity for this transformation process, radicalization appears as a choice, and formal participation processes are questioned. In the words of an urban movement activist, "for example, radicalization doesn't begin because the transportation is not free; it begins if people cannot do anything about it being not free," or when people cannot take any action, despite the democratic participation discourses. While oppressive approaches of the state gain more ground, activist groups from oppositional or discriminated-against positions tend to develop resistance practices. If certain state officials say that LGBTI individuals must be cured, or if children from Alevite families are forced to attend compulsory religion courses (with dominant Sunnite content) in school, if Kurdish groups cannot express themselves and are labelled as marginals, then the result is anger. The state itself pushes some groups towards marginalization and radicalization. What has happened in Gezi might also be understood from this point of view, as an outburst of anger from a diverse and sometimes conflicting group of political inclinations and identities, mostly young and almost all oppressed and humiliated by governmental discourse. Although it was an attempt on the part of these groups to express their protest towards the state and society, police brutality left no space for democratic communication in public space.

Radicalization doesn't have to come after actual events, it can emerge from an ongoing state of oppression and humiliation as well. An interviewee from the Kurdish region gave the example of a man [sic] who witnesses his village burned by soldiers when he was seven, who meets several unjust and exclusionary treatments throughout his life because of his family's ethnic origin, and who finds himself in a radical stance in the opposition. Interviewees who are from more "revolutionist" groups (or at least who are closer to the left) emphasize that in order to get the serious attention of decision makers, youth organizations and movements feel the urge to go out in the streets. But such attempts usually find themselves against the police, and if they resist, the police get violent. This process continues as a vicious circle as they can only get the attention of the mainstream by violence.

Interviewees point out that from time to time they compel the media to make real news; in these cases, social media play an important role. Social media is used to pull attention to some subjects, to raise a bit of awareness and even to transform the media's agenda, but again interviewees indicate that this is almost useless when it comes to changing policies. Some criticisms and self-criticism are mentioned as well. They criticize the quality and method of social media use; they mention that it is a bottomless pit, that there is too much information, that there are not many qualified users, that there exist many sites that are not being used. Especially those who focus on international exchange (and those who are already familiar with social media) claim that the ones reached by social media are not the big masses. They are the ones who already have a level of awareness, who are already in the civil society's social network, or one's own social environment. Nevertheless, most of the interviewees did report that there is active and effective social media use, an opportunity which didn't exist until recent times. Nowadays, especially triggered by the distrust towards conventional and mainstream media, social media has become one of the main sources of getting information. Youth organize through social media and use it as a leverage tool to bring local issues into the national agenda, and national into international. Social media activism and street activism are intertwined and complementary – one of the main factors that made the Gezi protests possible. Social media has become a part of the public sphere, also influencing the mainstream media, radio and television. The interviewee from HDP said that during the "peace process" between the Turkish state and the PKK, social media made a positive contribution towards youth in the west and east understanding each other.

Finally, when asked how they feel about the future, the interviewees' responses were very pessimistic, but also with a little bit of hope. They expressed emotions such as sadness, being stuck, insecurity, unhappiness, being on a knife's edge, being under threat, anger, hate, hopelessness, loneliness, being in captivity, worried, anxious and numb. They wish that people were not killed, and that corporate structures and people in power would be shown to be responsible. On the other hand, they self-criticize in positive and negative ways. Some good studies that are done, good examples, the presence of contenders and the changes that have happened in the last 30 years still give people hope for change. Therefore the motivation to do something, the urge to struggle or fight, the tendency to organize and to pose the question "how it can get better?" is sustained. When asked how social movements can be ultimately successful, the need to be solution-oriented is underlined.

3. CRITICAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The history of youth organizing in Turkey until the 1980 coup has been characterized by over-politicization and (violent) conflict between rival groups as well as state oppression, which was terminated by the crash of virtually all forms of organization under the military regime. It was only towards the end of that decade that a developing field of alternative, mainstream and issue-specific forms of organization began to spring up. Since that time, channels of organizing for youth gradually widened until the end of first decade of the 21st century, by liberalization of laws, internationalization, involvement of global and particularly European actors and funding mechanisms and finally development of information and communication technologies and social media as new tools for mobilization and public space (Nemutlu 2008). Therefore, according to the field research conducted within this study,

the organizational field of youth at the moment is characterized by a narrowing down, with polarization on the grounds of political inclination, and subsequent pessimism for the first time since the 1980s. Even before violent conflict between state and Kurdish rebels resumed in July 2015, polarization had forced us to organize focus groups according to politics, in order to conduct a meaningful dialogue. Following the suicide bomb on 20 July in Suruç, violence, state oppression and narrowing of rights of expression and association quickly gained pace, causing many difficulties for us to conduct a healthy field study even when we were successful in finding participants from any political inclination. Things became only more tense after we completed the field work in August, when a "repeated" general election on 1 November resulted in a single-party majority and a four-party parliament, despite sieges on Kurdish towns, with more than a thousand people killed in the conflict and other suicide attacks by ISIS during the campaign. Government raids against Kurdish towns still continue, causing many civilian deaths as well as prosecution of journalists, academics and activists objecting against this policy and criticizing the rise of authoritarianism under the hand of president. Therefore, results from our field study can only be said to cover the narrow period of time between June-August 2015, and most probably the situation has changed (but not towards a more hopeful direction) even such a short time later.[45]

Keeping this point in mind, the results of our field study show a minimal impact by youth organizations despite a period of empowerment and diversification. Using more conventional forms like political parties or other mainstream formal organizations, young people are not able to penetrate into the adult/elder hegemony on decision making, although degree and forms of participation varied. Youth-led groups are either registered (mostly as "softer" forms like clubs) and host mainstream activities including intercultural exchanges within the European Union Youth in Action programme, but with lower capacity to extend their impact beyond their immediate participants, or are unregistered, informal, temporary and activist-based protest organizations. Youth-related groups, on the other hand, are usually registered associations or foundations, with varying levels of capacity, sometimes with professional staff, and limited participation of young people in decision making. In order to achieve concrete results, youth participation has to remain within close circles of government and/or relevant levels of administration (mayor, rector, board of the party), through representative channels, and not challenging power structures or bringing up controversial issues. Other forms of participation can only have a general impact on public agenda and on a discursive level.

However, another trend since 2008 has been diversification and mobilization of social movement type organizing among youth, leading up to the Gezi protests and spreading afterwards, with a violent reaction from the governmental side attempting to criminalize such dissent. By retreat to a policy of violent conflict, from one of dialogue and ceasefire with the PKK, not only have new victims and internally displaced persons from Kurdish towns appeared on a massive scale, but also a rupture among Kurdish youth from civic engagement can be expected; the civil movement for peace and a legal party representing the Kurdish

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[45] At the time of editing this paper, Turkey has fallen into even more turmoil and authoritarianism with a failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016, the subsequent declaration of a state of emergency and the suspension of the European Convention on Human Rights, resulting in vast violations of fundamental human rights. A memorandum on the implications of these actions can be found in a recent report by the Council of Europe Commissioner on Human Rights. See Muižniek (2016).

population has been losing ground against both state and PKK since the resumption of violent conflict.

Another determining factor for the youth organizational field could be the massive inflow of Syrian refugees for the near future. By recent agreement between Turkey and EU, efforts to keep refugees within Turkey are expected to be strengthened together with more funding received to aid and serve refugees, of which a major part will be conducted through local or international NGOs. Not only can increased activities towards refugee youth and new rights-based youth organizations for or by refugees be foreseen, but also the professional feature of these sorts of activities could lead to career shifts for experienced young NGO professionals, from advocacy to service. New reactionary movements can also be expected as settling refugees become more visible in society.

Finally, by the deepening of wider political tension and social polarization, youth-specific issues might be postponed further into the future, as there are always more urgent agendas, and fractures between youth groups from different political inclinations may be widened. In any case, judged by the rising pessimism, more and more young people might have an eye on immigration rather than critically engaging in organizations and participating for change. Further research at the micro level could highlight the trend among young people as individuals.

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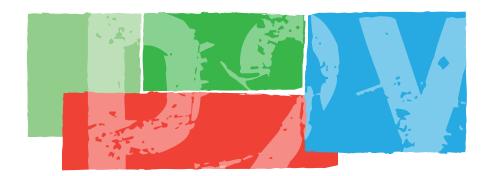
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POWER2YOUTH is a research project aimed at offering a critical understanding of youth in the South East Mediterranean (SEM) region through a comprehensive interdisciplinary, multi-level and gender sensitive approach. By combining the economic, political and socio-cultural spheres and a macro (policy/institutional), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) level analysis, POWER2YOUTH explores the root causes and complex dynamics of the processes of youth exclusion and inclusion in the labour market and civic/political life, while investigating the potentially transformative effect of youth collective and individual agency. The project has a cross-national comparative design with the case studies of Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territories and Turkey. POWER2YOUTH's participants are 13 research and academic institutions based in the EU member states, Norway, Switzerland and South East Mediterranean (SEM) countries. The project is mainly funded under the European Union's 7th Framework Programme.