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Perceptions and Attitudes of Turkish Youth Studying at Hungarian Universities – A Quantitative and Qualitative Approach

Abdulkerim YAVUZASLAN[1]*

Abstract

In recent years, one could observe a visible increase in the number of Turkish nationals studying in Hungary both on the basis of short-term (one semester) or long-term scholarship programs. Contrarily to the 1990's and early 2000's when Turks have opted for Hungary as they were unable to enter Turkish higher education institutions due to a discriminatory entrance policy in vigor in Turkey, nowadays, they tend to choose the Central European nation for various other reasons. The main goal of our present paper is to discover some of the motivations Turkish students might have and to describe an average Turkish student pursuing his or her studies in Hungary in terms of interest, education strategy and orientation for future career, and of course, the possibilities of research provided by Hungarian actors of the field. Our preconception is that the major issues to deal with while examining the Turkish youth learning in Hungary are that the country is located both physically and culturally closer to Turkey than many other European nations; most Turks strongly believe in the common origin of Turks and Hungarians and develop an interest in the shared past of the two ethnic groups; Hungary provides a high quality higher education in a variety of foreign languages and a European experience for a reasonable price; and finally, the Hungarian government offers a state scholarship for the Turks since 2014. Turkish students studying in Hungary constitute an important bridge between the two countries linked by common values and history and can refresh the developing relationship of Ankara and Budapest.

Keywords: Education, Study Abroad, Hungary, Turkey.

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1. Introduction

Though Hungary and Turkey have long historical and cultural ties and an increasingly flourishing diplomatic and economic relationship, the presence of Turkish students at Hungarian higher educational institutions was not visible until very recent years. Turkish youth started to pop up around the beginning of the 1990's, the time when the social, political and economic reality of Hungary was changing from a more closed society to a rather open one, from socialism to democracy, and from a communist economic system based on central clarification to a free market economy.

The same period in Turkey can be characterized as a time of social, political and economic turmoil, the starting point of a decade-long decline and crisis. After the 1982 military coup, the Middle Eastern nation has been pacified and a stabilised, but the ever-shifting political coalition seemed to be unable to coop with the marginalization of certain social strata, the growing inflation and unemployment rate and the returning wish of the military to intervene in the political scene. This era was also difficult for a number of people graduating from a certain type of secondary schools, namely the *imam-hatip*. These religious-oriented vocational schools were training both females and males for Islamic religious services, the ones finishing them were discriminated against as they have got lesser points and lower chances to get to Turkish universities. Girls wearing the Islamic headgear known as hijab were also banned from these higher educational institutes and –if they wanted to pursue their studies- were forced to study abroad. Most of them went to Western Europe, but some of them ended up with help religious communities and their scholarships in Hungary.

The attitude of the Turkish government towards to imam-hatips and the religious youth has been modified as in 2002 the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power. As the purpose of this important human capital flight was not valid anymore, this category started to disappear from the Hungarian universities. The new generation of Turkish students made its entry around the end of the 2000's and the beginning of the 2010's as they became eligible for Erasmus and Erasmus+ programs and with the introduction of the scholarships offered by the Hungarian government.

In all historical situations factors are determining the choices of future students abroad. "These include push factors such as political instability and pull factors such as a higher income level abroad and a more ordered and organized life in the host country. Among the pull factors, family considerations, followed by high-income levels in the host country

and a more ordered lifestyle abroad, in order of importance, all tend to weaken return intentions." [1]

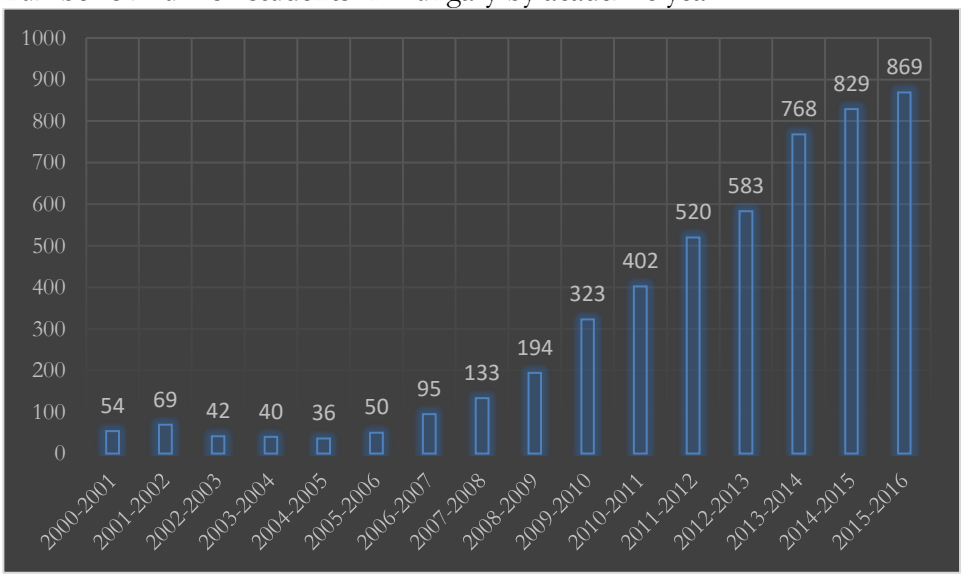
2. Problem Statement

As we have already mentioned in the introduction, historically speaking we can deal with two distinct waves of Turkish students pursuing their studies in Hungary. The first group of individuals started to appear at universities mainly in the cities of Budapest and Szeged around the first half of the 1990's and during the coming decade. Most of these young people have finished the so called imam-hatip vocational secondary schools. Imam is an Islamic prayer leader, whereas hatip is the person who gives Islamic religious sermons. The first schools of this sort have been established during the last years of the Ottoman Empire in 1913 under the name Medresetul Eimmti vel Hutaba. [2] The first modern imam-hatips came into existence in 1924 in 29 different larger urban centers, soon after the proclamation of the republic by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.[2] These institutions were recognized as ones having similar rights to ordinary secondary schools known as *lise* in Turkey in 1973. The influx of former imam-hatip students shows an increase after 1997 when following a military intervention into Turkish politics often termed as a postmodern coup, imam-hatips were not allowed anymore to continue their studies at the university level. In Turkey, a student willing to study at a selected university has to have a certain number of points. Former imam-hatips saw at that time their points reduced by 60% due to the new regulation of the relevant governmental authorities of YÖK and ÖSYM.[3] This discrimination has been lifted much later, in 2012.[4]

The vast majority of these young people opted for Western Europe as there were already well established Turkish-speaking communities. In the Austrian capital, Vienna, former imam-hatips have even realized an interesting community center called Wonder, a facility in which one can find a student hostel, a cultural and educational center, a community radio and a busy tea shop where Turks –not necessarily all of them are former imam-hatips- living in Vienna used to gather and socialize. [5]As they are trained for taking care of the spiritual needs of the practicing Muslims, former imam-hatip students tend to be active community member and contribute to the establishment of local civil society organizations. These NGO's are to be found in the West, but we can also find a very operating example in Hungary, too. Mr. Ahmet Bariscil, graduated from the Gemlik Imam-Hatip School relates in an interview how he could -besides his studies of

communication- bring together people of different faiths and convictions to promote Turkish and Oriental cultures.[6]

Though even after the formation of the first AKP governments, former imam-hatips still had a hard time to enroll Turkish universities, they ceased to come to Hungary. The end of the 2000's and the beginning of the 2010's meant the arrival of the second wave of Turkish students to Hungary. This time their prime target was not only the prestigious universities of Budapest and Szeged as in the past, but they also appeared among the pupils in Miskolc, Debrecen, Gödöllő and Pécs. Two category of them could be differentiated. On one hand, there were the ones who came on short-term programs such as Erasmus or Erasmus+, they formed the majority of the students, on the other –especially after 2014- more dedicated Turkish students started to profit of the offer of the Hungarian government. The turning point was probably the academic year of 2006/2007 when the total number of Turkish youth studying in Hungary almost doubled from 50 persons to 95 according to the statistics given by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH). After that year, an evident increase is visible. Today, almost nine times as much Turkish students study in Hungary as ten years ago. According to the numbers provided by KSH, 869 Turkish students were registered different higher education programs in the country during the academic year of 2015/2016. The following table summarizes the number of Turkish students in Hungary by academic year



Source: HCSO, www.ksh.hu, Case number: 20170214-31581

Figure 1: Number of Turkish Student in Tertiary Education in Hungary

3. Aims of the Research

The goal of our present paper is to analyze the attitudes and motivations, push and pull factors of this second wave of Turkish students in Hungary as opposed to the members of the first one.

4. Research Method

This paper would be based our academic work of both statistics obtained on a special request for our current study from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) and confessions of Turkish student we have been encountered during our stay in Hungary. So, our method is a combination of data, authentic documents of the relevant authorities and practical experience with the ones who constitute the very subject of our study. Our results show that Hungary features a number of advantages compared to Western Europe, and our main presupposition is that -if Hungary is still willing to attract Turkish students. Budapest has to put an emphasis to ameliorate these features and properly communicate them to possible candidates now residing in Turkey as there are still stipend not utilized by the Turkish students.

5. Findings

There are some attitudes and motivations of the above described two generations of Turkish students studying in Hungary, but befeor we have to stress that with the increase in number of the persons concerned, the attitudes and motivations tend to vary. We have also to add that whereas the first wave was constituted of some kind of "refugees" of a discriminatory system, they rather fled from a place, the members of the second wave were are not "persecuted" in their own country, they want to have an intriguing academic experience abroad and they intentionally choose Hungary.

To understand the simple motivation of the first generation, it is sufficient to refer to the above-quoted interview with Mr. Bariscil. Mr. Bariscil finished his studies in 1999 at the imam-hatip school of Gemlik, a small port town on the Marmara Sea in Western Turkey famed for its olive oil. The year after, in 2000 he has decided to run for a private scholarship to study communication offered especially for former imam-hatip students. His decision was mainly motivated by a friend already fixed in Hungary telling wonders of the Central European country. This explanation clearly shows

how personal contacts and a personal description of a foreign place could influence a young Turk at that time. There was not a national propaganda to promote Hungary or an agency in Turkey to orientate former imam-hatips. Though Hungary was a solution for the problems of the discrimination-hit young student, ha confesses to move to Hungary with a certain unease as he originally wanted to stay in his home country and never planned to study in another place. Mr. Bariscil tells his interviewer that after arriving in Hungary he understood that his studies in communication can be a good tool to serve local people. [6] This means that he has changed his mind, his motivation, after spending a few years in Hungary, he could not be considered a shipwrecked of an unjust system, but a young and motivated intellectual turned to his environment.

To understand the attitudes and the motivations of the first generation, we used an interview published in Turkish language, it describes an individual struggle but can be said to be typical for the very limited group of people who arrived to Hungary around 2000. The second wave of students is more numerous and diverse, therefore we do not base ourselves on a single source, but we will try to present the multifarious nature of their demeanour.

After getting in contact with actual Turkish students studying in Hungary, we came to the conclusion that there are six main reasons behind their choice. The first element here is related to the Turkish educational system itself. Though the Turkish educational system is constantly reformed, State universities in Turkey have been free since 2012 and there are at least one university in every province of Turkey. [7] However it is still competitive, there is no more discrimination as far as the entrance requirements are concerned, but one still has to wait for the total democratization of the Turkish higher education. Foreign countries and studying abroad gives a chance to a Turk to learn what he or she wants. Another aspect of the same issue is that in Turkey there still entrance exams to the universities as they were normal in Hungary prior to 2005. These dog-eat-dog style examinations deter a segment of the Turkish students from remaining home and they prefer to go abroad very entry conditions are different.

The above-mentioned first motivation explains why some of the Turks leave Turkey, but cannot be used as an argument for Hungary. The second point is more specific. Turks opt for Hungary as it is physically close to Turkey or at least closer than Austria or Germany where there even larger Turkish speaking student populations. Budapest can be reached by airplane in two hours from Istanbul, plane tickets are not expensive and even if somebody drives, can arrive to Budapest within a day or so. The physical

closeness gives also the impression that if the "adventure" turns bad, the student can easily get back to Turkey. Turkish student studying in Hungary often invite their friends and relatives, due to the distance and the related prices, this can be done on a budget.

The third argument usually quoted by Turkish student in Hungary is also linked to closeness, but this time they do not mean it physically but socially and culturally. Turks in general do believe that the origins of both the Turks and the Hungarians lay somewhere in Central Asia, they both speak a variant of the old Turkic tongue and share a rich and eventful history. Though some Hungarian academics would disagree with these assessments, this is an important and genuine motivation for many Turks to visit Hungary. This element of the motivation is crucial as it might contribute to the better integration of a Turk into the Hungarian society as he or she will always feel something in common with the local population. The fact that indeed many Hungarians feel the same way constitutes a social frame providing a certain security for the young Turks. We would say that generally a Turk trusts more a Hungarian than an average other European.

The second and the third arguments were related to the country of Hungary in general, but the fourth one is more connected to the system of education. According to the Turkish students, Hungary offers a wide variety of careers and subject in various foreign languages. It is also possible to have special introductory courses into the idiom of the subject on the given foreign language. This is an issue as in Turkey, the level of the education of foreign languages is unfortunately very low, over-crowed classes are thought by incompetent teachers themselves lacking the relevant skills. One of the main reasons of failure of Turkish students abroad is indeed their retard in terms of knowledge of foreign languages. The Turkish government is aware of this lamentable situation, therefore sends Turkish students abroad in masse to language courses. If we take those who profit of Turkish government scholarships abroad in 2012, the sole purpose of 18.9% of them is to perfection their language skills. [8]

According to the Turkish students –and this is their fifth argument- Hungary gives a perfect and affordable possibility to get to know Europe and the European Union, and more specifically the higher education on that continent. The students who underline the importance of this argument also confess that they have further plans with Europe. The majority of them wishes to carry on with postgraduate trainings or wish to work in Europe, few times in Hungary. This means that of their part Hungary was a well-premeditated choice with long term target ahead. Related to this point, it is also good to know that contemporary studies show that after having a European experience, the returning students in Turkey are more useful for

their personal and academic environment than the ones who remained in the country. [9] On the other hand, In the globalized world, employees will be asked to communicate better with people from different backgrounds and cultures. [10] In this context, higher education of Turkish students in Hungary may provide a positive transformation in terms of their careers.

The fifth argument is already partially based on a material issue. The financial background of studying abroad is clearly important. Most Turks on their own cannot afford a several years long study in the West. This is why the Turkish students studying in Hungary value the program called Stipendium Hungaricum proposed by the Hungarian government. In Stipendium Hungaricum, Turkish students are eligible for both full time and partial study programs. The latter one is great privilege as only 18 different nations are included. Turkish students are offered a total of 150 scholarships. [11] This contingent includes 50 undergraduates, 50 postgraduate, 30 doctoral and 20 partial study students. To our best knowledge, some of these places are vacant even though these scholarships cover all expenditures like tuition fee, accommodation and social security, and gives the students a monthly 40-140.000 HUF pocket money according to the level of education. [12]

6. Conclusions

We think that there solid arguments to support the opinion that it is worthy to study in Hungary, but the two respective governments must better advertise this option.

The cooperation in the field of education between Turkey and Hungary goes back to a contract signed in Ankara on the 5th June, 1989. [13] This agreement has been reviewed and renewed several times since that date. The latest diplomatic document underlining the importance of friendship and cooperation in the Turkish-Hungarian relationships was decreed by the Hungarian government on the 9th April, 2015.[14] The Article n. 12 of this accord states that the two governments encourage the cooperation between the higher education institutions and the research centers of the two countries and the establishment of common research programs based on European principles.

Having said so, one cannot deny that these wonderful ideas must put into practice. we are of the opinion that an action plan-oriented common work group designated by the respective governments can put together a special brochure and a web page to draw the attention of possible candidates to the scholarship program of Stipendium Hungaricum. To promote Hungary

the right way, we think that we have to include the six arguments pushed by the Turkish students and detailed in our present paper. We are fully convinced that the Hungarian infrastructure is ready to deal with more Turkish students and in Anatolia, there is the willingness to come to study in Hungary.

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