

**Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation: Turkish
focus group findings**

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Abstract

This paper presents the main findings of the 12 focus groups conducted between April 2010 and June 2010 as part of the PIDOP (Process Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation) Project in Turkey. The study, conducted by the Ankara University team as one of the partners of the Project, included 80 young people (16-18 years olds and 20-26 years olds) from three sub-groups: The majority (Turks), Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria and the Roma. The purpose of this study is to compare the preliminary findings of these subgroups in terms of participants' understanding of citizenship; participants' perceptions about young people's participation; sources of information and knowledge; personal and group experiences; proposals to promote inclusion and (civic and political) participation. It is observed that participants have little or no perceptions and ideas about the European dimension of civic and political participation, regardless of their migrant/minority statuses, ages and sexes. Unemployment and poverty have emerged as the most prominent issues, a major impediment for the male Roma participants' civic and political engagement, involvement and participation while no important gender difference was noted among the majority and the Bulgarian migrants groups. For almost all participants, regardless of categories, the most important sources of influence appear to be family members (especially the father) and friends. Family elders are also frequently mentioned. Alongside nationality and rights and obligations, participants (especially Romas, but also other groups) tend to refer to social inequalities and income levels in relation to citizenship. Although participants generally think that civic and political participation is important for

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being a member of society, they personally have no or limited participation. The other 16-18 male participants (except from the Roma) seem to be the most engaged.

1. Introduction

The concept of democratic ownership and participation gained extensive attention recently, among political scientists, psychologists and sociologists, working at national or cross-national level. In this respect many studies that focused on civic engagement, citizenship, political and social participation, community involvement, social service, non-governmental organizations have been carried out up to date.

With the changes in social life and the tenor of national politics, public interest groups have proliferated, not only groups advocating the rights of the formerly marginalized, but also groups speaking for broad causes such as environmentalism, human rights and other understandings of what is ‘good’ for society as a whole (Berry, 1997:29-34). Civil society, the network of ties and groups through which people connect to one another and get drawn into community and political affairs, may simply be ‘reinventing’ itself (Dionne, 1998).

On the other hand, recent researches showed people are participating less in many kinds of social and political spheres – unions, political parties, voluntary organizations, and voting rates are dropping (IEA Civic Education Study, 1999). Although the levels of social and political participation show variety according to nation and the life context (Skocpol ve Fiorina, 1999:1-27) young people, women and ethnic minorities are specified as specific groups at risk of social and political disengagement. The characteristic of those groups has been studied over time. Object of research include: global understanding of human rights (Tsutsui and Wotipka, 2004), gender equality (Verba, Schlozman and Burns, 2001:274), environmental concerns, ethnic and cultural diversity (Waldron, 2003: 155-174) and youth development (Sherrod, 2007).

This paper consists of the findings of the focus groups study that was carried out with young people in Turkey between April and June 2010 as part of the PIDOP project. The study included young people from three sub-groups: The majority (Turks),

Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria and Roma youth. After a short description of the minority groups, the method of the study and the general characteristics of the young people interviewed, preliminary findings will be presented. Themes of analysis include: participants' understanding of citizenship; participants' perceptions about young people's participation; sources of information and knowledge; personal and group experiences; proposals to promote inclusion and (civic and political) participation.

An examination of the mentioned groups should necessarily take into account that the notion of 'minority' in Turkey is different from most of European countries. Yet in Europe while there is marginalization of many minority ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, there is also a dense network of organizations, monitoring mechanisms and legal infrastructure to support them (Witte, 2008:1). Similarly the complicating factors in addressing and assessing the situation of minorities in Turkey include the facts that national censuses do not take into account people's ethnic origins and that the definition of what constitutes a "minority" is contested. While there is no universally agreed definition of the term "minority," minorities that are subject to special protection are generally understood as groups who share a common identity and who are characterized by their own ethnic, linguistic, or religious identity, which differs from that of the majority population of the territory on which they reside (International Helsinki Federation For Human Rights, 2006:3).

This paper intends to raise awareness of the situation of young people, woman and minorities in Turkey. It should not be understood as an attempt at a comprehensive analysis, but rather as an intention to examine, from the perspective of young people, their understanding of citizenship and participation.

Turkish Resettlers From Bulgaria and Roma People In Turkey

The Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, adopted in 1982, does not refer to minorities. According to it, the concept of citizenship does not include any reference to one's ethnic and/or religious identity. In that sense all citizens without reference to their ethnic or religious backgrounds have equal rights and obligations. The number of individuals belonging to various cultural and religious groups is unknown due to

the fact that the national censuses have not included data on ethnic and religious identities. Since the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the only protection for minorities has been that set out in the 1923 with the Treaty of Lausanne. In the Treaty only the non-Muslim populations are defined as minorities (Minority Rights Group International, 2007). There is no reference in the Constitution to the word ‘minority’ and there is no legislative framework for ethnic or religious groups in Turkey, either directly through laws granting minority rights or indirectly through an anti-discrimination law (Minority Rights Group International, 2007).

It is therefore impossible to find reliable data and estimation on the population of the groups included in the study. However, according to the unofficial estimates gathered from the press there are approximately one million Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria and Islam constitutes the dominant religion of this group. Although the situation cannot be estimated by leaning upon the existing data, it can be argued that a high proportion of Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria attend secondary and higher education in Turkey and members of this group are generally better educated than the Roma as well as the majority. In terms of socio-economic status, they also tend to occupy a relatively higher socio-economic position. The majority who tend to perceive Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria favorably when compared to other minority groups regards them as members of the same ethnic group. However, they also marginalized to a certain extent by the local population since they are ‘Bulgarian’ (Parla, 2007: 6). They are officially classed as ‘immigrants’ and citizenship used to be granted on arrival (Doganay, 1996: 6-7). At present, many of those Turkish resettlers from Bulgaria who have obtained Turkish citizenship tend to hold both Turkish and Bulgarian nationalities (Suter, 2008: 5).

Roma people are also not officially recognized as minority and research and statistics about the Roma in Turkey are still limited. According to official records, there are over 500,000 Roma people living throughout Turkey (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2006: 12) while numbers are estimated unofficially to be about two million (Minority Rights Group International, 2007: 12). Most are sedentary and live in larger cities and towns but some are still nomads who follow pre-established itineraries across the country. Similarly to the Bulgarian resettlers living in Turkey Roma generally tend to subscribe to Islam, but there is also a small

number of Christian Roma (International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, 2006: 12). Education levels tend to be low in the group. Illiteracy, for instance, is a prevalent feature among them and participation-levels in secondary school and higher education is lower than for the majority (Minority Rights Group International, 2009: 4, 13). Members of this group tend to suffer from financial destitution and generally take up employment that is low paid and low skilled (Kolukirik and Toktas, 2007: 762). The majority of the population normally perceives Roma unfavorably and negative stereotypes are widespread (Kolukirik and Toktas, 2007: 762). According to European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) further instances of acute social exclusion, which amount to a variety of violations of economic, social and cultural rights of the Roma, include having difficulties accessing personal documents, which subsequently affects their ability to access social welfare, to medical care, and to legal marriage.

2. Method

Participants:

The Turkish team conducted twelve focus groups with participants from three main categories: Turkish resettles from Bulgaria (Bulgarian Turks), Roma and the Majority population (divided into two age groups: 16-18 and 20-26). See (Table 1 below). The individuals included in the focus groups were recruited via different community organizations and organizational networks; and for the majority focus groups together with the participants recruited by the method of snowball sampling, different secondary schools and universities were used as the sources of participant recruitment.

Table 1. Distribution of the Focus Groups Participants by Age, Gender and Minority/Immigration Category				
	Turkish Resettlers from Bulgaria	Roma	Majority	Total
Female (16-18)	7	8	7	22
Female (20-26)	6	6	6	18
Male (16-18)	7	7	7	21
Male (20-26)	6	7	6	19
Total	26	28	26	80

In the process of composing the groups the research team attempted to recruit participants having different characteristics in terms of their socio-economic and educational statuses as well as their levels of civic and political participation. Except from the Roma participants (either unemployed or in temporary employment), all participants in the younger category were students attending secondary education. Participants who were between 20 and 26 years old were more heterogeneous in terms of educational and occupational status.

The participants from the Bulgarian Turks group, on the other hand, were more diverse in terms of migration background and citizenship status. Thus, while some of them migrated at an early age, some migrated quite recently and some others were born in Turkey. Among them there were citizens, non-citizens and those who have dual citizenship. Compared to the Roma participants they had also better educational and socio-economic status. “Bulgarian Turks” is the expression that the participants’ chose to use.

Procedure:

Due to cultural factors, especially for the Bulgarian Turks and Roma participants, focus groups were conducted with the participants from the same gender.

For Bulgarian Turks, we liaised with the Association of Bulgarian Turks in Istanbul. As the organization was widely contacted with its members, participants

from different ages and gender were approached during school class and private courses. For Roma participants, moderators liaised with the Salihli (administrative district within Manisa) Municipality where there is a sizeable Roma population. Participants were recruited with the help of a Roma person who works for the municipality and focus groups were conducted in the places that municipality arranged for the research team. For Majority group participants, school counsellor of one of the central high schools in a central region of Turkey was contacted and 16-18 age focus groups were conducted with his help in the school's library. For the higher age participants of the same group, participants were recruited from the personal connections of research team and focus group conducted in Ankara University.

3. Findings

3.1. Participants' understanding of citizenship

The most striking finding of the study in relation to participants' understanding of citizenship is that alongside nationality, rights and obligations, participants (especially the Roma, but also participants from other groups) tended to link social inequalities and income levels to citizenship. Especially Roma participants associate poverty and unemployment with 'second-class citizenship'.

"You can expect anything from a man if he is unemployed and does not have money" (Roma 20-26)

Participants also referred to cultural discrimination and negative prejudice as important barriers to full citizenship. Bulgarian Turks referred to the mass immigration from Bulgaria in the late 1980s and they stated that many have experienced a 'culture shock'. They stated that the immigrant generation had been excluded from society:

"Our generation have attained a status in society, but our parents have suffered a lot" (Bulgarian Turk 20-26)

While Roma participants refer to cultural discrimination and negative prejudice, participants from majority group emphasized the self-potential of individual citizens:

“The State is responsible from many things but the people are capable to be active in achieving better life and better society” (Majority 16-18)

Furthermore almost all participants claim that they did not have enough information about their rights and obligations as citizens. In general the perception of participants is firstly related to the duties to be fulfilled as a citizen such as paying taxes and doing military service.

None of the participants seemed interested in environmental issues. Global warming was mentioned as a key environmental issue among the older majority and the Bulgarian Turk groups, but not among the Roma group.

3.2. Participants’ perceptions about young people’s participation

Two important elements that were prominent in the focus group discussions were the barriers/disincentives to participation and the participants’ representation about young people’s participation. In that respect participants mentioned various barriers to civic and political participation, including:

- Ideology and/or political party affiliation (for both younger and older participants)
- Difficulties of finding jobs (younger participants)
- Loss of job (older participants)
- Need to pass the university exam (younger participants)
- Early marriage (female, Roma participants)
- Lack of efficacy (older participants)

Unemployment and poverty emerged as the most important barriers to Roma participants’ civic and political engagement, involvement and participation. During the focus groups they tended to associate almost all questions with these two issues.

“You can expect anything from a man if he is unemployed and does not have money”

“Should we revolt against the state for being listened to?”

(Roma 20-26)

Radicalism was mentioned:

“Nobody listens to me, then I become a rebel, since only rebels can be heard in this country”. (Bulgarian Turk, 20-26).

The focus groups conducted with the majority group also showed that alternative forms of participation were seen as important because of their impact, visibility and popularity. Internet was especially mentioned as a tool of expression by the majority and Bulgarian Turk groups.

Among Roma female participants, early marriage and poverty were seen as key issues.

While the participants belonging to the 16-18 age category mentioned the university entrance exam, lack of economic independence, parents’ prohibitive attitudes and existence of hostile police intervention against demonstrators as important disincentives for young people’s participation; the participants belonging to the 20-26 age category also stressed the lack of political efficacy.

Younger Bulgarian Turks group participants emphasized the university exam, which took so much time to prepare for, according to one. This meant that young people did not have enough time for civil-political participation.

“We always have to prepare for something and study for better grades”

“Sit down and study, they say”.

(Bulgarian Turk 16-18)

In complete contrast, among the older Bulgarian Turk group it was emphasized the advantage of being a university student:

“Some segments of the young people, especially those among university students, have a lot of resources, and political groups to join, and they for the most part exaggerated the issue of organising demonstrations by involving in violent activities” (Bulgarian Turk 20-26)

The opinions about parent’s attitudes were different among the groups. Parental factor was thus more mentioned by the majority group and Bulgarian Turks. Younger participants from the majority group stated that they did not have an economic independence which would enable them to engage in civil-political activities. Another participant mentioned the age issue from another perspective, claiming that their perspective on political issues are determined to a great extent by the opinions and attitudes of parents. She said:

“We are at high school, how can we do such kind of thing?... We are dependent on our families.” (Majority 16-18).

This was something to be accepted according to the participant and could be overcome in the following years. Another participant underlined the everyday life problems of people. She claimed that it was hard for people to allocate time and resources given the hard work many have to do and the care they should give to family members:

“Because of our country’s past people were overprotective when it came to their children” (Majority 20-26)

Another important finding of the study is the dominance of negative images about young people’s participation. Thus most of the participants thought that young people, those who are politically active, are ‘manipulated’ by different ideological groups and/or leaders. They also tended to conceive politically active young people as ‘careless’ in terms of earning their means of living. Furthermore, participants aged between 20 and 26 were more cautious with respect to civic and political participation as they tended to condemn different forms of action and protest, such as marches, demonstrations, graffiti writing, etc in stronger terms. Radical forms of protest were seen as deviant and ineffective.

3.3. Sources of information and knowledge

For almost all participants the most important sources of influence appeared to be the family members (especially the father) and the peer group. Family elders were also frequently mentioned. One particular difference between younger and older participants was that while younger participants thought their family sometimes exclude them while they talk about social and political issues, older participants were said to be influenced by their parents' views.

Bulgarian Turks, especially the older ones, mentioned friends as an influential source.

“Since we mainly have similar problems, to share ideas with close friends on these issues can be more appropriate. We constitute our ideas and opinions usually together”

(Bulgarian Turk 20-26)

The media (particularly audio-visual media) and the Internet were counted as the most influential sources of information. Roma participants in general and 20-26 aged female Bulgarian migrants constituted exception in this regard. Thus although they said that they generally spend a lot of time in front of the TV, they do not for the most part follow news or TV programs on civic and political issues. These participants also said they have no or restricted access to the Internet.

3.4. Personal and group experiences

Participation experiences reported by the participants include:

- Creating blogs on the Internet where people can discuss social and political issues
- Taking part in Internet discussion forums
- Sharing videos and messages on social and political issues on Facebook
- Participating in the so-called ‘Republican march’ which had the aim of protecting secularism

- Writing petition to a local authority concerning neighbourhood related issues
- Participating in a boycott campaign
- Participating in a commemorative ceremony (of Hrant Dink, an intellectual with Armenian origin who was murdered in 2007)
- Participating in activities concerning Bulgarian Turk music and folklore

Although participants generally thought that civic and political participation was important for society membership, they stressed that they have restricted participation.

An important finding of the study is that older participants felt they were too ‘old’ to participate, i.e. due to the need to have a secure and stable life. On the other hand, younger participants, felt too ‘young’ to participate by emphasizing the need to find a job and earn a living first.

Furthermore participants had little or no perceptions about the European dimension of civic and political participation, regardless of their migrant/minority status, age and gender.

3.5. Proposals to promote inclusion and (civic and political) participation

Young people should be informed of their rights and obligations and they should be encouraged to discuss political issues at school and university. That said, some of the participants argued that unemployment was a more important issue.

Some recommendations:

- Promoting civil and political participation in education
- To allocate more resources and increased financial support to the projects which could be helpful in increasing the level of participation
- More research to learn about the opinions of young people.
- To make the police more tolerant in order to promote inclusion in political participation

4. Concluding Remarks

The preliminary findings presented in this paper shows that the Roma, Bulgarian Turk and the majority youth in two different age groups (16-18 and 20-26) and gender categories have different opinions and attitudes concerning civic and political participation. Each sub-group has different understandings of citizenship, perceptions about young people's participation, sources of information and knowledge about civic and political issues; in addition to different personal and group experiences. Almost all the young people included in the study said they did not have enough information about their rights and obligations as citizens and that there were many barriers to their political involvement and participation. We hope that further research conducted as part of the PIDOP project will improve our knowledge by allowing us too obtain a more detailed and multifaceted analysis on political and civic engagement among youth in Turkey.

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