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Determinants of young people's civic and political participation in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This special section provides a timely reflection on current debates that are of extreme relevance in order to gain a better understanding of the concepts of citizenship and active citizenship in Turkey, by looking at the determinants of civic and political participation, at the patterns of political and civic mobilization and at the orientations of political behaviour. Its originality stands on the specific focus on young people in comparison to other age groups. The different papers remark upon the importance that the reframing of the notions of citizenship and active citizenship have in the Turkish context along with the determinants that make this remark more relevant than ever.

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Introduction to special section

Even if disengagement from politics is a phenomenon characterizing many modern societies and democracies of the contemporary age (Putnam 1995, 2000), this phenomenon acquires quite peculiar characteristics in Turkey (Şener 2014). It is a consequence of historical determinants that have, first of all, shaped a notion of citizenship that has created a strong dependency upon state institutions, resulting in having a clear effect upon participatory behaviours (Içduygu et al. 1999; Keyman and Içduygu 2003). This effect becomes even more dramatic if we look at the actual constraints put on young people and their political participation in the Turkish context (Lüküslü 2005).

The scenario that the papers of the special section is confronted with is one that describes young people in Turkey as apolitical and disengaged from politics (Neyzi 2001). This description is a clear effect of the process of apoliticization that followed the 1980 military coup and drafting of the 1982 Constitution. Its design created limited spaces for political participation, with the only exception of participation in conventional forms, and more precisely voting. This exception is a consequence of Article 58 of the Constitution, which reflects the need to protect and, at the same time, control youth, by keeping them 'at distance from all political ideas, movements and actions that might endanger the Republic' (Isyar, Keyman, and Rumelili 2010, 8). As documented very well, this process of apoliticization

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of young people goes hand in hand with the liberalization process and the social/cultural, economic and political change that took place in the 1990s (Keyman and Icduygu 2003; Kaya 2013). In this context, young people are socially constructed in public discourse as being 'apolitical consumers of a global market' (Lüküslü 2005, 33; See also Neyzi 2001, 412). Various processes of negative characterization are therefore attached to this social group, resulting in a very precise and clear stigmatization. As Lüküslü puts it, young people of new generations have been 'accused of acquiescing to a globalised, consumer society, and have been considered individualistic, apathetic, egotistical, and incapable of forming youth movements that characterised previous generations' (2013, 80).

However, new significant patterns have emerged putting in question this scenario, showing the relevance of studying analytically the issues of citizenship and active citizenship. It is in fact important to remark upon the fact that Turkish civil society has engaged in patterns similar to other European countries (Bee and Guerrina 2014), with processes of transformation that have been pushed forward by both external and internal dynamics. The Europeanization process, the establishment of the EU's civil society policy in the Turkish context, the formulation of policy networks and the development of organized groups of interest, between others, are particularly important aspects that tell us about key patterns regarding the mobilization of young people in Turkey and their processes of change that are worthwhile to be explored further.

It is also important to underline the specific developments that signify the emergence of new processes of mobilization that hold a strong political nature. Three years after the *occupygezi* movement and in the aftermath of the military coup of 15 July 2016, it becomes even more important to reflect upon the civic and political participation of young people in Turkey, by looking at the factors that hinder or activate political behaviours. The first event can clearly be classified as a protest movement where, through different means of non-conventional political participation, young people actively vindicated their right to the public space. What is peculiar about *occupygezi* is the clear anti-establishment nature of the movement. The second and more recent event tells us about a new experience of mass mobilization where different people of different ages participated in rallies on many Turkish squares to claim the victory of democracy over the military intervention. Again, the event is rather important in so far in this case it can be argued that the anti-coup mobilization is an expression of support for the current political establishment that managed to bring together a large number of people in the streets.

Different events, dynamics and processes therefore challenge the image and negative connotation of young people. It is not the case that current research shows that, rather than being apolitical or disengaged, Turkish young people have actually gone through a radical redefinition of the political realm, shaping a different meaning around what is political and what is not (Isyar, Keyman, and Rumelili 2010; Lüküslü 2013). Isyar et al., for example, look at the *acts of citizenship* (Isin 2008) through which specific demands and claims are put forward in respect to European and Turkish institutions. Lüküslü (2013), instead, by focusing on the apparent apathetic behaviour of young people in Turkey, elaborates on the notion of *necessary conformism* in order to argue that there is evidence of various modalities through which young people in Turkey show their discontent towards the socio-political system through *alternative tactics*.

The present special section takes into account these important findings and recommendations. In particular, it re-establishes the necessity to look at how young people define the

interactions with conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation. The aim is to present new insights regarding the transformation of political participation and civic and political engagement in Turkey. Moreover, the special section discusses different formulations taken by civic and political engagement and political participation by focusing on patterns that drive political behaviour and civic activism.

In addition, by combining analysis conducted by junior and senior scholars, it provides fresh empirical research and key studies supported by strong theoretical frameworks. It is multidisciplinary in focus, and touches upon different insights coming from political sociology, public policy analysis, political science and political psychology. It brings together articles that mix both quantitative and qualitative methods of enquiry in order to provide a deep understanding of the complexity of active citizenship in Turkey.

Yılmaz discusses Chevalier's typology of youth welfare citizenship by applying this typology to a non-Western European country context. The author argues that the model exists first within a *denied youth citizenship* type where young people have to still rely on family structures for support. His analysis sheds light on the importance played by certain social and economic policies in influencing patterns of political behaviour in Turkey. This is an issue, as the author argues, that has so far been underestimated in Turkey. Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerçi discuss existing forms of participation for young people. Their analysis is framed under the existing challenges to political participation, by looking at both conventional and unconventional forms. The research of the authors unpacks the differences of participation levels between younger and older generations. According to their findings, a number of significant dimensions such as gender, economic status and living in urban or rural areas along with what the authors define as *politicized collective identities* – rather than age – influence participatory behaviours. Chrona and Capelos, following the same line of Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerçi, focus on the individual-based determinants of participatory behaviours. The authors adopt a political psychology perspective in order to study the impact of civic engagement, political sophistication and values on conventional and unconventional political participation. Their findings suggest that unconventional participation is being driven by a complex interaction of factors such as levels of civic engagement, values and sophistication, whereas conventional participation is driven by simpler considerations such as high income and value of tradition–religiosity.

The article by Gökçe-Kizilkaya and Onursal-Beşgül deals with a currently under-investigated issue, which is young people's participation at the local level in Turkey. Taking as a case study the city councils and youth assemblies, the authors study these experiences as valuable examples of deliberative democratic procedures. The analysis offers ground for a policy evaluation of such experiences. The evidence they collected highlights the challenges that have been encountered in implementing instruments of participation at the local level and their effectiveness. Çakmaklı focuses on the processes of learning of active citizenship practices in different types of civil society organizations, by presenting results on the basis of a division between *rights-based NGOs* vs. *obligations-based NGOs*. The article is key to understanding the process of transformation of civil society in Turkey as well as the importance played by civil society in redefining their role vis-à-vis state institutions. Eventually, Bee and Kaya's analysis on young members of civil society organizations in Turkey focuses on the understanding of the consequences that certain macro-factors, social factors and psychological factors had in hindering or activating civic and political engagement among young people. The article looks at the constraints posed to active citizenship in the Turkish

context, by outlining at the same time different elements that signify the emancipation of young people from the strong state tradition of citizenship.

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