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# From Exit to Voice: Reflections on Exile through the Accounts of Turkey's Intelligentsia

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**ABSTRACT:** *The authoritarian turn in Turkey compelled many citizens to change life trajectories which included extreme measures such as migration and exile. Thousands of people left Turkey in the last decade, this recent wave constituting one of the largest Turkish migrations to Europe and beyond. The profile of the migrants included those who were comfortable with and/or opposed the current regime's political and social policies, members of oppressed minority groups, Gülen movement members who are accused of orchestrating the failed 2016 coup attempt as well as white collar and secular Turkish citizens who made lifestyle migration choices because of the political and economic developments in the country. The article focuses on the narratives of a specific group within this new wave, those whom we refer to as Turkey's intelligentsia in exile, and who decided to leave Turkey following the Gezi protests in 2013. The findings are based on 25 interviews conducted in 2021 with former academics, activists, artists, journalists and politicians who migrated to a variety of locations as a result of pending trials or arrest warrants against them, dehumanization discourse that pro-regime politicians directed toward them, as well as lack of freedom of speech and assembly.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Authoritarianism; diaspora; intelligentsia; migration; Turkey*

When the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—Justice and Development Party) came to power in the early 2000s, no one could imagine that it would rule Turkey for two decades and completely transform Turkish political space at home and abroad. Although political elites in Turkey and abroad initially praised the AKP for its reform-oriented agenda, its rising power paved the way for gradually increasing democratic backsliding in Turkey. As the party became more powerful, it became less dependent on the approval of liberal intellectuals at home or international actors such as the European Union. Beginning with the 2013 Gezi Park Protests, Turkey started showing a

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discernible trend toward authoritarianism as the AKP leaders decided to cling to power at any cost. The party turned to utilizing a polarizing discourse that deepened the already existing cleavages in the country. In 2015, the peace process between the Turkish state and the PKK (*Kürdistan İşçi Partisi*-Kurdistan Worker's Party) collapsed and political violence escalated once again. The coup attempt in 2016 prepared the context for further securitization in Turkey and served as a pretext for the AKP to oppress opposition groups from diverse ethnic, ideological and religious spectrums to consolidate its one-party rule.<sup>1</sup> With the 2017 referendum, which changed the regime from a parliamentary to a presidential system, the AKP and its leader Tayyip Erdogan cemented their domination over Turkish politics.<sup>2</sup>

The political developments throughout the last decade affected how grassroots movements get mobilized, how opposition formulates counter arguments to prevent further democratic backsliding or how ordinary citizens perceived their space and place within New Turkey's political environment. The polarized political atmosphere which promotes loyalists and suffocates regime opponents paved the way for a startling yet plausible consequence: A massive wave of migration from Turkey. Among those who leave, there are journalists and artists who find it impossible to breathe in the current anti-intellectual atmosphere<sup>3</sup>, liberal elites who once supported the AKP and parted ways during the last decade as a result of its authoritarian tendencies,<sup>4</sup> Kurdish activists and politicians who are being persecuted by the regime after the collapse of the peace process<sup>5</sup>, academics who are dismissed from their positions with emergency decrees after the coup attempt<sup>6</sup>, members of the Gülen Movement who are persecuted by the regime after being labelled as traitors following the coup attempt<sup>7</sup>, secular groups with or without Kemalist tendencies who are troubled by the re-Islamization of public and political spheres<sup>8</sup> white collar highly educated individuals who leave due to concerns about a future in Turkey among others. This new wave is important for several reasons. Firstly, the group is highly heterogenous compared to the previous waves of migration from Turkey to Europe. Secondly, it occurs due to concerns about human security, economic stability, and access to basic human rights as well as lifestyle concerns. It contains both voluntary and non-voluntary migration trends. The number of asylum seekers from Turkey keeps increasing in different parts of the world, while the departure of so many highly educated causes a massive braindrain, which will damage

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<sup>1</sup> Sandal, Nukhet Ahu, and Ahmet Erdi Ozturk (2022) Critical Junctures of Securitisation: The Case of the AK Party in Turkey, *Alternatives* 03043754221116738.

<sup>2</sup> See Hakki Taş, (2015) Turkey—from tutelary to delegative democracy, in *Third World Quarterly*, 36(4), pp. 776–791.

<sup>3</sup> Funda Gencoglu (2021) Heroes, villains and celebrityization of politics: Hegemony, populism and anti-intellectualism in Turkey, in *Celebrity Studies*, 12(1), pp. 1–19.

<sup>4</sup> Zafer Yılmaz (2017) The AKP and the spirit of the 'new' Turkey: Imagined victim, reactionary mood, and resentful sovereign. In: *Turkish Studies*, 18(3), pp. 482–513.

<sup>5</sup> Joost Jongerden (2019) Conquering the state and subordinating society under AKP rule: A Kurdish perspective on the development of a new autocracy in Turkey, in *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 21(3), pp. 260–273.

<sup>6</sup> Bahar Baser, Samim Akgönül & Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2017) "Academics for Peace" in Turkey: A case of criminalising dissent and critical thought via counterterrorism policy, in *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 10(2), pp. 274–296.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Watmough & Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2018) From 'diaspora by design' to transnational political exile: the Gülen Movement in transition, in *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 19(1), pp. 33–52.

<sup>8</sup> Ayhan Kaya (2015) Islamisation of Turkey under the AKP rule: Empowering family, faith and charity, in *South European Society and Politics*, 20(1), pp. 47–69.

Turkey's future in numerous ways. Not only vulnerable opposition groups but also millionaires are deserting Turkey by using golden visa schemes in Europe and beyond. The consequences of this wave of migration only can be assessed in the long term after the dust has settled. Currently, they constitute a new diasporic layer in the making which will be amalgamated to Turkey's wider diaspora groups over time.<sup>9</sup>

Among these groups of Turkish citizens left out of the boundaries of the definition of *ideal citizens* for the new regime, this article focuses on one specific group which can be broadly labelled as the Turkish intelligentsia. Not all individuals who leave Turkey opt for being politically active when they reach their new destination. Some keep a low profile in order not to exacerbate their situation in Turkey; they remain silent to protect their families or relatives who were left behind or they prefer to live a life that is not constantly affected by what is going on at home. However, certain individuals, who have been activists, politicians, journalists, academics, artists and public figures in Turkey, feel that they have an obligation to continue their struggle outside Turkey's borders. They are well-networked individuals who have access to decision-makers, media outlets, intellectual and academic circles in those countries where they currently reside. They have leverage due to their status and they can have an impact on shaping public opinion in their host states.

The article presents a snapshot of their current experience with exile and migration in their new countries of residence by scrutinizing how this experience affected them personally and by investigating what mobilization patterns they adapted since departure. The findings are based on 25 interviews conducted in 2021 with former politicians, artists, journalists, academics and activists who migrated to a variety of locations as a result of trials against them, dehumanization discourse toward them by pro-regime politicians as well as lack of freedom of speech and assembly. Interviewees come from different ethnic, religious and ideological backgrounds. Some were in the opposition against the AKP regime since the beginning such as Kemalists and leftists, while others such as liberal intellectuals supported its reform activities until a certain period.<sup>10</sup> There are some who supported or worked closely with the Gülen Movement and some others who were members of parliament from the HDP [*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* (Peoples' Democratic Party)] and other previous pro-Kurdish political parties. The sample represents different colors of the opposition today and provides an accurate account of the heterogeneous texture of the newly emerging intellectual diaspora outside Turkey's borders.

### Exit as the Trans-Nationalization of Voice

As illiberal regimes tighten the grip over dissidents who are not loyal to the regime, new migration flows occur as those individuals who have the will and the capacity leave the country via various means. In cases where illiberal states prevent individuals from exit; for example, by cancelling passports or by formulating blanket policies for preventing exit from the country by emergency decrees, those who are compelled to leave still opt for unconventional methods to flee. Turkey constitutes a perfect example for such cases given that people have been finding ways to leave the country legally or 'illegally' since

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<sup>9</sup> Öztürk Ahmet Erdi and Bahar Baser (2021) New Turkey's new diasporic constellations: The Gezi generation and beyond. ELIAMEP Report, <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Policy-paper-84-Ozturk-and-Basara-final.pdf> (accessed 13 May 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Duygu Ersoy and Fahriye Üstüner (2016) 'Liberal intellectuals' narration of the justice and development party in Turkey. In: *Turkish Studies*, 17(3), pp. 406–428.

the democratic backsliding process gained force. If people manage to migrate temporarily or permanently, what happens after exit? By building a critical engagement with Hirschman's well-cited work called *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*,<sup>11</sup> Bert Hoffman argued that in the age of diasporas, we should accept that exit, not only causes the articulation of voice, but it also trans-nationalizes it. In this time and age, exit and voice are not mutually exclusive. According to Hoffman, 'If a citizen, by choosing the exit option, can free him or herself from the conditions that have impeded the articulation of voice domestically, after emigration he or she might raise his/her voice all the louder from the outside'.<sup>12</sup> This view already has attracted significant attention in diaspora studies. As Forename Newman suggests, after exit, migrant communities tend to 'show a commitment to continuing "voice" when they engage in advocacy on issues concerning their country of origin or ancestry'.<sup>13</sup> However, this is not an easy process as 'their newcomer status in host countries affords diaspora communities limited voice in public affairs'.<sup>14</sup> Besides this limitation, scholars also acknowledge that not all migrants show interest in advocacy work, therefore the transnationalization of voice after exit is conducted by those who feel a certain obligation to have an impact on policy making processes in their country of origin or residence.<sup>15</sup> In this case, diaspora brokers or intermediaries, lead the mobilization process in the transnational space bridging homeland affairs to the host country audiences. Within these groups, there are individuals such as activists, former politicians, journalists, civil society workers, academics, artists and other public figures who usually are defined as 'intelligentsia in exile'.<sup>16</sup> The departing point of this article is that a new layer of Turkey's intelligentsia in exile is emerging and it is important to reflect on their lived experiences to understand better the transnational dynamics in which they operate, as well as to (re)create by their voice.

#### *Motivations to Leave and the Turkey They Left behind*

Leaving one's homeland behind is not an easy decision. Many factors play a role until the individual makes such a 'choice' and then the departure process might not always be smooth depending on the conditions that created the migration decision.<sup>17</sup> All participants in this research project were public figures who had influence on public opinion in Turkey in different periods of time during the AKP's reign in politics. They came from different educational, political, economic, and social backgrounds. Their

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<sup>11</sup> Albert O. Hirschman (1970) *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states* (vol. 25) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

<sup>12</sup> Bert Hoffmann (2010) Bringing Hirschman back in: "Exit," "voice" and "loyalty" in the politics of transnational migration, in *The Latin Americanist*, 54(2), pp. 57–73.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Newland and Hiroyuki Tanaka (2010) *Voice after exit: Diaspora advocacy* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Maria De los Angeles Torres (2001) *In the land of mirrors: Cuban exile politics in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth (2003) Diasporas and international relations theory, in *International Organization*, 57(3), pp. 449–479.

<sup>16</sup> Franz Neumann (1976) *The intelligentsia in exile*. In: *Critical Sociology* (London: Penguin Books), pp. 423–441; and Ana-Teodora Kurkina (2021) *Intelligentsia in exile: Bulgarian revolutionary emigration in the second half of the 19th century and the projects for a Balkan federation* (doctoral dissertation, Universität Regensburg).

<sup>17</sup> Katie Kuschminder (2018) Afghan refugee journeys: Onwards migration decision-making in Greece and Turkey, in *Journal of refugee studies*, 31(4), pp. 566–587.

accounts revealed that in some cases migration was involuntary and the decision was taken hastily either due to a pending trial or an arrest verdict, while in other cases the seeds were planted years ago and the shrinking political and social space within New Turkey paved the way to a gradual decision to depart.

A majority of participants mentioned that they started living in constant fear and/or anxiety after the collapse of the peace process and the 2016 coup attempt, as the government started a purge in all sectors and segments of society. Various interviewees mentioned that they always maintained a visa as a sort of *political foresight* and used it when they felt it was necessary for them to leave before being incarcerated.<sup>18</sup> We observed a desire to remain in Turkey to ‘contribute to the democracy struggle’ among many interviewees and the biggest fear they had was to lose their ‘voice’. Losing ‘voice’, however, was not solely associated with being in prison but also to not being able to do one’s job properly, especially in the case of academics, politicians and journalists. Certain political and social developments served as a breaking point and accelerated their decision to migrate. Each individual defined a different ‘political moment’ that made them understand that they needed to leave. These seminal moments included the Gezi protests, the AKP/Gülen movement rivalry and fall out, the collapse of the peace process and the 15 July 2016 coup attempt.

For award-winning photojournalist Güliz Vural, it was her political and social space that kept shrinking as a result of creeping authoritarianism. Witnessing the political developments in Turkey on a daily basis as a journalist and not being able to say anything due to fear of persecution slowly pushed her to make a migration decision although there were no pending trials or immediate concerns for her. She migrated with her husband Fatih Vural (a former journalist and biography writer) and their daughter to start a free lance photography business in the United Kingdom. During our interview, she explained her frustration: *‘I felt chained. It’s like they locked that chain and threw the key into the sea! That key was at the bottom of the sea. It was impossible to remove it... It’s like we came out of a fire at the last moment!’* For Barbaros Şansal, who is an activist and a famous fashion designer worldwide, the decision was a result of gradual discontent with Turkish politics. However, a significant milestone played a big role in his decision to leave Turkey for Cyprus, when he felt that his security and property was in danger because of a lynch attempt against him in 2017. He reflects on his decision: *‘When I look back on my performances, I performed a miracle in the desert in Turkey, but that flower can’t survive in the desert; I realised that as I matured. You leave a cactus in the desert and walk away...’*<sup>19</sup>

Bülent Somay who had signed the Academics for Peace (AfP) Petition which led to terrorism allegations against him, underlines the intricacies of everyday life in the shrinking democratic space for intellectual and critical thinking. His decision to leave Turkey at least temporarily not only is affected by criminal policies of the state but also by his lived experiences of everyday authoritarianism: *‘... if I don’t trust my students, this relationship has been broken for me. The moment I began to see my students as potential informants, potential rogues, that meant that I would no longer be*

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<sup>18</sup> Authors’ interview with Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı, online, July 2021. Authors’ interview with Hasip Kaplan online, July 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Authors’ Online Interview with Barbos Şansal, July 2021.

able to teach classes well. I decided there'.<sup>20</sup> Another participant who opted to stay anonymous talked about how traumatic the criminalization process was after the AfP petition. She has been targeted in the small city where she had been residing by mobs as well as university staff and students. The fear of prosecution was coupled with lack of human security: 'I left Turkey in 2017 after the 'We Will Not Be a Party to this Crime' petition. Every cell in my body, in my brain wants to forget that process'.<sup>21</sup> Some of these migration decisions initially were considered temporary in order to serve as a band-aid to the worsening situation in Turkey. However, as time passed various participants in this research preferred to turn their migration situation into a life plan.

Not only the current political atmosphere but also the uncertainty of the future compelled people to migrate. Especially those participants with children took migration decisions without hesitation to 'save their children's future', For instance, Kurdish journalist Jinda Zekioğlu, who left Turkey permanently and migrated to a Greek island, stated that she migrated also because she was giving birth to a daughter, and she did not want her to grow up in Turkey.<sup>22</sup> Other participants with children who are old enough to remember the migration experience, shared their concerns regarding 'forcing their children to migrate with them' as the children do not usually have a say in migration decisions.<sup>23</sup> Although as adults they make a risk-benefit assessment before departure, usually children experience adaptation problems in the new countries of residence. These issues recurred in interviews as hidden consequences of exile.<sup>24</sup> Children's status and wellbeing not only affect the migration decision, but it also has a significant impact on return decisions. In some cases, we observed that although the departure was triggered by the political environment in Turkey, the return decision was bounded with other concerns such as integration into the host societies, children's adaptation to as well as the future prospects presented by the new country of residence.

## Reflections on Displacement and Exile

When we embarked on this research, we noticed that media outlets automatically refer to the newcomers as exiles/intellectuals in exile and created a victimized position for those who are fleeing from 'Erdogan's Turkey'.<sup>25</sup> However, the definition of 'exile' is a contested one. Authors such as Yossi Shain drew our attention to the conceptual messiness of the term and underlined the difficulty of operationalizing the term if we do not have a clear definition.<sup>26</sup> Are all exiles refugees? Are all displaced people considered as exiles? In some cases, authors refer to a migration condition due to political

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<sup>20</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Bülent Somay, July 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Anonymous former Turkish university professor, July 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Jinda Zekioğlu, July 2021.

<sup>23</sup> See further Marjorie Faulstich Orellana, Barrie Thorne, Anna Chee & Wan Shun Eva Lam (2001) Transnational childhoods: The participation of children in processes of family migration. In: *Social Problems*, 48(4), pp. 572-591.

<sup>24</sup> Authors' Interview with Güliz and Fatih Vural, Rugby, United Kingdom, August 2021.

<sup>25</sup> See for instance: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/torture-turkey-rise-erdogan-republic-fear.html>, accessed 22 May 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Yossi Shain (2010) *The frontier of loyalty: Political exiles in the age of the nation-state* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

reasons as exile and in other cases the lack of the right to return is put as a precondition. Some call ‘political exiles’ the people who are banished by their governments,<sup>27</sup> while others put emphasis on the voluntary or involuntary nature of exile.<sup>28</sup> Despite the abundance of definitions and complexities surrounding the terms, it is usually associated with experiences of longing and belonging, nostalgia and sorrow, advocacy, and resistance. In his famous essay from 1984, Edward Said described the exilic situation as something that is ‘compelling to think about but terrible to experience’.<sup>29</sup> He continued to define it as ‘the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: it’s essential sadness can never be surmounted’.<sup>30</sup> Does exile always need to have a negative connotation?

We observed that some participants had an uneasy relationship with this concept. For some, their situation could not be defined as exile because they left voluntarily, and/or they never stopped fighting against human rights abuses or fascism<sup>31</sup> or because they do not intend to adapt to their new country of residence and they have the will to return one day.<sup>32</sup> For Murat Özbank, who is a well-known scholar and political theorist, his condition is complicated as he does not live in Germany by choice, and he did not pick his new country of residence for a reason that he wanted. He can still travel back and forth between Turkey and Germany but at the same time, he was a signatory of the AfP as well and he cannot find employment in Turkey. Bülent Somay, who is in a similar situation states the following:

*I don’t consider my own situation exile. Why? Because when I say let’s go, I am able to return to Turkey. At least since the end of 2019 – for a year and a half – since the acquittal and because they didn’t rise up to launch another case, if I return to Turkey today, nobody will stand at the gate and say, ‘Why are you coming?’ or stop me and not let me in. I’ll go and be unemployed. ... So, if I’m saying that I can return, I think this means I shouldn’t call this exile. I should say semi-exile. Why? I could return, but if I return, my life will be poor ... I’m not sure that they won’t break down my door with a battering ram at 5:30 in the morning because of a tweet I shared ...*<sup>33</sup>

The above accounts revealed that, although these individuals managed to migrate outside Turkey, the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty kept growing. Many interviewees witnessed police raids on their homes, arrest of their friends and family members and stigmatization of their political activities in mainstream newspapers from afar while living in a limbo situation in the host country. Even if they did not consider themselves as exiles, the feeling of *exile-to-be* lingered as they waited for news from

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<sup>27</sup> Ning Wan (2017) *Banished to the Great Northern Wilderness: Political Exile and Re-education in Mao’s China* (Vancouver: UBC Press).

<sup>28</sup> Getachew Metaferia (2020) Reflections on exile: The case of the Ethiopians. In: Sabella Ogbobode Abidde, (ed.) *African Scholars and Intellectuals in North American Academies* (London: Routledge), pp. 34–49.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Said (2000) Reflections on exile. In: *Said EW Reflections on exile and other essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 137.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 139

<sup>31</sup> Authors’ Online Interview with Barbaros Şansal, June 2021.

<sup>32</sup> Authors’ Online Interview with Nazan Üstündağ, June 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Authors’ Online Interview with Bülent Somay, July 2021.



Turkey about their pending trials or police investigations. For others, such as Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı, the current situation in which she found herself corresponds the term. She reflects on the reasons behind her displacement and explain her new life:

*I am in exile. It's very beautiful while sitting at home here or while together with Turkish friends. But I have come involuntarily to another society. Recognising this, trying to understand these mechanisms, and overcoming the language barrier are not easy things. Being unable to reach the people you love, feeling secure economically or being able to use the mechanisms of the system – health insurance and such. When I think about all these, then yes, I am an exile.<sup>34</sup>*

Academic Gökhan Bacık, on the other hand, drew our attention to the difference between the situation of exile and the psychology of exile. The same theme also recurred during our interview with Kurdish intellectual and academic Engin Sustam who reflected on his decision of not applying for asylum and losing the right to return to Turkey temporarily. He was a signatory of the AfP petition and had pending trials in Turkey based on his activism about Kurdish rights in Turkey. He resisted the idea of becoming an asylum seeker because the condition had baggage for him: *'When I listened to the experiences of the generation which came here after the 1980 coup, I didn't want to apply for political asylum. Because I didn't want to fall into that trap of victimisation as an intellectual'*. In order to avoid this victim psychology, Sustam dedicated himself to multifaceted struggles that go beyond Turkey and Turkish/Kurdish politics. Academic Mine Gencil Bak, who was dismissed from her position at a university in Turkey due to her participation in the AfP petition shared a similar feeling. Losing the right to return to Turkey meant a heavy price to pay and she decided to live in limbo for a while rather than to apply for asylum: *'I don't regret not initiating the asylum process because it would prolong my return to Turkey... But I went to Turkey after 44 months, my daughter went, and it was good for our psychological state. I mean that 44-month exile psychology ended then'*.<sup>35</sup> Barbaros Şansal also refused to apply for asylum in a country in the Global North for his own reasons. After fighting for years as a defender of rights and within civil society organisations, many countries have tried to grant him the right to asylum and residence. He had networks among political circles in European countries and had contacts with politicians with leverage, yet he decided to keep his Turkish passport in order not to live in *exile*.

The participants openly shared with us the hurdles they are facing after departure, including economic problems, language related difficulties as well as mental health issues that came with leaving friends and family behind unexpectedly. Although they continue to work for causes to which they dedicated themselves back in Turkey, their mobilization patterns are transforming, because each individual must 'save him/herself'<sup>36</sup> first to survive. For many, it was still too soon to talk about the benefits and challenges of exile as they were still digesting the realities on the ground. For others such as Yavuz Baydar, a prominent journalist who also had experienced exile in the 1980s, the exilic situation is not necessarily a negative one. He asserted: *'If you use it well, exile can be a very fertile space. You acquire quite a network. It has a great*

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<sup>34</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı, July 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Authors' Online Interview Mine Gencil Bak, September 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Nazan Üstündağ, August 2021.

*benefit if you open yourself up to foreign individuals, identities, spaces*'.<sup>37</sup> Could this be true for everyone who migrated due to political persecution? What do newcomers experience in their new countries of residence? Does the exilic condition automatically translate into diaspora activism and mobilization as the literature suggests?

### **From Exile to Diaspora?**

#### *Experiences in the Host Country: The Ambiguous Embrace and the Limbo*

Although the words diaspora and exile sometimes are used interchangeably in the literature, there are still nuances between them. In some cases, exiles return to their struggle in the homeland when the time is ripe, or they remain and slowly 'transform into diaspora members influenced by changes in the political context of the homeland'.<sup>38</sup> Scholars argue that diasporas emerge throughout time when generation after generation keep the diasporic stance toward the homeland.<sup>39</sup> This migration wave from Turkey is relatively new and not only the political context in the homeland but also the opportunity structures and political environment in the hostland will determine whether the newcomers stay or return in the future. We have observed that, currently, the newcomers do not define themselves as part of the 'Turkish diaspora' and they are taking their time to give meaning to their own experiences, free from how the media or the home and host states label them.

Our fieldwork observations revealed that the research participants continued to be active as soon as they left Turkey. AfP-affiliated groups kept organizing solidarity events, conferences and webinars to attract attention to the situation of academic freedom and the process of democratic decline in Turkey. Journalists such as Can Dündar, Hayko Bağdat and Yavuz Baydar kept being visible in international media and *translated* Turkish politics to wider audiences as well as creating new independent media platforms. Author and documentary filmmaker Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı wrote a book, 'Living in a Suitcase', to present her experience in exile in Germany while novelist and playwright Meltem Arıkan kept writing books and plays which were praised highly in the United Kingdom. Large gatherings of dissidents such as the Democracy and Freedom Conference have been organized, with the participation by different groups in exile.

Many of these high-profile individuals, however, also had to deal with economic problems and high levels of stress as soon as they arrived in their new destinations. Although compared to other individuals who came with the recent waves and were not public figures in Turkey, their status in the country of residence remained relatively stable thanks to their previous networks in policy and civil society circles, but they still had to struggle with unemployment, uncertainty, and transnational repression. Some participants mentioned that Turkish authorities seized their properties or the consulates refuse to work with them when they try to renew passports, or to give proxy to an attorney in Turkey to sell property. Among the interviewees there were some who

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<sup>37</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Yavuz Baydar, May 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Claudio Bolzman (2002) "From Exile to Diaspora: Migration from Chile," *Autrepart* (22) 2, pp. 91–107.

<sup>39</sup> Yehonatan Abramson (2019) Securing the diasporic 'self' by travelling abroad: Taglit-birthright and ontological security, in *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(4), pp. 656–673.

were financially in a good situation and did not need to worry about the logistics of their new migrant status, while others had dual citizenship and therefore did not need to deal with migration/asylum related problems. On the other hand, there were others who never planned to live outside Turkey and had a hard time accepting their new condition. While trying to adapt to their new lives, they also had to come to terms with what is expected from them by their social and political networks at home and abroad. A majority of the participants mentioned that they felt an obligation to act for Turkish politics in exile; while for some it was a natural consequence of exile, for others it turned into a burden. Can Dündar, a prominent journalist who left Turkey due to an arrest warrant against him, explained this matter:

*'Ultimately, being in exile or being from Turkey under these circumstances evokes a strange feeling of responsibility and guilt. If you drink a beer at a bar in Berlin or have fun somewhere, you feel as if you'll spend two or three hours away from the issues of your home and this causes feelings of guilt, in a way. It's very cumbersome.'*<sup>40</sup>

As Dündar defines the exilic situation as a constant feeling of guilt in a way, Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı asserts that exile creates opportunities for the continuation of the struggles in the homeland: *'We, as political exiles, continue the struggle wherever we go. And this period will also, certainly, end! The day will come when we can speak from the lands that made us who we are! ...'*<sup>41</sup> We observe hope and resilience in Arınlı's words, although she was not the only participant who made such declarations. Hayko Bağdat, an Armenian columnist who left Turkey because of threats and political pressures, also concurred with this approach toward exile: *'We're at the point where we can't sit around doing nothing. Each of us are rebelling in our own space. It's not bad, by the way, Turkey's rebellion, despite this oppression. I hope we win, otherwise the situation will be bad. What we win won't be heaven, but the alternative is quite terrible.'*<sup>42</sup>

Although these individuals were trying to turn the exilic situation into an asset, they also reflected on their interactions with the policymakers, media, academia and civil society in their new countries of residence. As Sznajder and Roniger argued in the Latin American context, in some cases 'the presence of exiles was tolerated, and even fostered, as a political tool to be used by the host country relative to the political scene in exile's home country.'<sup>43</sup> Many participants confirmed that leaving Turkey opened up a new space for their 'voice' after 'exit', but this new space also had its limitations and agenda which truly disturbed these individuals who do not want to be categorized and/or utilized for political aims by any state anywhere. Nil Mutluer, a signatory of the AfP petition and a participant in this study, wrote an op-ed to show her frustration with the victim category that several actors had put her in. By acknowledging the international solidarity networks which gave her a lifeline when she first arrived in Germany, she stated:

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<sup>40</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Can Dündar, September 2021.

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<sup>42</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Hayko Bağdat, June 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Mario Sznajder & Luis Roniger (2009) *The politics of exile in Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 52.

*Nevertheless, there were also quite a number of encounters where I felt that the western gaze required me as a victimized subject of its own choice – a subject who is heard only when she talks about the ordeals she has been put through by her persecutor, namely Erdoğan; a subject who is seen only when she exemplifies, in her very person, the authoritarian straitjacket that Erdoğan has been imposing on Turkey. This was what the western gaze wanted to see and wanted me to show. Quite often I felt as if I were selected as a potential refugee for the sole purpose of voicing/showing what the mainstream western institutions and media wanted to hear/to see. Europe needs me as a victim to assure itself that it is indeed 'the saviour' that it has imagined itself to be.<sup>44</sup>*

Similarly, Seckin Sertdemir Ozdemir, who was also a signatory of the AfP petition, mentioned in an article that the academics in exile were assigned roles as victims to be saved and their agency as academics have been diminished as the host society treatment toward them were packaged as a charity.<sup>45</sup> In our interview, Can Dündar also corroborated with these accounts, stating:

*[W]hen you are exiled: they define you through your identity as a Turkish dissident and there you go to another prison, at least ideologically. This is a little disturbing. After a while, you only get asked about Erdogan and Turkey, and this puts you into a tailspin eventually. It's coming to such a point that it's as if without Erdogan you would disappear as well. As if you exist through your opposition or are allowed to play on a playground.<sup>46</sup>*

A majority of the interviewees mentioned this feeling of being categorised as victims or 'Erdoğan opponents' as if they have no agency in defining their own situation.<sup>47</sup> Sznajder and Roniger, drawing on their research on Latin American exiles, also assert that there is such a thing as *rules of membership* in the host society. Exiles are usually expected to comment on their home country politics but are precluded from intervening in the local politics of the host country. Nazan Üstündağ for instance, stated that authoritarianism in Germany and USA also needs to be dealt with, however they are not expected to comment on these matters when they are invited to seminars. Although the participants tried to draw attention to the globalized struggles to show that Turkey is not an isolated case and most of the problems they are facing there (academic precarity, lack of academic freedom, democratic backsliding, anti-intellectualism...) are deeply rooted issues in other parts of the world, these issues were not given priority when they were invited to talks or seminars. As soon as they criticized their host country politics, academia or civil society, their peers were aghast. Their 'voice' was then, expected to be on a certain topic in a limited space granted by the 'host' and they could act freely only within those boundaries. In other words, they were encouraged to stay *local* in their intellectual activities.

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<sup>44</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Nil Mutluer, June 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Seckin Sertdemir Özdemir (2021) Pity the exiled: Turkish academics in exile, the problem of compassion in politics and the promise of dis-exile, in *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), p. 938.

<sup>46</sup> Authors' Online Interview with Can Dündar, September 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Sehbak Senyurt Arinli also discusses this matter in her book where she reflects on the devastating impact of not being accepted as equal by her peers on her mental health.

During the time we conducted the interviews, many participants still were trying to come to terms with their positionality within this transnational space, which was in-the-making after their ‘exit’. Besides the ambiguous relationship that the new exiles established with the host country, they also had to interact with multifaceted actors in the transnational space such as the already established diaspora groups from Turkey and the Turkish state which reaches out to its citizens abroad in negative and positive ways.<sup>48</sup> A majority of the participants stated that they prefer to stay away from established diaspora groups as they perceive the bulk of the diaspora as AKP supporters. A small number of participants such as Can Dündar, Nil Mutluer or Nazan Üstündağ established relations with already existing leftist or Kurdish diaspora organizations and participated in their seminars, talks and activities. There was a shared feeling among the participants that everyday authoritarianism in Turkey has spilled over to the transnational space and dissidents are being targeted not only by transnational state apparatuses but also by ordinary diaspora members who are regime supporters. Some had firsthand experiences of harassment in their new countries of residence while others have heard rumors and chose to be cautious *just in case*. International media also repeatedly reported about Turkish intelligence service operating in various countries, spying on regime dissidents. When exiled Turkish journalist Erk Acarer was attacked in Germany in the summer of 2021 due to his reporting against the AKP regime, it gave a clear signal to other exiles that Turkey has a long arm abroad and any dissident can be attacked anytime. Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı commented on this matter: ‘The Turkish regime is exporting its aggression. This became clear in the incident with Erk. Before that, you know, there were threats against several friends. My god, people don’t feel safe, of course’.<sup>49</sup> Some participants said that they are living under police protection that is provided by their host countries. For instance, Hayko Bağdat said that he has been living with protection since he left Turkey due to the threats he has received:

*They were going to attack me. I was on a list. There was a notice that hitmen had been dispatched. Garo<sup>50</sup> vocalized this notice in parliament. Then the German authorities, Berlin State Interior Ministry and the federal government confirmed this notice. I lived with the highest level of protection for up to eight months. This changed not only my life here but a lot of things.*<sup>51</sup>

We have observed that several such incidents and the attacks against public figures which made newspaper headlines created a perception that the Turkish state is monitoring the exiles and they are under constant surveillance. This has not stopped many from being politically active where they currently are, but at the same time it created anxiety that impacts their ambiguous relationship with the host states and the prospects for return to Turkey. As this lingering in limbo situation persists, the newcomers

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<sup>48</sup> Bahar Baser and Ahmet Erdi Ozturk (2020) Positive and negative diaspora governance in context: From public diplomacy to transnational authoritarianism, in *Middle East Critique*, 29(3), pp. 319–334.

<sup>49</sup> Authors’ Interview with Arınlı, Şehbal Şenyurt Arınlı, online, June 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Garo Paylan is a politician with Armenian descent. He is a member of parliament in Turkey representing the HDP (Peoples Democratic Party).

<sup>51</sup> Authors’ Interview with Bağdat, online, June 2021.

continue to try to make sense of the ambiguous embrace that they receive from their host countries while rearticulating the ties that bind them back to Turkey.

## Conclusion

This new wave of migration from Turkey continues. It is happening not due to a unique political milestone but is occurring throughout time as authoritarianism and one-man-rule is transforming Turkey and Turkish society. Each individual mentions a different milestone that pushed him/her away from Turkey and bears a different political memory of what went wrong. This new wave is giving us the opportunity to observe how newcomers gradually turn into diaspora members over time and constitute a new layer in Turkey's transnational communities. In this article we specifically focused on the experiences of Turkey's intelligentsia in exile. We observed that they are still coming to terms with their exilic situation and making a meaning of their transnational experience while their limbo situation lingers. They keep their voice in this transnational space which offers them opportunities as well as limitations. They continue their struggle in Turkey as they try to protest against creeping authoritarian rule, and they are pushing boundaries in their host countries by questioning the labels that a variety of actors are giving to them. During our conversations, many underlined that the local is global; all struggles they experience in Turkey are actually universal. Therefore, their 'exit' from Turkey also enabled them to trans-nationalize their voices to an extent that cannot be bounded solely by homeland politics. Although further democratization in Turkey remains as the first priority in their actions and discourses, they also draw our attention to wider intellectual discussions that need to take place in their countries of residence as well. Their return prospects presently seem slim, and only time will show how their mobilization patterns will transform as many factors have an impact on the articulation of their voice.

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