

TURKISH REVIEW

International student migration to Turkey: focus on CEE

This report attempts to map international student migration to Turkey -- from Central and Eastern Europe in particular. This important migration pattern has so far received scant scholarly attention, and the topic of CEE migration to Turkey has long been overshadowed by studies on the mass migration of ethnic Turks from Bulgaria in the 1990s. Student migration from CEE -- ever increasing in scope and diversity -- stands out as an area for study

In 1981, Turkey began accepting foreign students via the Foreign Students Exam (YÖS), but a lack of available scholarships meant that only a small number of international students traveled to Turkey until the 1990s. Then in 1992, a new exam called the Turkic Republics and Related Communities Exam (TCS) and expanding scholarship options for students from Azerbaijan and five Central Asian Turkic republics -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan -- led to an increase in students from these areas.¹

Despite the fact that the number of foreign students in the country has been rising since 1981, student migration has only very recently become a subject of scholarly study. The lion's share of the few studies that focus on this issue deal with Turkic students and the problems they have adapting to life in Turkey. Although the subject has not received broad consideration, existing data on residence permits issued to international students starting from 2003 shows that Turkey's foreign student population doubled by 2012 to reach 35,000. Regarding the rising popularity of both long- and short-term education programs in Turkey, the increasing diversity of countries of origin deserves attention. Turkish government scholarship programs, which set enrollment quotas for different regions, award the most scholarships to students from Turkic-language speaking countries such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan; next come Middle Eastern students from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria; Southern and Eastern European students come third. Although far fewer scholarships are offered to students from Africa, East Asia, South America and the Black Sea area compared to those from the first three regions, all of these groups are on the rise.²

Increasing international student migration to Turkey tracks with an upward global trend in student mobility. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) data on international student flows demonstrates that the number of international students is rising worldwide,

and that student migration is growing almost four times faster than total international migration. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), a great increase has been observed in the internationally mobile student population, especially after the 2000s. There were about 1.1 million international students in 1980, and this number rose only to approximately 1.3 million in 1990. By 2009, however, that figure had tripled to reach 3.4 million -- and according to UNESCO, these figures may be understated because short-term exchange students aren't usually included in the data. If this trend continues, the international student population is expected to reach 8 million by 2020.

In Turkey from 1992-2007 more than 36,000 spaces were available for students of Turkish ethnicity from 55 countries, of which approximately 26,000 were filled. While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan received the largest regional quotas for the TCS, students from Albania, Yugoslavia, and Serbia and Montenegro had the highest graduation rates, i.e., the highest success rate compared with students from other countries.³ Overall, the number of international students rose 59 percent from 2003 to 2012. In addition to this general increase, data on residence permits for education also shows a rise in the proportion of university and graduate students among total international students in Turkey over the same period. In the early 2000s, international students pursuing higher education in Turkey made up about 60 percent of total foreign students, while the remaining 40 percent were mostly enrolled in primary schools, with a smaller number taking language and other training courses. By the year 2009, foreign university and graduate students had gradually risen to a peak of 80 percent of the total international student population, and never fell under 75 percent again. Considering these increases, it is evident that Turkey is gaining ground as a center of attraction for education, especially for university and graduate students.

Looking at residence permits issued to international students based on the regional categories of scholarships provided by Turkey, Turkic-speaking countries have traditionally been the dominant places of origin for foreign students. This group has swung between 30 and 38 percent of the total foreign student body. The "Harran" group, the second-largest category, which includes Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria, has trended upward over the last decade. Between 2003 and 2012, the number of students from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan rose three-, four-, five- and six-fold, respectively, and this category constitutes 15-25 percent of all foreign students issued residence permits. The Turkic-speaking and Harran groups are followed by the Balkan group, which accounts for 10 percent of the total and includes the three prominent countries of Bulgaria, Greece and Albania -- which together constitute 65 percent of the Balkan group. The steady increase in Balkan-group students is overshadowed by the faster increase in the first two categories. Fourth, while the Black Sea and Bosphorus groups remain small in comparison to the three aforementioned countries, the Africa group made

significant gains in 2010, surpassed the Bosphorus group in 2011 and then overtook the Black Sea group in 2012, and has showed the fastest growth out of all regions.

Within this context, international student migration from Central and Eastern Europe (including Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine) paints an interesting picture, as this region, historically, was the dominant source of migration to Turkey. A dearth of data on student migration from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to Turkey, unfortunately, precludes detailed analysis on the subject.

According to residence permit data, however, from 2003 to 2006, CEE international students range between approximately 14 and 28 percent of total students with educational residence permits in Turkey. While the data on CEE migrants with these permits does not show major shifts over the years, the major increase in the overall number of educational residence permits causes the proportion of CEE students to shrink. Between 2003 and 2012, the CEE student population fluctuated between 5,000 and 7,000 of the 21,000-37,000 students issued educational residence permits per year. Overall, data on educational residence permits issued in that period reveals that CEE students made up an average of 22 percent of all foreign students in Turkey. In 2003, 2005 and 2007, 27 percent of the more than 20,000 foreign students in Turkey were from Central and Eastern Europe. In 2009, CEE students dropped to 21 percent of 27,000; they fell to 17 percent of 37,000 in 2011. However, the drop in the proportion of CEE students is attributable to the rising number of educational residence permits issued, which jumped from close to 22,000 to more than 37,000 in a period of eight years.

For a more detailed picture, educational residence permits are categorized by the Ministry of the Interior into permits issued for primary, university and graduate education; the Turkish and Foreign Languages Research and Application Center (TÖMER); and language and other courses. Accordingly, in 2003, most CEE students were registered for primary education. Over the years, university students overtook their primary school counterparts, and since the year 2007, residence permits issued for university education have been the most popular. Primary education permits for CEE students are currently in second place, followed by TÖMER permits, permits for language and other courses, and finally graduate permits. Among CEE students in Turkey, Bulgarian, Albanian, Serbian, Macedonian and Ukrainian students are the most represented, with Bulgarians making up 9 percent, Albanians 3 percent, students from Serbia and Montenegro and Macedonia approximately 2 percent each, and Ukrainians 1 percent of all foreign students.

Various channels facilitate CEE student migration to Turkey. Interviews with CEE students show that while students benefit greatly from Erasmus and other EU programs as well as the Turkish government's Türkiye Scholarships, many

students are funded through scholarships from their home countries, nongovernmental organizations established by Bulgarian, Bosnian or Macedonian migrants in Turkey, or simply by their families. Moreover, interviews with consulates, such as the Hungarian Consulate, attest to existing bilateral student exchange agreements with Turkey outside of the Erasmus Program. Thus, student migration from CEE is becoming both more visible and encouraged by Turkish state higher education authorities, which boosts the mobility of students from CEE.

Within this context, Turkish universities are actively working to attract students from CEE. For example, the International Relations Office of the University of Thrace, located in Edirne (which borders Greece), has said in interviews that the university has set a goal of becoming a regional center for foreign students and is attracting students from the CEE region by opening new academic institutes, such as its Balkan Research Center and Balkan Languages and Literatures Department, which are bringing in students from Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Macedonia. These efforts are bearing fruit: In 2013, students from CEE made up approximately 47 percent of the university's total foreign student population. The largest contingents are Kosovars, Bulgarians, Macedonians and Albanians, with a balanced gender distribution. CEE students from these regions, who have a large presence in Edirne, have established student groups based on nationality and are well integrated with the larger student community in the city. Moreover, in-depth interviews with CEE students show that many intend to stay in Turkey after graduation. No data is available, however, on the numbers or backgrounds of students who are able to continue residing in Turkey after graduating.

Overall, several findings on international student migration in Turkey are noteworthy. First, Turkey is increasingly becoming a center for education not only in the region, but also globally. Second, while the dominance of ethnic Turks among international students has been the most visible trend since Turkey first became an option for international students, there has also been an increase in the number of African and Asian students.

There is a definite need for more in-depth ethnographic research into the students themselves. Why do they choose Turkey, and not other countries, for education? What kinds of problems do they face during their stay? What is it like to be a foreign student in Turkey? Do they have any intentions of staying in the country? Are they interested in naturalization and eventually becoming Turkish citizens? While these micro-level questions may not have direct policy implications, they are interesting subjects for further academic inquiry.

On a broader level, one may ask whether international student mobility can lead to an influx of highly skilled, qualified workers to Turkey, as many have claimed. While there are some studies on student mobility in Europe, this literature does not cover Turkey as a host country, but rather looks into the mobility of Turkish students in the global knowledge economy. Broadly speaking, international student migration to Turkey is an interesting area of

research in migration studies, with implications both for policy-makers and academics, especially regarding high-skilled migration and brain gain. International student migration from CEE, which is a neglected area of research, has potential to strengthen Turkey's position in the European migratory system.

The authors would like to thank the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK, project ARDEB 113K021) for its support to the Urban Europe project 'IMAGINATION: Urban Implications and Governance of CEE Migration in Europe.'

1. Kasım Kırođlu, Alper Kesten and Cevat Elma, "Türkiye'de Öğrenim Gören Yabancı Uyruklu Lisans Öğrencilerinin Sosyo-Kültürel ve Ekonomik Sorunları," Mersin Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi 6, No. 2 (2010): 26-39.

2. For a full list of categories and countries, see the different headings here: "Burs Programları," Türkiye Burs Programları (accessed Sept. 1, 2014) <http://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/index.php/tr/turkiye-burslari/burs-programlari>.

3. İsa Özkan, "Türk Cumhuriyetleri, Türk ve Akraba Topluluklardan Gelen Burslu Öğrencilerin Meseleleri ve Çözüm Teklifleri," in 21. Yüzyılda Türk Dünyası Jeopolitigi, Muzaffer Özdağ'a Armağan, ed. Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, Yaşar Kalafat, Ümit Özdağ (Ankara: Avrasya Stratejik Arastırmalar Merkezi Yayınları, 2004), 4: 141-150.

2014-09-01

Muhabir: ASST. PROF. DENİZ SERT , DENİZ K. KORFALI AND TUĞBA ACAR, Özyeğin University, Koç University
