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# **REVITALIZING THE MYTH OF RETURN?**

**GERMAN-TURKISH EXCHANGE STUDENTS  
GOING TO TURKEY**

**MOTIVES, DECISION-MAKING AND FUTURE CAREER PLANS**

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### ***Abstract***

*The following paper presents the results of an explorative qualitative research on German-Turkish exchange students who went to Turkey to do their abroad studies. Although the students pursued very different aims by going to Turkey (e.g. language improvement, cultural and political insights, social and development work etc.) a commonality they share seems to be the desire to personally experience life and culture in their parents' country, apart from vacation and short visits (e.g. summer holidays, family-visits etc.). Another important insight of this research is that many students indeed regard 'return' to Turkey as a consider-worthy career option because they deem living and economic conditions in Turkey better as in Germany (e.g. feeling of well-being, higher wages etc.). In doing so, they seem to comprehend their exchange studies in Turkey as an important preparatory act of gearing up for a possible future return. Whether the students are going to be de facto ready and prepared upon return with regards to resource mobilization (social and economic capital) and adaptation remains unsettled and object to future research.*

### **KEYWORDS:**

German-Turkish Exchange Students, Myth of Return, Return Migration, Returnees

## 1. *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

According to recent figures, a significant amount of highly-skilled Turkish origin labor living in Germany has begun to return to Turkey (about 35.000 returnees per year<sup>2</sup>). Reasons for this phenomenon are various and multifaceted. Perceived better working and living conditions in Turkey<sup>3</sup> and inherent structural and individual discrimination patterns in Germany (see for instance Green 2003: 228ff.; Kaas/ Manger 2010; Solga 2008) might be some decisive factors to mention. It is nevertheless important to remark that those people are anything but a homogenous group so that individual migratory decision-making processes can involve very different and distinctive dynamics.

Inspired by this recent trend of return migration observed among Turks living in Germany and numerous on-site conversations I have held with German-Turkish<sup>4</sup> exchange students in Istanbul, this study is devoted to explore the specific case of German-Turkish exchange students going to Turkey. At the center stage of the analysis is the question whether these students' decision to do their abroad studies in Turkey can be conceived of as a preparatory act of gearing up for a possible future employment or/and living in Turkey. In other words: Can we speak of some sort of '**revitalization of the myth of return**' in their specific case? – A phenomenon which lately had been deemed to have withered away amongst the third generation offspring of Turkish labor immigrants.

The first chapter will render a theoretical framework to grasp the case of German-Turkish exchange students by reflecting conventional literature on return migration (e.g. Gmelch 1980) and offering a different approach that is grounded in the 'transnational lens' (Faist 2010). Chapter three will subsequently present the research methodology that was deployed in this qualitative research before exposing the particular views and experiences of the interviewed students in chapter four. The remainder of this paper will be reserved to give concluding remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> This qualitative research is being conducted as part of my final Bachelor-Thesis at the University of Bielefeld. In this paper I intend to present preliminary insights and results of the explorative study.

<sup>2</sup> Since this number only pertains to those with German citizenship, the actual amount of returnees can be expected to be higher (<http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/0,1518,716677,00.html>; Access 20.05.2011)

<sup>3</sup> See for instance <http://www.migazin.de/2011/01/11/reintegrationskurse-fur-hoch-qualifizierte-ruckkehrer/> (Access 20.05.2011)

<sup>4</sup> The notion 'German-Turkish' is borrowed from Ayhan Kaya (2002)

## 2. *Conceptualizing Return-Migration*

### 2.1 Conventional Approach: Return as the ultimate end of the migration journey

The very first theoretical conceptualizations of return migration date back to the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Cerase 1974; Gmelch 1980; King 1986) and were concomitant with then occurring return migration flows mainly from industrialized states back to the developing home countries (e.g. South-European *guest-workers* returning to their home countries). Over the past decades, however, the issue of return has experienced a significant revival both in the academic and political realm. George Gmelch (1980), one of the very first scholars who dealt with the conceptualization of this issue, distinguishes between *re-migration* and *return migration*. The former one pertains to those who move back to their homelands and then emigrate a second time, and the latter notion describes the movement of emigrants back to their home countries (ibid.: 136). However, the ideal typical understanding has always been that an ultimate return would pose the end of the migration-cycle. In the following I will adapt the transnational approach and illustrate in which ways the conventional terminology upheld by return migration scholars has to be revised in order to pertain to German-Turkish exchange students, as well.

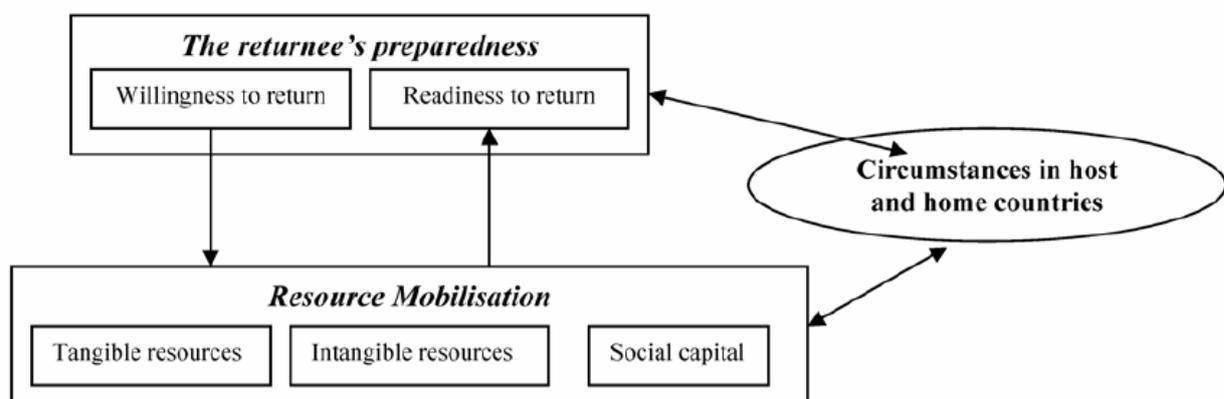
### 2.2 The Transnational Lens: Return as a stage of the migration journey

As described above, approaches to return migration up to now have mainly been stressing that return either describes an ‘anomaly, if not the failure of a migration experience’ (Cassarino 2004: 15) or a ‘calculated strategy’ (Stark 1985: 175) that indicates the end of the actor’s migration-journey (Neo-classical Economics and the New Economics of Labor Migration).

However, in the last years more and more emphasis has been put on the ‘transnational lens’ (Faist 2010) in analyzing international migration. Thanks to the impulse of transnational theory it has been increasingly acknowledged that many migrants are involved in a transnational social space that is ‘composed of a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contacts across national borders’ (Portes et al. 1999: 217), or in other words and figuratively thought: a life that is led simultaneously in multiple locations (cf. Sinatti 2011: 154). What does the transnational approach then bear for the deeper comprehension of return migration?

First of all, it broadens the view on returnees by approving that return migration can ‘take many forms and can be more or less permanent’ (ibd.). This can for instance contain regular back and forth shuttling between the home and host country or even the migration to another state. Moreover, return plans also have to be well-prepared and thought through ahead of time. Return desires on their own cannot be sufficient in undertaking a successful return but have to be accompanied by adequate social and economic capital, as well. Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004: 17f.) in his very comprehensive article on the revision of return migration approaches underlines the importance of two factors in effectively preparing a future return: (1) *Resource mobilization* and (2) *preparedness*. According to him, the mobilization of resources alludes to tangible (i.e. financial capital) and intangible (i.e. contacts, relationships, skills, acquaintances) resources that are retrievable by the migrants at any time. In terms of (2) Preparedness, Cassarino conceives the factual readiness of the repatriate to return. It refers to the complementation of the individual’s desire to return with information gathered on conditions in the country of return (see figure 1).

**Figure 1**



Source: (Cassarino 2004: 17)

As figure 1 illustrates both factors are highly interrelated and cannot be thought separately from each other. On the side of preparedness the returnee’s potential willingness to return provokes the collection of tangible and intangible resources. This, in turn, influences his/her factual readiness. However, both factors (preparedness and resource mobilization) have to be thought in a triangle relationship with the prevailing factual circumstances in host and home countries (i.e. economic and living conditions, prevailing discrimination patterns etc.).

### 3. *Research Methodology*

In the case of German-Turkish exchange students, access to possible research subjects was very limited (due to the lack of a central data pool and data privacy constraints). Hence, after having predefined German-Turkish exchange students as the specific group of research interest, the non-probability sample technique (purposive and snowball method) has been applied to detect suitable interview partners.

The research is based on five semi-structured interviews with German-Turkish exchange students that have been conducted in Istanbul (Turkey) in May 2011<sup>5</sup>. The students participating in this study have been enrolled at different state and private universities in Istanbul for either one or two semesters between 2007 and 2011. Two have been studying at Bilgi University (private), two at Istanbul University (state) and one at Marmara University (state). The students in the sample represent a variety of disciplinary affiliations such as Political Science, Communication Science, Linguistics (German as foreign language), Business Studies and Law. Moreover, the interviewees' were also from different places in Germany. Three were from North-Rhine Westphalia, one from Bavaria and one from Baden-Württemberg. By choosing respondents from different types of universities (e.g. state and private), disciplinary backgrounds and places of origin it was envisaged to minimize distortion.

The interview questions were directed towards the students' decision-making processes and motives to do their exchange-studies in Istanbul and future plans with regards to employment in Turkey. Importantly, they were part of a broader protocol also probing issues of identity and transnational ties. While specific questions were related to students' intentions, motivations and plans participants have also been engaged in lengthy discussions on their (emotional) relationship to Germany and Turkey<sup>6</sup>. All conversations were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and the names of the interviewees have been made anonymous afterwards. Since all participants answered to the questions in German (with only few exceptions in Turkish) the responses have been *a posteriori* translated into English as accurate and literal as possible.

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<sup>5</sup> The actual and final paper on this research will comprise more interviewees and will be more comprehensive theoretical analysis-wise.

<sup>6</sup> Questions related to identity issues and transnational ties will be left out here due to space constraints.

#### 4. *Students' Voices: Motives, Decision-Making and Future Career Plans*

Nowadays, one of the main reasons of going abroad for students is doubtlessly experiencing intercultural exchange, to which one can count the learning or improving of a language and gaining insights into cultural and political life of the respective country (cf. Teichler 1996: 166). However, career purposes should not be underestimated either, since going abroad 'fits into the notion of the *do-it-your-self biography*' (King/ Ruiz-Gelices 2003: 232) and contemporary employers more and more demand international experience from their job applicants. In fact, four students indicated that they aimed to improve their language competencies in Turkish and all participants underlined their desire to gain insight into social, cultural and political life in Turkey. This opinion is well reflected by Ayşe's comment:

'I mean I grew up in Germany and went to Turkey every year to visit family. But somehow I always felt like a German. [...] My mother always tried to keep me in a German environment, friends etc., so that I can learn the language. I forgot Turkish almost completely. I only spoke it with my grandma and grandpa. And my Grandpa was fussing about that: *bu kiza türkce öğretin* (teach this girl Turkish)'

Indeed, this is a feeling many German-Turks seem to have in common. It points to their deficits in the command of the Turkish language which, to a large extent, derives from the widely existing lack of (long-term) Turkish language schooling in Germany. In particular, this becomes obvious in the usage of a new dialect (*lehçe*) among young German-Turks that is in places termed '*Türkmanca*' – a dialect of its own consisting of German and Turkish words (see Dirim/ Dirim 2005).

Another important question was whether the students were influenced by their parents, families, friends or others in making their decision to go to Turkey. This is a crucial question since the 'myth of return' was mainly maintained and passed on to the offspring by first and second generation Turkish immigrants who came to Germany (most of them born in Turkey). Interestingly, all participants underscored that they asked for advice among family and friends while making their decision whether to do exchange studies in Turkey. Anyhow, the result was that some were supportive of and some against their idea:

'Nobody had significantly influenced me; it was entirely my own decision. My mother was anxious though, and didn't want to me to go [...] because she deemed Istanbul as too dangerous [...] But I wanted to go, and I did' (Nalan)

On my inquiry if the students' parents had ever tinkered with the idea of returning to Turkey and if yes, if this had an impact on the students themselves, four of five interviewees replied with a resounding no. Only Benal, whose parents had already expressed ideas of returning before, said the following:

'Firstly, it was my own decision, and secondly my family's positive recommendations. I mean there was a certain influence. But in the end, it was my own decision'.

Over the last decade, Turkey has forged ahead and advanced economically as well as politically, especially with regards to democratization. The EU as an anchor and catalyst of economic and political development has stimulated a lot of change since the beginning of the membership negotiations (cf. Düzgit/ Keyman 2007). The participants of this study seemed to be well-aware of this progress in that they expressed perceivably more convenient living conditions and better economic opportunities in Turkey than in Germany. With regards to this Leyla states:

'My parents hoped, that I would live here [in Turkey] for one year, see how hard life is and then value Germany and come back again. But it didn't happen like that [...]. Economically, you have more opportunities in Turkey. Lust for life is way higher here [...]. There is action on the streets at every time of the day [...]. Even if I would try to leave out the financial aspect, a lot depends on it. Here I can do more with the same amount of money. More opportunities; more lust for life'.

Since all students set out their journey to Turkey with specific purposes (e.g. language improvement, cultural and political insights), on my part the question arose whether they would see any career outlook for themselves in Turkey. In fact, all students acknowledged that they could imagine assuming work in Turkey someday. Ayşe illustrated this in a very lucid manner:

'I find it somehow [socially] too cold and unloving in Germany. I mean, if I have the opportunity to go to Istanbul, and economically it is also interesting, maybe it's interesting to work there in the future [...]. I am already considering, once I am finished [with my studies in Germany] in September, to come back to Istanbul. I mean I have nothing to lose. There are so many German companies here. If it works out it does, if not then not, my God...'

Ayşe's comment is very illuminative in that it demonstrates that the students indeed see career prospects in Turkey. All of them regard it as an opportunity rather than as a risk and underline the unrestrained possibility to return to Germany in case of displeasure or failure. Furthermore, all five participants expressed that they would not perceive return to Turkey as the ultimate goal. Rather, they think that it provides one means of capitalizing on their skills and intercultural competencies, earned throughout their lifetime in Germany and complemented by their abroad studies in Turkey. Moreover, all interviewees expressed that they could even imagine living somewhere completely different. This idea is well expressed by Benal's remark:

‘I want to leave all doors open. In this regard, I think, that my personal pursuit of happiness plays a decisive role. It also lies in the nature of my personality in that I attach great importance to living freely, travelling freely, deciding independently where I want to stay, what I want to do and so on’

In effect, Benal's comment acknowledges what all interviewed students agree upon: Return must not necessarily constitute the end of the migration journey. On the contrary, it should rather be regarded as one stage within the migration-cycle, leaving the option open to continue movement anywhere.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this paper was to present preliminary results of the explorative qualitative research on German-Turkish exchange students which is part of a broader and more comprehensive bachelor final project that is going to be finished by the end of summer 2011.

In terms of this paper, the students' decision-making processes and motives of going to Turkey have been exposed and their future career plans have been illustrated at length. At the center stage was the question whether German-Turkish exchange students undertake some sort of **revitalization of the myth of return** by doing their abroad studies in Turkey. The conducted interviews have illustrated, that the students indeed conceive their abroad studies in terms of gearing up for a possible future employment in Turkey (e.g. language improvement, cultural insights into daily life etc.). As reasons for assuming work in Turkey they refer to comparatively better living

conditions (overall feeling of well-being) and brighter economic opportunities (higher wages) in Turkey.

However, the term 'return' in its conventional sense (according to Gmelch and consorts) does not seem to pertain to German-Turkish exchange students since all of the interviewees regard a future repatriation to Turkey not necessarily as the ultimate end of their migration journey. Rather, they leave the possibility open to move back and forth or even somewhere else in case of displeasure or failure.

Moreover, Cassarino's model presented in chapter 2.2 illustrates that it cannot be certainly assessed at present whether the German-Turkish students' return aspirations would be successful or not. The realization of a successful repatriation depends not only on potential return desires but also on the effective mobilization of resources (such as social and economic capital) and favorable conditions in the home country (e.g. good economic and political situation). The question whether the students would be successful upon a possible return to Turkey or not thus remains open and object of future research.

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