

## Construction of ethnic identity among young Kurdish voluntary migrants in Istanbul<sup>286</sup>

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The aim of the article is to present partial results of ongoing research project devoted to examining social construction of ethnic identity of young Kurdish voluntary migrants in Istanbul. In the first part of the paper theoretical context of the study is shortly explained, with emphasis on: importance of Istanbul for Kurdish culture, conceptualization of identity and migration. The second part depicts preliminary results of interviews with migrants. It presents respondents' attitudes towards Istanbul, perceived qualities and flaws of conditions that it provides, and potential relation of metropolis to Kurdish culture.

### **Significance of Istanbul for Kurdish culture and society**

The largest part (often referred to as *Northern*) of geographical and cultural region treated by Kurds as their homeland - Kurdistan is located within the borders of modern Turkey. The estimations of Kurdish population in Turkey vary between 14 and 20 million (ref. CIA 2008)<sup>287</sup>. The population of Istanbul, the biggest city in Turkey, is of more than 14 million. Headquarters of Turkish corporations and national media are located in this great metropolis (see Karpat 2004; Ciplak 2012).

Istanbul bears a great significance for the Kurdish culture as many Kurdish organizations were active in the city over the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Alakom 2011, p. 19-21; Pirbal 2008). The largest Kurdish community in the world lives in Istanbul (The Economist 2005). The metropolis has been for years called as "the biggest Kurdish city" (see Alakom 2011, p. 9-19). Research carried out by Rüstem Erkan in 2009 demonstrated that over 5 million of Turkish Kurds live outside the eastern regions of the country (which are named by the Kurds as the Northern Kurdistan). The highest percentage of this group lives in Istanbul (TimeTurk 2010). The city of Istanbul is also special due to domination of Turkish culture. Here, cultural dominance is understood not only as majority of citizens of Istanbul of Turkish descent, but also as cultural phenomenons which show their hidden diameter at both symbolic and societal level, i.e. interactive level (Mucha 1999: 27-31).

### **Theorizing identity and ethnicity**

*Identity* - as theoretical notion and a subject of social studies has gained popularity in last decades of the twentieth century. Some social psychologists and

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<sup>287</sup> Both global and Turkish populations of Kurds are hard to estimate. Resettlement and assimilation processes forced by inhabited states are obstacles in this matter. Some estimation from the first decade of 21st century implicate that there are 30-38 millions of Kurds worldwide and 12-20 million live in Turkey (see. Yıldız 2005: 6). Therefore it can be assumed that probably Turkish Kurds are half of world's Kurdish population.

micro-sociologist tend to put more emphasis on individual self and even state that such thing as *collective identity* is non-existent. Other scholars - often macro-oriented sociologists and historians study only dominant traits of large groups (usually nations, societies). There are however also contemporary social scientists who suggest that studies of individual and collective identity should be connected with themselves (e.g. Jenkins 2004, p. 15-18).

Ethnic identity is often regarded as one of the key components of individual identity, as the ethnic group is one of the main reference groups. Belonging to a particular ethnic group in the eyes of society and the state can influence one's economic, legal and political situation: hence there is a need to negotiate ethnic identity. (Fenton 2010, p. 190-213). In the foreword to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* Frederik Barth (1969) stated that despite earlier theories of ethnicity in social anthropology, its' constitutive features are largely not objective and not biological. Barth did not, however, overestimate the cultural interpretation of ethnicity, noting that in conducting research anthropologist has access only to socially effective traits of ethnicity, and in practice cultural values are often used instrumentally by ethnic groups (e.g. for gaining political or economic support). In presented study, ethnic identity is treated as connected with cultural identity (e.g. Steve Hall 2006; Comaroff i Comaroff 2009), subject to changes in time and socially constructed.

Frederik Barth (1969: 12-13) underlined the importance of consideration of ecological factors in studying ethnicity as people who identify themselves as members of the same ethnic group can practice their ethnic identity completely differently in different environments. Urban environment can be crucial to the construction and negotiation of all elements of identity (Mach 1989: 153-193). Antagonistic relations between metropolises (treated as place of exile) and villages in Kurdistan (treated as homeland) are also often depicted in Kurdish literature (see. Bocheńska 2011; van Bruinessen 2013).

### **Kurds and internal migration flows in Turkey**

One of most important theoretical and analytic divisions in migration studies concerns forced and voluntary migration. Janet Abu-Lunghod (1988, p. 61-62) notes that there is still an enormous difference between situation when a migrant is pulled by needs and an exile when he is pushed from his homeland. Drawing from these differences, in presented study, a spatial mobility undertaken after own decision is treated as voluntary migration. In the situation of Kurds in Turkey such migration contrasts with forced resettlement led by state in country's South-East especially from 1980's until the beginning of twenty-first century (see Jongerden 2007).

Voluntary migration is usually theorized with focus on (more or less) rational calculation of potential loss and gain analyzing migration. Scholars often enumerate push and pull factors for migration while putting emphasis on different dimensions of decision making. Frequently cited push factors for internal migration in Turkey are: lack of services, inadequacy or low standard of infrastructure and insecurity. According to Ayşe Gedik (1997) who analyzed internal migration in Turkey (in years: 1970, 1980, 1985) pull factors to the same extent influence potential migrant during the decision making. These would be:

existing social networks in the migration area, job-opportunities, communication and transportation facilities. Psychological distance may be more important than physical one as proximity of a destination place seems to be irrelevant if only family members, neighbors or friend reside there.

Apart from pull factors that are most frequently enumerated by scholars of migration, important might be also less evident factors of cultural and social advantages in cities that provide wider range of free time activities and social atmosphere allowing migrant to partake in them. International Organization for Migration (2003) have noticed while studying international migrants from Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Iraq (Southern Kurdistan) to United Kingdom, that general atmosphere of freedom (including leisure activities) played a substantial role in respondents decision and evaluation of migration.

It is important to note that contrary to theories of internal migration in developing countries it is not rural to urban but urban to urban which is the most popular type of migration within Turkey. Analysis by Gedik (1997) proved that migration from city to a city (even in the least urbanized provinces), since 1970's have become a most frequent type of migration. The road to a new home for many forced migrants in 1990's was multi-step (from the South-East to some city closer to the region but situated usually in more western part of country, and from that city to other urban area located in a further distance, often Istanbul). Kurds who migrate contemporary may also do it in a multi-step manner - one can study (or complete a part of their studies e.g. undergraduate) in one city and then move to another (as was the case with some of my respondents).

Waves of internal migration in Turkey can be divided between pre-1960's era, rapid industrialization and urbanization of 1960's and 1970's, dominance of forced migration due to military fight of state with PKK and resettlement policy in 1980's and 1990's (especially in the latter decade) and potential new wave of voluntary migration connected with economic growth in the beginning of twenty-first century. Kurds that migrated voluntary could rely on social networks constituted people coming from the same village, city or region of Turkey (*bemşebri*). Those who migrated for economic reasons before mass resettlement, would easier integrate and cope economically while internally displaced people have problems with speaking proper, official Turkish language, lacked recognition and support from state until the beginning of twenty-first century (see: Betül Çelik 2012). Considering that Turkish state eventually abstained from policy of resettlement in the break of the centuries, while migration-rate still grew in first decade of twenty-first century, we can argue that a new wave of Kurdish migration would be voluntary one, basing mostly on economic and educational needs.

### **Characteristics of studied group**

Preliminary research results presented below base on 22 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Young Kurdish migrants from different districts of Istanbul, and one group interview with 6 conservative Kurdish women (among whom two were migrated to Istanbul). Selection for the interviews was based on snow-ball effect. Interviews were made in Turkish language in August and September 2014. Interview questions were concentrated on three broad topics: history of migration, (taking into consideration changes in habits that have taken

place after arriving to Istanbul), social construction of Kurdish identity (it's understanding and perceived every day and festive practices which maintain this identity) and attitudes towards Istanbul (advantages and disadvantages of the city and places especially connected with the Kurdish culture) Below are mentioned general characteristics of interviewed people.

From 22 in-depth interviews, 6 were done with women. Almost all of respondents were Sunni Muslim (there were 2 Alevi women) and kurmanci dialect speakers (one respondent's native language was zazakî). The youngest respondent was a 19 years old student, the oldest were 35. Majority of the respondents were students or graduates of one of the universities in Istanbul, two of them were studying in other cities but stated Istanbul as their residence. Among graduates were: beginner advocates, high school teachers, physiotherapists, one entrepreneur and one unemployed person. Most of respondents of in-depth interviews were also leftist Kurds, although not all of them were voters of Kurdish *Peoples Democracy Party* (Turkish shortcut *HDP*) and one respondent described himself as former AKP voter.

### **Young migrant's attitudes towards the city of Istanbul**

Majority of the respondents have migrated to Istanbul in order to study in one of the universities functioning in the city. Its multiculturalism, educational prestige, economic situation and availability of rare majors were cited as reasons for choosing studying in the city. Some of respondents have completed part of their higher education in other Turkish city and moved to Istanbul for graduate studies, studying second major or to pursue a career. Almost all of interviewed migrants at first sight of Istanbul felt overwhelmed by its enormous size and crowded nature. Respondents underlined the difference between their homeland and Istanbul citing direct contacts with almost every one living in the district of their origin. Close relations were contrasted with thousands of anonymous people passing by themselves in Istanbul – *very crowded, very hectic, everyone was in hurry ...* (third respondent from Mardin on his first impression of the city). *I came to university, in our place people talk with themselves while walking, here they talk very rarely, no one looks the other in the face...*(respondent from Bitlis). Reaction to vastness of cities' landscape was described a few times as experiencing fear of being lost.

Narrations on relation between Istanbul and Kurdish culture differed depending on one's general attitude to the city. While enumerating discussing Kurdish population in Istanbul, respondents would often point out that many Kurdish migrants are getting assimilated to Turkish culture in the city – *For Kurdish culture Istanbul is disadvantageous... people living in metropolis became similar to each other (...)* (respondent from Bitlis) . Some respondents pointed out that Istanbul is not a Kurdish homeland in a way cities of Kurdistan are - *Istanbul is important for Kurdish culture...but more for Turks... as for lives of Kurds... Diyarbakır, Erbil, Mohabad, Qmîşlo, Kobane, Efrin...* (respondent from Batman). Some underlined that Kurdish traditions cannot be cultivated there. Many respondents stated that the city has a place in Kurdish history as it was a home for living for Bedîrxan and is a destination of Kurdish migration. Many respondents accented that the city was a place of cross-cultural exchange – *Istanbul is important for every culture* (respondent from Şırnak). This difference in views on the city was mirrored also in varying

emphasis on its advantages and disadvantages. Most of respondents pointed to availability of employment and variety of possible activities that one can find in the city as its main qualities – *You can find everything that you want* (respondent from Konya). *If you want to work in Istanbul you can find the job* (second respondent from Mardin). *It was like going to Disneyland, it was a city like Disneyand, everything looked great* (respondent from Batman on his first impression of Istanbul). *In our place, in the evening, everybody altogether stop for the call for prayers - ezan - and life ends. Here it's not like this, in Taksim, in Kadikoy, at night at any hour you can sit with your friends* (respondent from Bitlis) At the same time majority of interviewees have found living there difficult and working conditions hard. One of the respondents noted that Istanbul is great city for the rich ones while there is a widespread economic exploitation and exclusion of many Kurdish migrants - *In other Kurdish districts if you live with Kurds there (...) they are poor...they are oppressed...* (second respondent from Mardin). Overpopulation, pollution, traffic and more indirect inter-personal relations were also cited as disadvantages of living in the city.

### Maintaining Kurdish identity in Istanbul

Being Kurdish as being born from Kurds appears to be a part of common-sense among respondents (and probably among most of Istanbul residents basing on observations and conversation made during the fieldwork). This does not however mean that every person who was raised in Kurdish family would in every situation publicly and openly admit that he or she is a Kurd. Some people think of their ethnicity as just simple fact (e.g. Seeing more value in religious affiliation and community) - while other underline it consciously and often politically in order to be identified as opposed to those who discriminate Kurds in Turkey. It is however important to note that majority of respondents when asked what is in their opinion the meaning of being Kurdish and how Kurds differ from other groups would start they answer with emphasis on statement that one's ethnicity does not matter much to them and people of various origins have similarities (implying at the same time that they are not nationalists and Kurds are not fundamentally different from other cultures, ethnic groups and nations) – *Being Kurdish.. so...normally... if it's necessary to express than...It's nothing. Being Turkish does not matter, being English does not matter, being German, being French does not matter...* (respondent from Batman). Many of my interviewee's have stated that if they would have to describe in some way Kurdishness they would refer to resistance, oppression and discrimination, thus referring to difficult history of Kurds and their homeland – *Being Kurd in this country means death, means pain, means tears* (respondent from Van). Many of them have also pointed to having darker skin color than Turks and being generally warm in social relations (phrase used was - *sıcak kanlı* – literary having warm blood) and hospitable as Kurdish characteristics. These latter two can be associated more personally than general values and ideas symbolizing Kurdish identity enumerated before.

Maintaining Kurdish identity in respondents narrations was usually connected with using Kurdish dialect (most of respondents spoke kurmanci), collective commemorations like participating in *Nevroz* celebrations and knowing Kurdish history. Although respondents did not name the latter in a straightforward manner, preserving collective Kurdish memory was often important to them as

during the interview many of them would mention important Kurdish characters and tragic events that Kurds experienced (e.g. Halabja genocide or killing of Kurdish smugglers in Roboski). Some respondents were also active members in youth of Kurdish leftist People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*) or other leftist parties close to it (e.g. Socialist Party of Oppressed - *Ezilenlerin Sosyalist Partisi*). Most of respondents could name some Kurdish institutions functioning in Istanbul. Apart from most frequently cited were: Mesopotamia Cultural Center (Turkish: *Mezopotamya Kültür Merkezi*) and Kurdish Institute of Istanbul (Kurdish name - *Enstîtuya Kurdî Ya Stenbolê*). Some of them took part or were involved in organization of activities provided by those institutions (e.g. one of the respondents was teaching Kurdish language in Kurdish Institute) but many of my interlocutors would admit that they do not recall the addresses of these organizations nor that they regularly participate in events organized there.

Although majority of respondents would think mainly about Kurdish traditions and high culture when asked about cultivating customs, after I have pointed to possibility of individual cultivation of Kurdish habits, for example in leisure activities and food preferences they would admit that they do preserve them for example by drinking ceylon tea (the so-called smuggled tea – *kaçak çay* as it used to be smuggled to Northern Kurdistan from Arab countries) instead of Turkish tea from black sea or eating specially prepared cheese with herbs (which is typical for Şırnak province). Many respondents stated that they listen to Kurdish music most notably to Şivan Perwer, Civan Haco and Ahmet Kaya.

Various ways of preserving ethnic identity enumerated by respondents does not however mean that they could do it completely freely. Policy of state was almost invariable states as the greatest obstacle on maintaining Kurdish identity in Istanbul. Examples of perceived discrimination and descriptions of situations when they preferred to hide their ethnicity point to the need of negotiation of public display of Kurdish identity. It is however important to note that in respondents narrations Istanbul was viewed generally as a multicultural city with better atmosphere for exercising identities other than Turkish than other cities in the country (e.g. Izmir or Adana). Interviews have proved also that it is not necessarily a demonstration of distinctive identity that draws discrimination from others in Istanbul but sole admission of province when they come from. Many respondents have pointed that they could not find apartments for rent when they would reply for a question about homeland with a name of city, village or region that was from South-East – I came to Istanbul, *I was a student, I was supposed to find home, I searched for home, but I couldn't find it. In most places they asked me where are you from, what is your homeland, Hakkari I would say, we do not give it (for rent) they would say* (respondent from Hakkari).

## Conclusion

With growing migration rate in the beginning of twenty-first century, after Turkish state withdrew from the policy of resettlement, it appears that new wave of internal migration emerged in the country. As Istanbul is the city gathering largest Kurdish group in the country, there is a need to study new Kurdish voluntary migration – their ways of preserving identity and coping with space and conditions provided by metropolis. Preliminary results of in-depth interviews with

young migrants from different districts of the city show that Istanbul is not necessarily treated by migrants as city connected with Kurdish culture – as tradition is associated more with collective life in Northern Kurdistan – but more as a place with wider social freedoms and enabling activity of Kurdish organizations. The metropolis can be treated by migrants as endless source of possibilities – a *Disneyland* but also as an urban space of hard work necessary for economic support but empowering assimilation – a place of an exile.

Preserving Kurdish habits in Istanbul is mirrored not only in publicly visible, collective actions but also in everyday activities done by young migrants. The latter may be maintained not consciously as Kurdish cultural traits but rather as something obvious for people brought up in Northern Kurdistan. Multiculturalism and job availability pose as qualities which make Istanbul better than other Turkish cities in the eyes of migrants. It is however important to note that this atmosphere of openness does not mean that there are no perceived obstacles in maintaining Kurdish identity in Istanbul. Lack of legal recognition as separate group and cases of discrimination are examples of the necessity for social negotiation of one's identity. District, city or village of the origin of family remains a strong marker of identification. Ties with people from the same place can help migrants accommodate but at the same time the sole admission of being born in place inhabited by Kurds can cause adverse reactions from some Turkish inhabitants of the city.

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