The civic and political participation of young people in a context of heightened authoritarianism. The case of Turkey

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Abstract

Applying insights from research on civic and political participation, this study focuses on the effects that the recent authoritarian turn taken by Turkey had on the expression of participatory behaviours by young people. The analysis brings about a number of contentious issues and intertwines two recent dynamics. First of all recent events (such as the protests associated with the *occupygezi* movement) show that youth in Turkey are extremely important players and political actors. Secondly, however, the authoritarian turn taken by the country under the AKP's governance resulted in serious and alarming limitations to the exercise of basic freedoms and hence participatory behaviours. Based on the results of 40 semi-structured interviews with young people involved in civil society organisations, the article discusses three aspects: young people's view of active citizenship; the instruments of empowerment that stimulate participatory behaviours and the significance attributed by young people to different means of civic and political participation. The analysis reveals the complexity of active citizenship in a context of heightened authoritarianism and underlines the constraints put on the exercise of civic and political participation by the current government. It also unpacks the alarming consequences of the AKP agenda on the expression of freedoms, with a particular focus on the repression of participatory behaviours.

Key Words

Political Participation; Civic Participation; Active Citizenship; Youth; Turkey; Authoritarianism

Introduction

This article looks at the development of active citizenship in Turkey, taking as a key case study the civic and political participation of young people involved in civil society organisations. The study of participatory behaviours by younger generations in the Turkish context has recently attracted a growing attention (Bozkurt *el al.* 2015; Chrona and Capelos 2017; Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci 2017; Gökçe-Kizilkaya and Onursal-Beşgül 2017; Gümüş 2017; Lüküslü 2005, 2012, 2016; Kayaoğlu 2017; Şener 2014). This vibrant research agenda is important because it highlights a number of trends that are extremely significant in respect to the dynamics that motivate youth to participate civically and politically in the Turkish society. In the first instance, it underlines a rupture with the paternalistic link with the highly centralised Turkish state inherited by the 1982 Constitution. This limited spaces for political participation, with the only exception of participation in conventional forms, and more precisely voting. In particular art. 58 of the Constitution[1], reflects the need to protect and at the same time control youth, by keeping them 'at distance from all political ideas, movements and actions that might endanger the republic' (Isyar et al. 2010, 8). As a result, Turkish young people have been characterised as apathetic and disinterested, showing low levels of engagement and consequently participation. As Lüküslü puts it well young

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[1] Art. 58 of the Turkish Constitution assigned specific roles to youth. The articles states that: *The State shall take measures to ensure the education and development of the youth into whose keeping our independence and our Republic are entrusted, in the light of positive science, in line with the principles and reforms of Atatürk, and in opposition to ideas aiming at the destruction of the indivisible integrity of the State with its territory and nation. The State shall take necessary measures to protect youth from addiction to alcohol and drugs, crime, gambling, and similar vices, and ignorance.*

people of new generations have been 'accused of acquiescing to a globalised, consumer society, and have been considered individualistic, apathetic, egotistical, and incapable of forming youth movements that characterised previous generations' (2013, 80). This image and negative connotation is however challenged by current research showing that rather than being apolitical or disengaged, Turkish young people have actually gone through a radical redefinition of the political realm, shaping a different meaning around what is political and what is not. Isyar *et al.* (2010), for example, look at the *acts of citizenship* (Isin 2008) through which specific demands and claims are put forward in respect to European and Turkish institutions. In second instance therefore, the growth of research on young people in Turkey provides evidence of the various and complex modalities that young people use in order to engage with the political domain. It also shows that -if taken comparatively- the Turkish case is not dissimilar from other case studies conducted across the world. Worthwhile to be pointed out is that the recent research agenda on youth's engagement and participation is inspired by the work of Norris (2003), that in recognising that conventional political participation is in decline, focuses on the *repertoires* and *agencies* of political activism by young people. This corresponds to a growing mistrust towards representative democracy and traditional institutions and actors, such as political parties. Following this insight, different scholars note that this attitude does not correspond to apathy, disengagement or disinterest but rather to the emergence of forms of participation that are non-electoral or non-institutionalised (Sloam 2016, 522; Henn and Foard, 2012). As a consequence, a number of studies have been looking at the emergence of different and alternative modalities to design the political space by young people and to exercise participatory behaviours (Basted 2015; Farthing 2010; Henn and Foard 2012; Marsh *et al.* 2007; Ribeiro *et al.* 2015).

Patterns of political behaviour in Turkey are similar –with an apparent disengagement by young people and a mounting mistrust towards forms of representative democracy- but however with quite important peculiarities determined by the characteristics of the socio-political context. Recent events show that Turkey has taken a dramatic authoritarian turn, with alarming consequences on the expression of freedoms and liberties in the country and a mounting suppression of anti-governmental voices. Exemplificative of this situation are the developments subsequent to the repression suffered by the academics that signed the 'Academics for Peace' petition. This document, signed by 1128 academics in January 2016 called for peace and the suspension of violence in the Kurdish regions of Turkey. As a consequence of this, a number of socio-political actors strictly connected with the government initiated an oppressive political narrative based on the 'criminalisation of academics through counterterrorism discourse' (Baser *et. al* 2017, 289). This led to an extensive number of dismissals and arrests, indicating quite clearly the gravity of the situation in terms of suspension of freedoms and human rights.

This study fits with this context and paradoxical situation. By exploring different components of active citizenship and the importance assigned to civic and political engagement and participation, I focus on the processes of development of participatory behaviours by young people that belong to civil society groups. The aim of this paper is to understand first of all the views of young people that are part of various organisations in respect to the issue of active citizenship, by looking at their evaluation of policies initiated by the government. Secondly, the article is focused on the definition of various modalities of empowerment that characterise the working practices of young people in order to look at the processes that link engagement and participation. In addition to this, the aim is to look at the salience of different components of active

citizenship for young people, by looking prominently at the contrast between the importance given to means of civic and political participation such as volunteering, voting and protesting. Before moving into the discussion of the main results of the 40 semi structured interview conducted in Turkey in 2016, it is however necessary firstly to remark some insights regarding the definitions of civic and political participation and engagement adopted in this article, secondly to summarise briefly some of the characteristics of the Turkish context, and finally to introduce the framework used for the analysis, by shedding light on the key concepts and the method adopted for the empirical research.

Civic and political engagement and participation

The article takes inspiration from recent discussions in the literature that, influenced by the work of Verba et al. (1995), aimed at establishing clear indicators to measure participatory behaviours that underlay active citizenship (Barrett and Brunton Smith 2014; Barrett and Zani 2015; Berger 2009; Ekman and Amnå 2012). This section focuses on unpacking the discussion surrounding the concepts of civic and political engagement and participation (Adler and Goggin 2005; Norris 1999, 2003; Putnam 2000; Skocpol et al 1999; van Deth et. al 2007; Zukin et al. 2006). I also draw on the criticism of the use and ambiguities inherent to the analysis on civic engagement put forward by Berger (2009).

Defining engagement and participation

The distinction between *engagement* and *participation* is necessary to be drawn. In this respect, the recent work carried on as part of the PIDOP[2] project is essential as a

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[2] The Project PIDOP (Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation) financed by the 7FP aimed at the analysis of civic and political engagement and participaton in 8 European countries. Full details on the Project can be found at: http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop/

reference point in order to provide these distinctions and to discuss different dimensions pertaining the determinants of active citizenship. Barrett and Brunton Smith (2014: 6) underline that engagement refers to 'having an interest in, paying attention to, or having knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or feelings about either political or civic matters' or, in other words, it is specifically based on the holding of interests, feelings, beliefs, attitudes towards civic or political issues (Barrett and Zani 2014). Having an interest, a feeling or an idea towards something, be this a civic or a political matter, does not necessarily imply assuming a participatory behavior. In a nutshell, an interest in a civic or political matter, does not directly correspond to open participation in the polity or the community and does not necessarily lead to active forms of civic and political participation. For instance, someone could be interested in who is running for elections in a particular community believing that, according to her/his opinion, a specific candidate should win, therefore following political blogs or TV shows where political issues are discussed, without participating in any campaigning for the support of such candidate. Or, to draw another example, someone could have an interest towards the well-being of everyone in the community and acknowledge the fact that there should be safety nets and mutual support for the poorer, without actively participating in any volunteer activity or being part of an organization providing mutual help or try to lobby policy makers to introduce specific policies targeting such groups. The central issue here is therefore the level of distinction existing between cognitive and behavioral engagement, with the latter implying the assumption of participatory attitudes that may result in active involvement. In short, by referring to the first example drawn above, the support for a candidate at elections might result in either individual or collective efforts to support her/him: writing blogs or twittering during the political campaign; supporting his/her political party by donating money; participating in public

events in support of the candidate, and so on. With reference to the second example, having an interest towards the more disadvantaged in the community, might result in the individual joining a specific volunteer organization and actively participating in activities aiming at supporting and improving their life conditions; donating money to charity; actively participating in a social movement that advocates for better living conditions.

The distinction between individual and collective engagement and participation is also rather central in this context. Reading news, having personal feelings towards a civic matter, knowing about civic institutions are examples of individual forms of engagement, whereas the adoption of a certain lifestyle or the recognition with a specific collective ideology have collective dimensions. Thus, an example of engagement in civic and political matters, at the individual level, could be considered reflecting a personal interest in the life of the community. An example of individual participation in civic and political matters could be for instance adopting environmentally sustainable behaviors, such as for example recycling, or donating money to a green organization or a charity, supporting therefore their initiatives.

Taking inspiration from these insights, I considered engagement as a cognitive process that implies the assumption of awareness towards civic or political matters. In other words, holding interest and awareness towards -for example- political institutions- is an indicator of political engagement; looking for information and building awareness in regards to civic issues, is an indicator of civic engagement. By reflex, participation, on the other hand, either of a civic or political nature, is behavioural in the sense that it implies the activation of specific actions, either as an individual or as a part of a broader social group, or a civic or political community. As Barrett and Zani argue, 'individuals can be cognitively or affectively engaged without necessarily being behaviorally

engaged' (Barrett and Zani 2015: 4). By consequence of this, on the other side, it can be argued that participation involves the active involvement in civic or political matters and is 'behavioral in nature' (Barrett and Brunton Smith 2014: 6).

Civic and political participation

Civic participation (Zukin et al. 2006) refers to the set of voluntary activities that are meant to provide, for example, mutual help or trying to face social and public problems emerging in the community. As I argued above, engagement, either civic or political, can obviously, but not necessarily, subsume participation, or lead into the activation of participatory behaviors. When we talk about civic participation we refer to the set of voluntary activities 'focused on helping others, achieving a public good or solving a community problem, including work undertaken either alone or in cooperation with others in order to effect change' (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014: 6). This of course implies a form of civic activism that is oriented at the improvement of a particular society. As it is arguable, many activities of voluntary organizations are behavioral in the sense that they have the scope of promoting forms of mutual help and are based on the fostering of social solidarity.

Political participation (Van Deth et al. 2007; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Norris 1999) encompasses various modalities through which the influence on the political system and on public policy can be exercised: examples being voting, campaigning, protesting, expressing opinions or dissent through the use of social media, actively joining a political movement. Barrett and Brunton Smith (2014) define political participation to denote the 'activity that has the intent or effect of influencing either regional, national or supranational governance, either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of individuals that make that policy' (Barrett and Brunton Smith 2014: 6). This definition, inspired by the seminal

work of Verba *et al.* (1995) on political participation, encompasses various modalities through which this influence can be exercised: voting, campaigning, protesting, expressing opinions or dissent through the use of social media, actively joining a political movement etc. In short, it encompasses both conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation. In the former, dimensions that are directly linked with the political arena can be included and are linked with electoral processes and therefore crucial for the survival of representative democracy. The latter instead involves a variety of actions that are usually not taking place in usual channels of political representation and therefore can be located outside electoral processes.

To sum up examples of civic participation are, for example, the activities of an individual within a charity, if we are focusing on an individual agency, or of a charity in itself in providing certain provisions, if we are studying instead a group agency. Examples of political participation are for example, voting (conventional political participation), or joining a rally or a protest against a specific government (non-conventional political participation). It is important to note that, as argued by Ekman and Amnå (2012), civic engagement can, in some cases, be considered as a latent form of political participation. In a nutshell, holding an interest towards civic institutions, or the civic history of a country, may lead – but not necessarily- into the assumption of participatory behaviours. A number of factors are related to –and affect- the patterns of engagement and participation. Barrett and Zani (2015: 8), in particular outline a model that accounts for macro contextual factors, demographic factors, social factors and psychological factors (See Bee and Kaya 2017a for a discussion of this model on the Turkish context).

Active citizenship

The research deals with the dynamics enabling or hindering participatory behaviours leading citizens to gain ownership of democratic processes. The discussion on the concept of *citizenship* and the development of the notion of *active citizenship* has reinvigorated thanks to the efforts of various scholars to put emphasis on the active elements of citizenship besides of the passive ones (Lister 1997). In a nutshell, moving away from a conception of citizenship that takes into account the focus on the prescribed rights and responsibilities entailed by this status, the literature has focused on the various interlinked patterns that motivate people to mobilise in the public sphere but also to become critical actors in public policy processes (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000).

Besides, active citizenship has become part of the institutional language and political discourse of governments in various countries but also of supranational organisations such the European Union (Boye 2015). The ultimate scope is to lay the ground for improving the governance of public affairs by enhancing civic and political participation.

This debate assumes particularly fascinating characteristics in the Turkish context. If on the one side there is agreement on the fact that the traditional notion of citizenship in the country is strongly associated to a republican model where citizens are mostly dependant upon a highly centralised state (İçduygu 2011), on the other side however different scholars have observed the salience and impact of political activism for challenging this structure. A recent turning point is to be found in the protests linked to *occupygezi*, the political movement that in 2013 saw the mobilisation of thousands of people in Istanbul and in other Turkish cities. Although the protest started against the redevelopment project of the Takism Square in Istanbul, its reasoning soon became the claim for a different ground where to build Turkish democracy. Most of the literature

that looks at the motivations of participants at occupygezi share the argument that Gezi represented a unique experience of active citizenship where individuals belonging to various social groups and social classes claimed the right to the public space and social justice (Karasulu 2014; Kaya 2017; Ozkaynak et al 2015).

This is one valuable example, between others, that shows the importance of connecting two interlinked dimensions of active citizenship, one that has to do with the *practices* and another that has to do with the *demands*. In the first instance, active citizenship is stimulated by public institutions in order to enlarge the democratic bases of consensus and legitimacy of public policy. In this sense, policy makers promote and develop a number of participatory mechanisms with the scope of listening concerns and opinions, and receiving inputs about public matters (See Bee and Kaya 2017b for a discussion of this characterisation). However, restricting the analysis to this dimension limits the definition of active citizenship to a set of institutionally stimulated practices.

How could we explain for example forms of volunteerism spontaneously developing in emergency situations where people mobilise to provide rescue for other peers? Or how do we explain the emergence of deliberative processes, as it has happened during the recent protests that took place as part of the occupy movements? Because of this, in order to provide a well rounded definition of active citizenship we need to take into account the category of *active citizenship as a demand* that is shaped when public policy is lacking or insufficient, or in most extreme cases, when public intervention is authoritatively controlled (and promoted) as it is in the Turkish case. The results of the analysis of semi-structured interviews reveal the tension existing between the practices of active citizenship promoted by the central government and the demands emerging from the civil society in terms of accountability and democratisation.

Turkey: a context of heightened authoritarianism

Turkey is a context where recently there has been a significant and alarming reduction of possibilities to participate, politically and civically. A growing number of scholars and analysts have focused on the retention of basic democratic rights in the country. For instance, in their introduction to a recent special issue Öktem and Akkoyunlu discuss various patterns that furnish evidence of the process of Turkish de-democratization. (2016, 473).

Conceptually the research aims at providing new insights on the outcomes of the Turkish phenomenon of 'competitive authoritarianism'. This concept has been used in order to describe a situation where, especially in the last election cycles, the AKP has dominated political institutions and exploited state resources in a partisan manner blocking opposition's chances of winning an election (Esen and Gumuscu 2016). However, the Turkish descent into authoritarianism (Özturk and Gözaydin 2017) after the 2016 attempted military coup and the 2018 elections show that the AKP's dominance is now unquestioned and undisputed. This authoritarian turn has resulted in serious limitations to the exercise of basic freedoms and participatory behaviours with dramatic effects on younger generations (Lüküslü 2016). Recent events, have dramatically worsened this situation, with various dismissals from public service because of alleged links with the Gülenist movement, the firing of an extensive number of academics, the seizure of various oppositional media and the closure of a number of NGOs in the context of the so called 'Turkish purges'. In these terms, the research has the ambition to provide new information on forms of authoritarianism taken by the country.

In regards to the specific angle taken by my article, there are a number of important factors that need to be highlighted. Specifically, it is worth noting that the Justice and

Development's party (AKP) dominance across the years, the centralisation of political power around the current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and the shaping of policies aiming at controlling the civil society are dramatically counterbalancing and annihilating Turkish citizens' possibilities for civic and political action. In a recent interview to the Hurriet Daily News, Tevfik Başak Ersen, director of the Third Sector Foundation of Turkey (TÜSEV) explains rather efficiently the situation of the civil society, arguing that more and more the so called GONGOs (or government-oriented NGOs) have been gradually replacing NGOs in the country. In discussing the AKP's approach to civil society he argues that the ruling party 'continues to support civil society organizations that it sees itself as close to, but perceives the rest as a threat. We have also seen measures that directly target these organizations' (HDN 2016). Sarfati on this account provides an analysis of the process that led to the co-optation of the civil society across time by the AKP while trying to reduce the power of the organisations in order to annihilate their oversight over governmental activities (Sarfati 2017, 405).

Taking into account the current growth of authoritarianism (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2016), the restriction of freedoms (Chrona and Capelos 2017), the seizure of anti-governmental voices and closure of civil society organisations (Sarfati 2017), the repression of dissent and protest through the use of excessive force by public authorities (Göle, 2013), and the manipulation of educational programmes in order to create a pious generation by AKP (Lüküslü 2016), this study explores the effects of this repressive repertoire on the participatory behaviour of young people in the country.

Turkish young people

The study accounts for two antithetical tensions that make Turkey a worthwhile case study to be looked at. On the one side the expression of participatory behaviours by Turkish youth is a significant positive trend, as it has been noticed by the literature. This breaks the link with past conceptualisations that emphasised a passivity of youth towards political issues (Neizy 2001). A vast number of recent studies highlighted the processes that led young people to become a civically and politically engaged actor in Turkish politics. In particular, evidence (Gümüş 2017; Lüküslü 2013) shows the complexity of patterns of civic and political participation that have developed prominently in the last few years and that see youth as a key actor involved in a process of emancipation from a strong state tradition. Taking this into account, research on the subject shows specific trends in regard to the participation of young people in Turkish politics.

In a recent study Yılmaz (2017) looked at the influence of the social and economic context on patterns of youth's political behaviour in Turkey. Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci (2017) concentrated more explicitly on conventional and non-conventional forms of political participation, focusing on the differences existing between younger and older generations. Chrona and Capelos (2017) studied the individual-based determinants of participatory behaviours adopting a political psychology point of view noting the factors that determine the exercise of non-conventional participation. Gökçe-Kizilkaya and Onursal-Beşgül (2017) focused on the participation of young people at the municipal level, shedding light on the limitations of public policies aimed at the stimulation of civic and political participation in Turkey. Gümüş (2017) reported the results of a fieldwork conducted with young people during the days of the Gezi protests in 2013 in order to determine the modalities through which participants redefine the political. Lüküslü (2013) focused on the apparent apathy and disengagement of Turkish

young people from politics, elaborating on the notion of *necessary conformism* to argue that there is evidence of various modalities through which young people in Turkey show they discontent towards the socio-political system using alternative tactics that stand outside conventional politics.

In a nutshell, this research agenda shows that young people formulate specific modalities of participation neglecting their disengagement from politics, establishing various alternative strategies of active citizenship and developing behavioural patterns of participation that brought them to elaborate 'civic tactics' and 'acts of citizenship' in order to interact with the civic and political domains. Besides they have emancipated from the centralised state thanks to the impact of external processes -i.e. Europeanization- and internal dynamics -i.e. occupygezi (Kaya 2017). These have brought to the surface new significant modalities to interact with the political but also forms of criticism aimed at contesting the dominant state elites (Gümüş 2017).

In this context the exercise of control over young people is significant and alarming. Recently, Lüküslü for instance noticed the AKP's manipulation of education policies with the intention of creating a *pious generation* adherent with the values and principles of the political culture promoted by Erdoğan (Lüküslü 2016). If on the one side there are then positive trends that show us that young people have become active political actors in the Turkish context, on the other side the recent promotion of a specific normative system by AKP is significant because –between other effects- is meant to be suppressive of oppositional voices, with dramatic effects on younger generations.

Methodology and research design

The article adopts a discursive approach to policy analysis (Fisher 2003) arguing that language and communication play a central role in shaping social action and policies

as well as at the processes of discursive interaction finalized at determining specific policy outcomes (Drizek 2008; Hajer 2002). The methodological approach that is adopted is qualitative and focuses on the application of Discourse Analysis (DA) to transcripts from interviews. As Hajer argued 'discourse is defined as an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena. Meaning is thus produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices' (2002). For the purpose of this article, it is a useful approach as it looks at the interaction between different publics, the reciprocal dynamics of power and the establishment of specific argumentative strategies formulated to impose a certain meaning on social reality (Liebert 2007). Methodologically, the analysis refers to the study of different components of active citizenship and more precisely to the values and importance assumed by civic and political engagement and participation (both conventional and non-conventional). However, the scope of this article is not to test the significance of the factors that influence these components of active citizenship (as it is for example in the case of Ribeiro et al. 2015). Following the rationale of an explorative strategy of enquiry with little pre-planned structure (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 106), the research is qualitative and based upon the execution of 40 semi-structured interviews with activists aged 18-28 in Istanbul, Izmir, Antalya, Sanliurfa[3].

Interviewees are either university students or have obtained a university degree, are involved in their organizations as policy officers or youth trainers or are part of informal groups of young people that have actively submitting proposals for funding to the EU. More precisely, the research is focused on members of youth organizations that are

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[3] The four cities were selected because of their geographical location but also because of the presence of different umbrella networks of youth organizations active in the application for EU funding. The research team also attempted to include a number of participants in Ankara and Gaziantep without success.

either part of transnational networks thanks to project funding sponsored by the EU in programmes such as Youth in Action and Erasmus +, or have been attempting to put forward proposals to join such networks. Being directly involved in the activities of their organizations under these roles they are representatives of the organizations of belonging. The areas of activity of such organizations regard democratization, human rights, social inclusion, education and youth exchanges. In this sense, I look at one but yet significant side of the coin regarding the emergence of the organized civil society in Turkey, by taking a stance on civil society groups that have been active in the light of the Turkish Europeanization process. On this account, the findings are not meant to draw conclusions in regard to other typologies of organizations (i.e. religious organizations).

Participants were selected following a snowball sampling technique. In each of the cities initial contacts were sent to policy officers of youth organizations or to leaders of informal groups of young people publicly seeking participants to constitute and/or join European projects through the EU Salto Youth Website. Initially a number of 8 contacts in Istanbul, 6 in Izmir, 5 in Antalya and 1 in Sanliurfa responded positively to the invitation to participate in the research. The respondents were then asked to suggest colleagues that would be available to participate in the research. The final sample size reached 40 participants in total (16 in Istanbul, 11 in Izmir, 10 in Antalya and 3 in Sanliurfa). At that point, the researchers felt that they had collected sufficient information to answer the research question(s) (Kvale 1996)

The semi structured interview was organized in five main sections:)1 Introduction; 2) Priorities and values; 3) National level; 4) European priorities and 5) Conclusion. Whilst Section 1 and 5 were the warm up and cool down phases of the interview, Section 2 had the aim to uncover the main priorities of the interviewees' organizations

of belonging but also to gather information on the strategies employed to promote engagement and participation. This slot of the interview was also meant to collect information on the individual understanding of the different components of active citizenship related to processes of engagement and participation. Section 3 was meant to elaborate on the 'interviewees' personal evaluation of the national strategies implemented by the Turkish government on active citizenship but also to evaluate the perceived impact that activists had in public policy. Section 4 looked the opportunities but also limitations offered by EU funding for Turkish organizations, with the scope to understanding whether this had produced a positive or negative change for the processes of mobilization of young people.

The transcripts of the interviews were coded following an open-coding process that led to the definition of specific analytical categories. It is important to note that the fieldwork was carried on following very specific ethical standards. All participants have been approached with the provision of all necessary information regarding the ethical procedures and guaranteed the right to stay anonymous. From the extracts reported in this article I therefore removed any reference such as names or organization of belonging. The interview schedule has been designed in order to let the participants touch upon the elements they found to be more significant in order to explain the critical dimensions of active citizenship, but also in order to let them identify what enables or constraints their participatory behaviours. As a consequence of this, the focus of the analysis is on the importance assigned to civic and political activities such as voting (conventional political participation), protesting (non-conventional political participation), volunteering (civic participation), having an interest in civic affairs (civic engagement), holding awareness of the importance of political developments (political engagement).

Practices and demands of active citizenship

The first part of the findings' section of this article looks into participants' perceived meanings of active citizenship. It is important to note that during the interviews, part of the reflection focused on different connotations taken by active citizenship for young people. This discussion is particularly important because it reveals a number of critical issues for understanding the Turkish context and the limitations put upon the exercise of participatory behaviours in a context of heightened authoritarianism.

From the data that have been analysed, it results that active citizenship in the mindset of young people, entails the activation of participatory behaviours at different levels and by combining different mechanisms of engagement and awareness. In a nutshell, active citizenship corresponds to the expression of a number of rights and the realisation of basic freedoms. At the same time however, as the two extracts below reveal, it is stimulated by holding a strong interest towards civic and political matters. Engagement is therefore an important element to activate participatory behaviour and hence active citizenship:

> *Active citizenship is participation at all levels to decisions and in social life, it should relate to all levels of the society and to different activities* (interview n.28)

> *Active citizenship is gaining consciousness and capacity. If you are thinking about the problems of the society, and then if you are thinking about solutions and you are taking initiative in order to solve these problems, then, you are an active citizen* (Interview n.12)

In respect to the issue regarding active citizenship as a mechanism to participate at

different levels, it is important to underline that activists focus on various layers of formal and informal civic and political action that regard the interest towards institutional activities but also at the same time diffused social problems emerging in the community of belonging. Eventually, active citizenship is defined as a choice for public action. This is a particularly important point, because it establishes active citizenship as a set of civically and politically active behaviours that are expressed in the public sphere. One interviewee, for example, described quite well the different layers of engagement and participation inherent to active citizenship:

> *I think that active citizenship is about having an interest on how the government works, I think it is also discovering social problems and how you solve these. It is also being attentive to the civil society, being attentive to cultural happenings. It is also, I mean, going out for your rights. All this is active citizenship. Its also a choice, you can be here or you can be in your home* (Interview n.6).

In defining active citizenship, it is however important to look at what the data say in regards to the core categorisations that I summarised previously, *active citizenship as a practice* and *active citizenship as a demand*. The argument that I drew is that demands for active citizenship emerge between Turkish youth because of the inefficiency of current policy programmes to put forward reliable policy actions devoted to young people but also because of the low levels of trust towards the existing political elite. In a context where there is a strong state-centric tradition that affects the exercise of citizenship and where possibilities for young people to participate in politics are minimal, youth activists see activities promoted by public institutions with great suspicion.

In fact, a good deal of the evaluations during the interviews targeted the practices of active citizenship promoted by the central government with a special reference to the

recent working programmes initiated by the Ministry for Youth and Sport (i.e. MYS 2012). These programmes are meant to 'support the personal and social development of young people, to create opportunities and to provide ground for them to truly reveal their potentials and to help them participate actively in every aspect of social life' (MYS 2012, 1).

During the interviews, activists expressed a critical evaluation of such programmes. These are in fact considered as instrumental in order to get consensus rather than enhancing the bases of participation. In particular, it is noted the scarce impact they had for young people, the lack of transparency in setting initiatives that are part of these plans and their purpose to exercise control over young people, by hindering the bases for the exercise of active citizenship rather than establishing them:

> *Whatever the government does right now is to try to make people blind for me. They want to do it…they just want to get the vote from youth and they give something in return. So they say, if you want to start something, the government is going to give you 4000 liras. It's a way to buy the support of young people* (Interview n.18)

> *For young people, it is a total disaster in Turkey. I mean, what the minister is doing, they want to control young people with these programmes on youth and sport. If you fear active young people to go into politics, to do academic research, to participate in the civil society, then you control them* (Interview n.10)

This results in a situation where the promotion of active citizenship as a practice is highly contested in the Turkish context. This is developed further when the evaluation touches more directly the policy aims and goals of the AKP in the sponsorship of certain organisations instead of others. In the following transcript, the interviewee points at the

selective background of the policy actions promoted by the government, but also on the pressures exercised on civil society organizations that are not aligned with the AKP's principles and values. It is argued that they mostly target certain organizations excluding others. In this case there is reference to the difficulty in accessing public support and to sustain independently certain activities:

> *The government supports active citizenship and some organizations, but these are always close to government. But there are organizations that are not supported by the government. For example I was working with one of these, and yes, it's too hard for us to make something, because the government was always putting a lot of pressure on us* (Interview n.15)

It is important to note that young people at the same time vindicate their independency against any form of top down imposed measures. In this sense, besides of the principles underpinning the strategies promoted at the institutional level, young people are highly critical of any institutionally controlled forms of promotion of active citizenship. As an interviewee stated:

> *I think that young people, and probably not only young people but every part of the society, shouldn't be shaped by any of government, so whatever they do or propose I would probably oppose it. I mean, it doesn't matter which government does this. I find it very undemocratic* (Interview n.26)

As part of the analysis, different definitions of active citizenship were put forward by young people remarking this claim for independency and fairness. This point is rather important, in so far, it gives particular emphasis to the emergence of *demands of active citizenship* from the bottom and in contrast to state controlled forms of participation and mobilisation. The sense of collective responsibility, in order to find viable solutions

to emerging social problems, is a core dimension in this sense. As stated for example by Ekman and Amnå (2012), one of the main prerequisites of civic and political participation is the activation of forms of civic and political engagement. In this case active citizenship is related to bottom up processes that derive first and foremost from a process of awareness building:

> *Active citizenship is awareness, this is always one of the main expected results of the projects that I prepare. My understanding of active citizenship is to be aware of what's going on around you and of all the different views. So of course we are naturally biased and we tend to we poled towards certain views as persons, but when we work as organizations, I think, we should keep our ideas aside and we should take part in what is happening in the society* (Interview n.1)

It is important to note that the discussion regarding the *demands of active citizenship* is based on two main levels. The first, directly related with the issue of legitimacy, is focused on the modalities through which civic and political participation should stimulate government' accountability. The democratic bases inherent to processes of mobilization are in this case an extremely important issue. Hereby it emerges quite clearly a new role that motivates the participation of young people in civil society organizations, that of acting as a watchdog over Turkish democracy. At the same time, the collective dimension of public action is important. The following interviewee clearly addresses these issues, by remarking both functions:

> *I think active citizenship in Turkey is falling into areas where the government or the decision makers are not able first to provide services, and then make sure that these services are fairly distributed to the whole participants of the society. So what I would consider as an active citizen, is not only protesting or mobilizing, or voting, but requesting the decision makers to be accountable for*

their actions. That would be using the right for citizens to information, or using the right to gather and protest peacefully. So I think its something that each individual first should consider for his or her individual life, but also, you know, for the whole society. So if you are up to a better, let's say, living for our country, if you want better quality in terms of the government, and in terms of the whole system, I think we should demand that. So active citizenship I think is the way that the individual chooses for him or herself to follow in terms of demanding that quality (Interview n.2).

Stimulating civic and political engagement through awareness building

It is rather important to discuss the mechanisms that according to activists are considered as key to enhance patterns of participation in Turkey, by looking more explicitly at the importance played by various forms of empowerment. This term is often mentioned during the interviews because of its centrality for the stimulation of engagement and the development of participatory behaviors. It implies two interrelated dimensions: the acquisition and implementation of skills, and the transfer of these skills to other peers. This is a fundamental process that leads young people into the appropriation of forms of awareness and knowledge that enable them to become more active. In other words, it is fundamental in order to stimulate prepolitical forms of participation that drive young people into the acquisition of active participatory behaviors. In Turkey, this has become particularly important under the stimulus provided thanks to EU funding to civil society organizations and the initiation of a number of projects on a transnational scale (Kubicek 2012; Zihnioğlu 2013).

Various activities are promoted by organizations in order to furnish to young people the necessary capacities for developing and implementing their ideas. During the research young people mentioned a number of instruments that they consider

fundamental in order to develop this skillset. Youth trainings, in the first example that is described in the following extract:

> *I am currently involved in various activities for training young people. For example project management seminars. These are useful, because when they go back to their cities they start to implement projects. It is a process where we build knowledge. We build skills. We touch upon the lives of young people, and then they discover that there are also other things they can do, while they go to the university. Then they start to be active in the society. So if you ask me what is active citizenship for me, it is what we are doing here, I am also part, one of the products of this process as well* (Interview n.16)

The concept of empowerment through youth trainings is therefore pivotal, because these initiatives allow implementing a transfer of skills in more decentralized areas, with a specific and important emphasis on the assumption of ownership of social and public problems at the local level. At the same time, as the interviewee argues they are cornerstones that can span young people life across their personal development, their higher education experience and eventually in respect to the whole society. It is important to note that one of the specific purposes of trainings is that of developing their capacities to act independently and to transfer their skills and capacities through specific projects.

On this matter, another activist summarizes these efforts by addressing the development of capacity building via the involvement in civil society organizations' works and activities. The following interviewee reports different experiences that imply various mechanisms of empowerment:

> *When it comes to NGOs capacity building, what we are doing it is mainly through training, providing them with means, like networks, we do a lot of study visits for example to see the European institutions and make them meet with NGOs they can work with. Our aim is to facilitate NGOs, to bring them in touch and make*

them meet with counterparts, that can scale out NGOs' activities. When it comes to youth, when we are doing some empowerment it is basically about training and formation, but sometimes we provide also some little possibilities to do their own projects (Interview n.3).

Worthy to be noted is also the added value that exposing young people to various initiatives outside of the Turkish borders assumes. This is seen as essential in this process of building awareness and stimulating engagement. It is not a case that within a context such as the Turkish one that is characterized by strong limitations in the exercise of active citizenship, the exposure to processes of learning is a vital component for the stimulation of awareness acquisition, but ultimately also for the political socialization of young people. The promotion of youth exchanges –for example- is another particularly important instrument through which civil society organizations try to provide awareness and capacities for young people. This is important in order to challenge stereotypes –both towards Turkey and from Turkey to other countries- via the enhancement of processes of mutual cultural learning:

We work for favoring Turkish young people to go abroad to improve their social skills, to make them become solution-oriented persons, and also make them become better citizens. When they come back they increase their tolerance about other cultures. I mean, we try to challenge stereotypes. We are trying to break walls. For example, we do exchanges with Greece, there are many stereotypes because of what happened in the past, but by participating, they open their ideas, their mindsets, their point of view in order to understand other people as well, it's an awareness building activity, though the exchange of different ideas. We also take the chance to show the Turkish culture and at the same time challenge ideas about Turkey (Interview n.18)

It is important as well to note another particular important function that active citizenship in Turkey assumes. In a country characterized by a deep polarization, active citizenship is central in order to smooth differences thanks to the enhancement of

processes of reciprocal understanding that can reduce barriers, stereotypes and challenge cultural differences. This reflects a bottom-up demand to work towards a more egalitarian Turkish society, by putting forward the respect for differences:

> *Active citizenship for me is that, you know your own culture, but you need also to meet other cultures as well. For me active citizenship is whatever I am doing here in Turkey to increase the mindset of the youth, is to understand the importance of meeting other cultures, without having stereotypes. I think this is for me the main understanding of active citizenship* (Interview n.31)

It is important to note the by-dimensional function that empowerment assumes: on the one side it is important in order to build awareness, capacities and smooth cultural barriers and stereotypes; on the other side it is key in order to stimulate pre-political forms of engagement that eventually result in multilayered forms that civic and political participation can take as I will argue in the next paragraph.

Dimensions of active citizenship: Civic and political participation

In this final part of this article I focus on the views that interviewees hold in respect to different means of civic and political participation. This is important in order to understand the mechanisms that surround active behaviors within the constraints experienced in an authoritarian context. The scope here is to focus more precisely on a number of issues that emerged during the interviews. In this article, I particularly refer to the importance attached to volunteering, voting and protesting, as representative dimensions of civic and political participation (either in conventional and non-conventional form).

The comparison between civic participation and conventional and non-conventional political participation emerges when various participatory activities are contrasted. For instance one participant states:

> *I think volunteering is a process in the first step, in the national area, but also international area. When you volunteer you start understanding people more, you are increasing you mindset, because you are in contact with a lot of people. So yes, volunteering is a process, and thanks to it you can open up. Voting is the right, ok, but if you don't volunteer, if you don't have the practical experience, let's say if you don't open to others, voting is just a paper, I mean, you put a stamp on it, and ok. I mean, there is a bigger process in democracy. Protest as well, it is extremely important, because protest is a human right. The logic is that if this idea is against me, I should go and protest but not in a violent way. It a human right and should not be restricted. Unfortunately, in Turkey these days you can't do it* (Interview n.5)

The dimension of civic participation –such as the involvement in voluntary activities thanks to the membership to civic organizations- emerges as being particularly important for young people. This is often discussed and compared in respect to the value attributed to conventional forms of political participation –such as voting- while at the same time it is considered as a way to overcome the limitations inherent to representative democracy in the country. In this scenario the development of civil society in Turkey is seen as an extremely positive development and as a valuable alternative for young people to express participatory behaviors.

> *There has been a process of transformation of active citizenship. What most people would consider active citizenship maybe is just to vote, and ok you vote every 5 years, but at the same time there are some other things that you can also do, that are more relevant. I mean NGOs, interest group, informal groups have the responsibility to highlight and promote those areas where active citizenship can take form, to go beyond voting, because you know, I mean…voting in Turkey…* (Interview n.8)

Volunteering and voting are often contrasted one with the other by youth activists. These are seen as fundamental means of civic and political participation and not necessarily antithetical. By consequence interviewees remark the importance of both instruments of participation. However, a number of issues undermining the salience of voting in terms of impact is the lack of trust towards the political elites. Hereby volunteering, as a specific civic activity, assumes according to the interviewees a strong political dimension. This is reiterated in the following two transcripts:

> *Participating at elections is important, I think and also to be a volunteer is so important in order to be active citizens not just in social life but in political life. In Turkey, some people don't want to go to elections because we don't believe that the system can change. Overall I think the most important thing is to volunteer* (Interview n.27)

> *Younger people in Turkey believe less in the power of vote than the fathers and the grandfathers. Maybe it is changing but is also possible to see that voting might not be the only way to change things, raise our voice* (Interview n.37)

In these terms civic participation is often mentioned as a viable alternative to express participatory behaviours for young people in respect to conventional forms of political participation. It is important to note as well that most interviewees reflect upon the modalities upon which they relate to politics, by discussing the processes that underline their redefinition of the political space, but also by discussing the importance associated to traditional actors, such as political parties.

> *Young people are scared to become more political. I mean many people think that politics is about joining a political party, but that is not true, not necessarily. If you want to do something, if you want to be active you don't need a political party but most people think that. But in my view it's not necessary* (Interview n.6).

It is however fundamental to focus on the actual mechanisms that give value to civic activities and that imply their political relevance. Acts of citizenship -or 'civic acts' as they are widely referred to during the interviews- are the instruments that according to young activists hold great political salience and that give to active citizenship a strong communitarian value. In this sense, they become particularly important in order to define the scope of a communitarian sense of citizenship. These civic acts are referring to all those actions that are focused on the initiation of processes of social change happening first of all at the local level and that can have an important political impact. This local dimension of participation is seen as particularly important:

> *I think if everyone can do something to change things locally, it will affect the nation, it will affect the world as well so we try to give awareness to the people that can change what they see. Of course we should be aware of global problems, or natural problems, or social problems, of course we should think about them, but to me in order to be active, what we can do around ourselves, what we can do in our own area, how we can create good example if people see this, then they will be convinced they can change things as well* (Interview n.1).

As a last point, when looking at the dimension of non-conventional political participation, it is valuable to remark that part of the discussion has been focused on the importance of protesting as a mean of participation. This is considered as a basic right and a central component of active citizenship, even though most interviewees agree on the fact that the unfavorable conditions caused by the Turkish context limit the political significance of protesting. The discussion is connected to the necessity of determining possible alternative ways of acting civically and politically in order to overcome these limitations:

> *I think protesting is part of active citizenship. I also think it is important. But in Turkey when you want to protest the government is always adding a provocateur,*

so this is very dangerous (Interview n.19)

Many civic actions can become political, you can get involved in politics but, you know, using a different language. We should find a different language to express our thoughts. I mean take protesting. In Turkey, it doesn't change much, and it is dangerous (Interview n.35)

In relation to this it is important to note that in the mindset of young people, the experience accumulated as part of *occupygezi* is still vivid. Most of the participants in the research value highly this movement because it is considered a turning point that has given to young people a first hand experience, for the first time in such a massive manner, of a mass mobilization. This however is in contrast with the perceived sense of risk that has augmented in the aftermath of the Gezi park protest, with growing senses of fear caused by the authoritarian turn taken by the AKP since 2013:

The political violence is part of our system, of our political culture, I mean, how can I say it, the nation state, our tradition, you cannot protest, and Gezi maybe has been kind of cultural changing in this sense. People during Gezi were united. But the AKP did not like that. (Interview n.33)

After Gezi park, the fear is very high. There are very interesting youth association, very interesting young people. I mean this is what active citizenship is for me, but most of the people fear that now. Now everybody is scared that, if they say something against the government, they are going to jail (Interview n.19)

This is a particular important point that shows that, in a context deprived by possibilities to exercise basic rights and freedoms, there is an increased perception of fear consequent to the authoritarian turn taken by the AKP. In this sense, even if the days of *occupygezi* are still a vivid memory, the current policy strategy of the governing party and the suppression of oppositional voices dramatically inhibits the civic and political participation of young people in Turkey.

Discussion and limitations

In line with the findings of recent research (Bee and Kaya 2017a; Chrona and Capelos 2017; Erdoğan and Uyan-Semerci 2017; Gümüş 2017; Lüküslü 2012, 2016; Kayaoğlu 2017), it can be argued that the necessary conformism (Lüküslü 2013) characterizing Turkish young people is not explained by indifference, apathy or disengagement but instead participation is mostly expressed through non-conventional modalities (Isin 2009). More specifically, these studies have focused on various complex patterns, key for understanding the transformation of Turkish society by taking young people as a critical case study. In particular, research has shown that young people: 1) formulate modalities of participation neglecting their disengagement from politics; 2) have established alternative strategies of active citizenship developing behavioural patterns of participation that brought them to elaborate 'civic tactics' and 'acts of citizenship' in order to interact with the civic and political domains; 3) have emancipated from the so-called centralised 'father state' thanks to the impact of external processes -i.e. Europeanization- and internal dynamics -i.e. occupygezi. In other words, evidence collected up to the 15 July 2016 attempted coup indicates that youth have assumed active participatory behaviors in a way similar to other southern and eastern European countries (Oleinik 2018; Radiukiewicz 2017; Ribeiro et al. 2015; Simiti 2017)

The country's recent authoritarian turn, however, points to the limitations of the theoretical frameworks employed in these studies and highlights the necessity to study the Turkish case under different lenses. The state of emergency that ended in July 2018, in combination with the severe restrictions on freedoms and liberties, has resulted in a radical suppression of anti-governmental voices. Under these circumstances, this paper highlighted a number of constrains suffered by Turkish young people and the

challenges they face in a context of heightened authoritarianism. In doing so and because of its qualitative nature my article has a number of natural limitations. First of all, it does not provide generalisations about the nature of civic and political participation that extend to all young people in the country, as it deals with a small sample of activists that are actively involved in EU funding proposals. Secondly, by adopting a strategy of enquiry based on a grounded theory approach, it looks at a number of factors that emerge directly from the data collected through interviews. A further development of this research calls for a broader understanding of the factors that influence participatory behaviours in the country, by adopting a quantitative strategy that statistically models the intertwining of macro contextual factors, demographic factors, social factors and psychological factors (Barrett and Zani 2015). As a consequence of my discussion, this paper highlighted a number of relevant trends and calls for fresh and original research aiming at providing a new comprehensive understanding of participatory behaviours among young people in Turkey.

Conclusion

This research looked into some important aspects for understanding the civic and political participation of young people in the Turkish context. The evidence collected during the fieldwork shows that there is an over encompassing criticism towards practices of active citizenship currently promoted by the central government. These are seen suspiciously and targeting exclusively those actors that are directly supporting the AKP. In this context, young people value highly the importance of participating civically and politically in the country and do so outside the realm of conventional politics, delineating important alternatives for expressing participatory behaviours. On this regard, the article touched upon some of the mechanisms of empowerment that

young people consider being essential in order to stimulate engagement. At the same time, it discussed the value assigned by young people to different means of participation (volunteering, voting, protesting). What results from the analysis is that in a context of heightened authoritarianism, where participation is dramatically lowered if not supressed, Turkish youth emerges as a critical actor. Interviewees put forward the importance of acting civically in order to have a political impact and to express participatory behaviours outside of the manipulation and control of the government. In other words, the demands for democracy by young people are expressed by vindicating their autonomy and possibilities to take ownership of the public space.

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