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The Exodus from the Netherlands or Brain Circulation: Push and Pull Factors of Remigration among Highly Educated Turkish Dutch

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An increasing number of Turkish Dutch, the Netherlands' largest ethnic minority group, are beginning to return to their country of origin, taking with them the education and skills they have acquired abroad, as the Netherlands faces challenges from economic difficulties and socio-political tensions. At the same time, Turkey's political, social and economic conditions have been improving, making returning home all the more appealing for Turkish migrants at large. The authors provide explanations about the push and pull factors of return migration among Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands. The factors influencing return to one's country of origin are, for example, the social and political climate, labour market participation and social integration in the host society, including discrimination and career prospects. It is assumed that remigration is more affected by positive developments in the country of origin than by negative developments in the country of residence. It is recommended that civil society, the business world and the Dutch government develop return-on-investment policies in order to bind these capable people to the Netherlands, at least in the form of 'brain circulation' so that they can serve as bridge builders and knowledge workers between the two countries.

In recent years, articles have been frequently published in the Dutch news media about the return migration of highly skilled Dutch citizens of Turkish origin (Turkish Dutch) to their motherland. This theme is common within the Turkish community in the Netherlands and it has also caught the interest of both the public and the politicians. It is assumed that Turkish-Dutch youth are seriously thinking about migrating back to Turkey.

This is one aspect of the return migration to which this article pays attention. The other aspect is: if the knowledge of educated Turkish Dutch disappears, does the Netherlands lose out? The current article focuses on this dual problem and seeks explanations about the influence of push and pull factors on the return migration of Turkish Dutch. We also attempt to answer how the Netherlands can utilise optimally the second and third generation Turks with university degrees who are leaving the Netherlands for Turkey ('brain circulation').

In addition to a systematic review of the literature – newspaper articles, documents and websites – we have participated in conversations with Turkish Dutch, holding interviews with experts and highly educated Dutch citizens of Turkish origin. This study is multi-sited: it is performed in both the Netherlands and Turkey. In the Netherlands we e-mailed a questionnaire and held telephone and face-to-face interviews with 21 highly educated Turkish Dutch from the first and second generation. In the same way, we interviewed 27 highly educated Turkish returnees (see Table 2 later). In the next sections we first give some figures on Turkish immigration in the Netherlands and a brief explanation of relevant concepts.

Migration, Integration, Isolation and Remigration

Remigration, or return-migration, is the voluntarily temporary or permanent return of people to their country of origin having lived in another country for a substantial period of time.¹ Turkish Dutch are returning to Turkey, where they themselves or their parents were born. Here, for 'migrant' we use the following definition: a person who resides in the Netherlands and of whom at least one parent was born abroad. Anyone who was born abroad belongs to the first generation, and if born in the Netherlands to the second generation. As of 2012, the Turkish community is the largest ethnic minority group in the Netherlands. The size of the group has grown from 22 Turks in 1960, to around 400,000 in 2012.² The first group came to the Netherlands as guest workers in the 1960s. They arrived between 1964 and 1975, based on a bilateral agreement between the Netherlands and Turkey to recruit Turkish immigrant workers.

Later on, Turkish migration to the Netherlands mainly consisted of 'family migration'. There are currently about 187,000 second-generation Dutch Turks, which is the group that some Dutch politicians and business people are concerned about. About 21,000 highly educated Turkish migrants are living in the Netherlands.³ This equates to 1.05% of the total educated population in the Netherlands (see Table 1). Highly educated people are qualified here as graduates with at least a Bachelor's degree. The number of highly educated Turkish Dutch is nevertheless growing.

The desire among highly educated Turkish Dutch to return to Turkey seems to be increasing.⁴ According to recent research of VU University Amsterdam, 40% of Turkish youth desire to remigrate to Turkey, while only 14% wish to continue their work in the Netherlands.⁵ The number of immigrants born in the Netherlands who want to leave (18%) is significantly higher than the number of natives with the same desire (7%).⁶

Table 1. Highly educated Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands

Ethnic Group	Number	Percentage (%)	Male	Female
Native Dutch	1,652,000	82.60	828,000	823,000
Non-indigenous	348,000	17.40	164,000	184,000
Total	2,000,000	100	992,000	1,007,000
Turkish	21,000	1.05	—	—
Moroccans	23,000	1.15	—	—

The public debate in the Netherlands focuses on the economic (labour), psychological and social integration of young Turks, and is based on the assumption that problematic integration leads to isolation and return migration. Labour market integration or economic integration involves the question of whether members of cultural groups may or may not participate in paid employment.^{7,8} In other words, it involves the advancement in the economic and educational institutions and structures of the host society. Social integration concerns the number of contacts and the correspondences in values, expectations and requirements that are needed to give direction to personal and social choices. The social integration of migrant youth implies two main facets: the focus on their own ethnic identity and the degree of instrumental integration into society.⁹ This instrumental integration is all about the knowledge of the country of residence. The level of the labour market and social integration among Turkish youth may influence their feeling at home (psychological integration) in the broader society and contribute to forming their decision whether to return to their country of origin. Acceptance and contacts outside their (own) ethnic group are important indicators, which strengthen the feeling of being at home in the society in which they live.

It is important to observe that a certain number of Turkish youth do not finish their education, and develop their own social networks or seize another opportunity to position themselves in Dutch society. However, this is only one side of the problem. Remarkably, a percentage of highly educated Turkish-Dutch youth is losing its motivation for and vision of a future in the Netherlands.^{10,11} This is not only due to ethnic resentment of the dominant society, but also because of upbringing and an introverted attitude among the minority population. The question is whether the Dutch government will solve the problem behind closed doors or working together with minorities. It is undeniable that the pressure to assimilate has been met by resistance within private circles of migrant groups. At the same time, there are young, second-generation youths who feel at home in the Netherlands, and do not view themselves in the role of victim.

Brain Drain and Brain Gain

For highly skilled Turkish Dutch, a spontaneous increase of return migration among second and third generation Turks is in progress. In addition to the motives for

Table 2. A survey of highly educated Turkish remigrants from the Netherlands

Returnees	Job	Generation	Sex (M/F)
R1	Editor	1st	M
R2	Educator	1st	M
R3	Assistant professor	1st	M
R4	Economist	1st	M
R5	Philosopher	1st	M
R6	Journalist	1st	M
R7	Professor	1st	M
R8	Pianist	1st	F
R9	Musician	1st	M
R10	Administrator	1st	M
R11	Doctor	1st	M
R12	Journalist	1st	M
R13	Teacher	1st	M
R14	Journalist	1st	M
R15	Assistant professor	1st	M
R16	Businessman	1st	M
R17	Cabaret artist	1st	F
R18	Artist	1st	F
R19	Journalist	1st	M
R20	English teacher	1st	F
R21	Physicist	1st	M
R22	Businessman	1st	M
R23	Producer	1st	M
R24	Researcher	1st	M
R25	Assistant professor	1st	M
R26	Teacher	1st	M
R27	Teacher	1st	M
Total	–	First = 27	M = 23, F = 4

remigration from the Netherlands, such as the social, political and economic climate (push factors), there are other reasons that make Turkey an attractive alternative to those seeking to make a living (pull factors). It is primarily young professionals and entrepreneurs who see economic opportunities in their country of origin.¹² The Turkish government might view such return migration positively, and this phenomenon is considered as a brain gain. Capable young people are returning to Turkey to build a new life there and to contribute to the Turkish economy. However, one can argue that ‘as Turkey gains the Netherlands loses’. The knowledge of well-educated Turkish-Dutch citizens threatens to disappear with them. From the perspective of the Netherlands, the loss of knowledge – brain drain – represents a decline of human capital, which to a large extent was funded by public money.

To draw a picture of returned human capital from the Netherlands, Table 2 lists the 27 highly educated Turkish ‘remigrants’ who currently live and work in Turkey. It is interesting to note that all of these highly educated returnees are from

Table 3. Push and pull factors, and preconditions to leave from the Netherlands to Turkey

Return migration	Push	Pull	Preconditions
Social, political and economic climate	+	+	
Cultural identity and social network	+	+	
Integration into society and labour market	+		
Labour market discrimination	+		
Democratization of Turkey		+	
Turkey's economic prosperity		+	
Career perspective or international experience		+	
Homesickness (missing family members and culture)		+	
Contacts with family and friends in Turkey		+	
Long-term career opportunities in Turkey			±
Selling their own home in the Netherlands			±
The future of school life of their children			±

the first generation and dominantly males. The names of returnees have been anonymised.

Our interviews with highly educated Turkish returnees from the Netherlands suggest that the first generation in particular are more inclined to remigrate to Turkey. This trend may mean that the repatriation issue might dissolve when it comes to the second and third generation Turks in the Netherlands. Based on our interviews we can argue that highly educated young Turkish Dutch talk with each other about their (r)emigration intention, but they do not seriously consider return migration. One third of the 21 potential returnees from the first and second generation we interviewed think about temporarily or permanently living in Turkey, i.e. for career purposes. The democratisation of Turkey and its economic prosperity are in this context the most frequently used arguments. Besides motives for remigration from the Netherlands (push factors such as the social, political and economic climate in the country), there are also reasons that make Turkey attractive enough (pull factors) to leave the Netherlands to reside there. A list of the push and pull factors, and preconditions to leave from the Netherlands to Turkey is provided in Table 3. The following sections will briefly elaborate upon these aspects.

'Myth of Return'

Returning has always been discussed among the first generation, and the second and third generations have grown up with their parents' stories. However, there are often a number of practical and intangible reasons that stop the first generation from leaving to return to their country of origin. In particular, the location of remaining family members, children and grandchildren, the prospects of a new beginning and fear of the re-integration process in the country of origin are discouraging. Next to the social and political context, the decision to migrate back can probably be seen as emotionally driven. In this respect, homesickness (missing family members, habits

and culture) is an often-mentioned argument among Turkish Dutch. In addition to adjustment problems in Dutch society ('I don't feel really at home in the culture of the country of residence'), there are also economic reasons to re-migrate (e.g. 'I can't find a job at my educational level').

Our interviews with (potential) Turkish returnees help us to identify the development of return migration in five categories: (1) the idea of return migration; (2) the intention of leaving for the country of origin; (3) the decision to migrate back; (4) the action of migrating back; and (5) the degree of satisfaction with return migration. It seems likely that the desire to repatriate among the Turkish Dutch is high, but that many do not actually think about it in practical terms and ultimately do not re-emigrate. This is also called the 'myth of return.' Migrants talk and behave as though they favour returning, but the reality of daily life means this step is hardly ever taken. Exploratory studies show that return migration is a topic of conversation among first, second and third generation Turks in the Netherlands.¹³ Our interviews indicate that people who have an intention to migrate back to Turkey will do so if conditions are conducive to do so. Thus, career opportunities in Turkey, selling their own home in the Netherlands and the school life of their children are mentioned as the main preconditions.

Return Migration, Push and Pull Factors...

Research on migration patterns often utilises the concepts of 'push and pull'. Push factors are those that contribute to the decision to leave the country.¹⁴ These are factors present in the forms of social exclusion and discrimination, a deteriorating environment, and the economic situation, including high rates of unemployment. For this reason, the perception of the home country among highly educated Turkish migrants in the Netherlands is important for analysing return migration patterns. In contrast, pull factors are those that encourage an immigrant to opt for a specific foreign country, in this case Turkey. These factors include economic growth, a known social network, stable political climate and the perceived potential for freedom or prosperity. The question is whether Turkey is an attractive pull factor for highly educated Turks, or whether the situation in the Netherlands is a significant push factor for them. The social and political environment, along with labour integration, constitute some of the influential push and pull factors for those Turkish Dutch considering migrating back to Turkey.

Social, Political and Economic Climate

On average, it is harder for migrant youth to find their way in the job market, which contributes to their lack of a sense of being at home in the Netherlands. It is often argued that they feel 'put under the microscope', pressured to perform three times better than the average employee in order to prove themselves. They struggle to climb above their social strata, and employment figures demonstrate that it is difficult for this group to find a job at their (educational) level.¹⁶ Developing strategies to improve the sense of belonging, of being at home, and trust in society as a whole are factors that might counter this push.

It is also important to discuss the impact of the political climate in the Netherlands on the desire to move away. Events such as September 11 and the murder of the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh have negatively affected the attitude of the Dutch towards ethnic minorities, especially Muslim migrants. A survey among migrants in the Netherlands showed that as a result of the popularity of the right-wing party of Wilders (PVV), more than a quarter of Turkish and Moroccan Muslims expressed a desire to leave the country.¹⁵ In addition to the current political climate in the Netherlands, the negative image of migrants in the Dutch media is also mentioned by the Turkish Dutch as a factor contributing to the decision to re-emigrate.

Labour Market Discrimination and Integration

Integration into the labour market is a significant contributing factor in the case of return migration. As mentioned before, educated migrants experience difficulties finding a job. There are a number of different reasons for this. Immigrants fall outside the relevant social networks, so they are less visible as candidates for jobs. When Turkish migrant workers first came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s, there was much heavy manual labour available, especially in the industrial and agricultural sectors. Today the number of jobs in the service industry has increased greatly. Culturally sensitive communication and relationship skills are much more important in the public and private sectors, and may put immigrant workers at a disadvantage, due to a lack of sufficient mastery of the language or trouble interpreting the unwritten rules of social conduct.

Employers sometimes have negative expectations about the performance of immigrants, or fear that a more diverse staff may bring negative consequences for the functioning of the organisation. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research affirms that there is discrimination in the Dutch labour market.¹⁶ A common explanation is that employers dislike minorities and they simply do not want members of a different ethnic group (taste for discrimination). This aversion could also be related to the assumption that customers have an aversion to minority groups (customer discrimination). Another explanation is statistical discrimination. This means that people form an opinion about individual members of minorities based on perceptions they have of those minority groups as a whole. Since the image of migrant groups is often an unfavourable one (e.g. heavily represented in crime statistics, causing nuisance), this contributes to an unfavourable opinion of individual migrants. People may, for example, be afraid of lower productivity or the higher risk that the migrant worker will not fit in with the rest of the staff. In a situation where information is incomplete, as is almost always the case when a selection decision is taken, employers are then more often likely to choose someone from their own ethnic group. The implicit assumption is that they are able to make a more accurate assessment of the qualities of someone from their own group, thus reducing the risk of failure.

Cultural Identity and Social Network

In addition to obstacles in the development of social contacts outside their own immediate cultural group, highly educated Turkish Dutch have a specific pattern of

identification that influences their decision to leave the Netherlands. Most immigrants can create a comfortable situation in a different cultural environment, in which they are able to adopt aspects of the new culture while maintaining aspects of their native one. It benefits civil society when immigrants are oriented towards their new environment. The desirability of maintaining one's original culture is an important theme in public debate about the integration of immigrants into the society of the country of residence. Proponents consider the 'mixing in' of immigrant cultures to be a logical consequence of diversity, and even a source of enrichment. Opponents believe that maintaining the native culture of the immigrant population undermines the stability of society and prevents the preservation of a Dutch identity.¹⁷ Research has shown that higher educated immigrants with a strong orientation towards the Netherlands are vulnerable to exclusion because they are faced with disappointing opportunities when one considers their level of education. This is also referred to as the 'integration paradox'.¹⁸

It is also important to analyse the social relations of Turkish immigrants to their homeland. There are frequent visits to the country of origin. Segregation of social networks is not uncommon in the Netherlands: the majority of Turkish people mostly have Turkish friends. Modern communication allows immigrants to stay in close contact with family and friends in their home country.¹⁹ This, combined with a strong focus on the social network within their own ethnic group in the Netherlands, is a contributing factor in the decision to return to their native land.

... and Positive Developments in Turkey

The factors influencing return to one's country of origin are 'pulls'. The leading assumption is that remigration is more influenced by positive developments in the country of origin than by negative developments in the country of residence.²⁰ Turkey is a candidate member for the European Union and has seen progress in socio-economic areas in recent decades. The Turkish economy is booming. As a G20 member state it plays an increasingly important role. Both the prospect of Turkish membership in the EU and its recent economic growth make migration back home more attractive.

It is assumed that the process experienced in Spain and Italy will be repeated. When Spain and Italy joined the EU, the economy and democracy in each country strengthened so much that the majority of Spanish and Italian immigrant workers in Western Europe returned to their motherland. Might the same happen when Turkey joins the EU?

In short, while remigration depends in part on the economic situation and the social and political climate in the country of residence, it largely hinges on growing opportunities in Turkey. For years, Turks have been the largest group of returning immigrants in the Netherlands, in contrast with the Moroccans and Surinamese, who along with the Turks are the three largest immigrant groups in the country. The opportunities in Morocco and Suriname are not like those in Turkey, with its rapidly improving economic and political conditions over the last decade. The rising

economy in Turkey has an influence on the desire of highly educated professionals and entrepreneurs in the Netherlands' Turkish community to leave.

Career Perspective and International Experience

It is not exactly known how permanent the planned return migrations are. Added to other possible push and pull factors, the career perspective – with international experience – is a further compelling reason why Turks are leaving the Netherlands. Young Turkish migrants, like their Dutch peers, value employment opportunities that offer chances for an international career. While the Dutch youth have their (usually temporary) international experiences in the US, Australia or the UK, the Turkish-Dutch youth often chooses Turkey because of their Turkish and cultural heritage. The overwhelming majority of our respondents see it as temporary emigration, and they eventually want to return to the Netherlands. However, a positive experience can eventually lead to permanent residency in Turkey, once youth are able to compare the particular push and pull factors in Turkey and the Netherlands.

Conclusion and Discussion

Thoughts about migrating back to Turkey remain strong among Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands. However, there is often a significant difference between what one desires and what one actually accomplishes. The desire to leave seems to be common, but the number of people who seriously consider leaving actually appears to be low. To conclude, explanations of the recent remigration tendency among educated Turkish Dutch point to the social and political climate in the Netherlands as the dominant push factors, and economic opportunities and the democratization process in Turkey as key pull factors.

Another general point is the presence of a paradox regarding the position of Turkish Dutch. On the one hand, it seems that the Turkish migrant youth in the Netherlands do well, while on the other hand, the problems – such as social inclusion, high remigration desire and discrimination in the labour market – experienced by this community are not sufficiently visible. There is an effect of integration and transnationalism on return migration intentions among Turkish youth in the Netherlands.

Dutch civil society, the business world and the Dutch government can develop return-on-investment policies in order to bind these capable people to the Netherlands. The Dutch government, which abolished the diversity and affirmative action policy on the basis of ethnic origin, can take a more active stance to compete with Turkey or to promote bilateral cooperation. The negative spiral of return migration can probably be broken by promoting brain circulation policy, in particular by strengthening the bonds of departing Turkish talent with the Netherlands. Qualified Turkish returnees can be seen as the best ambassadors for the Netherlands in Turkey. They may fulfil a bridge-building role between the two countries in many areas. This can only be realised when return migration is seen as an opportunity rather than a threat.

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