YOUTH EMIGRATION FROM TÜRKIYE: TRENDS, DETERMINANTS, AND POLICY PERSPECTIVES[1]

CZU:325.2(560)
https://doi.org/10.53783/mtrmt2025.02

Muhammet BERIGEL, *doctor,*
Karadeniz Technical University Turkiey,
ORCID 0000-0001-5682-8956
mberigel@hotmail.com

Abstract

This study analyzes the growing phenomenon of youth emigration from Türkiye by integrating statistical data, conceptual discussions, and policy perspectives. The findings show that individuals aged 20–29 consistently constitute one of the largest emigrant cohorts, indicating that youth emigration has become a persistent and structural trend. Economic instability, unemployment, income insecurity, and limited merit-based career opportunities remain key push factors driving young people abroad, while aspirations for improved living conditions, quality education, and global mobility further strengthen their motivation to migrate. Statistical evidence from 2016–2024 demonstrates a significant increase in youth outflows, alongside a shift toward more permanent settlement patterns among young emigrants. Regional analyses highlight that major metropolitan provinces despite offering greater opportunities also generate the highest levels of youth emigration, reflecting deeper concerns about future prospects and institutional trust. The study argues that youth emigration is not solely an economic issue but a multidimensional societal challenge affecting Türkiye's human capital, innovation capacity, and long-term development. Based on these insights, the paper underscores the need for comprehensive youth-centered policies focusing on labor market reforms, improved educational pathways, merit-based recruitment, and strategic diaspora engagement to address the ongoing outflow of young talent.

Keywords: *Youth emigration, human capital, Türkiye, migration trends, youth policies, unemployment, brain drain, socio-economic development, EU comparison, migration governance*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

Türkiye has entered a period in recent years in which the tendency to move abroad has increased rapidly. A striking aspect of this mobility is that the majority of emigrants are young people between the ages of 20 and 29. Various push and pull factors influence this age group (Lee, 1966). Broadly speaking, the main drivers behind young people's desire to emigrate include economic problems, limited employment opportunities, hopelessness about the future, and the aspiration for better living conditions. (Urbański, 2022)

[1] The article is developed within the project "Youth Emigration: Motivations, Trends, and Future Prospects in Moldova and Turkey with an Adaptive Predictive System", number 25.80013.0807.03TR, funded by TUBITAK.

According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), the number of young people emigrating abroad has shown a significant increase over the last eight years (Turkish Statistical Institute [TUIK], 2024). Moreover, the profiles of these emigrants indicate that they come from diverse educational backgrounds and occupational groups. These statistics highlight an important issue that requires careful attention and academic inquiry. Losing young brains and young labor power creates long-term economic and social risks (Kahya, 2022; Soysal & Atalan Ergin, 2024).

This situation is critical for Türkiye's future development goals. Young people represent a country's hidden treasure. Their movement abroad has not only individual but also collective consequences. This trend negatively affects the country's productive workforce, innovation capacity, and social dynamism (Taştekin et al., 2025). The fact that young people are establishing a permanent life abroad weakens Türkiye's qualified human capital in the long run and makes it more difficult to achieve sustainable development goals (Bakırtaş & Kandemir, 2010; Metin, 2023).

In addition, youth emigration carries not only economic but also social and cultural implications (Karakaya, 2020). A considerable portion of emigrating young people are educated, multilingual, and equipped with global competencies. The departure of this group results in a loss often referred to as "brain drain," reducing the country's potential for knowledge production, innovation, and technological development (Başel, 2007).

Furthermore, most young emigrants do not return but integrate permanently into the countries where they settle. This creates a demographic and social gap that is difficult to reverse for Türkiye (Urbański, 2022).

Therefore, youth emigration should not be viewed merely as an individual choice, but as a societal phenomenon shaped by economic, social, and structural factors. Economic instability, unemployment, lack of meritocracy, social inequality, and hopelessness push young people to seek a new life abroad (Soysal & Atalan Ergin, 2024; Parkins 2010; Williams et al., 2018; Koleљa 2019; Karakaya, 2020). Understanding youth emigration requires not only analyzing numerical data but also examining the socio-economic dynamics and policy gaps underlying this trend (Massey et al., 2014).

This study aims to analyze youth emigration in Türkiye within a multidimensional framework, examining its causes, trends, and consequences in light of TUIK data and current policy documents. The findings are expected to contribute to revising Türkiye's youth, employment, and migration policies.

1.2 Youth Emigration from Türkiye: Key Drivers and Youth Tendencies

Youth emigration from Türkiye is primarily driven by economic pressures, high unemployment rates, and uncertainty about future opportunities. Statistical trends consistently show that individuals aged 20–29 constitute a disproportionately large share of total emigrants (Turkish Statistical Institute [TUIK], 2024). Push factors

such as income insecurity, limited career prospects, and perceived lack of meritocracy strongly influence young adults' decisions to leave the country (Massey et al., 2014; Urbański, 2022; Parkins 2010; Williams et al., 2018; Koleša 2019). As a result, many young people seek better living conditions, more stable labor markets, and higher wages in Europe and other developed regions (Aslany et al., 2021; Hagen-Zanker 2015; Ranceva 2014).

However, economic motives alone do not fully explain youth emigration. Social, cultural, and psychological factors also play an important role in shaping young people's aspirations (Özcan, 2017). Through digital exposure and global connectivity, young adults increasingly compare their lives with peers abroad and become more aware of international educational and professional opportunities (Furxhi & Toromëni, 2024). For those who perceive domestic environments as restrictive or insufficient, migration becomes a pathway to access high-quality institutions, equitable work conditions, and global mobility (Solgun & Durat, 2017). These dynamics are especially evident among highly educated youth, raising long-term concerns about brain drain and the erosion of skilled human capital (Başel, 2007).

In recent years, emigration intentions among young people have also become more permanent. Economic volatility, rising living costs, and declining optimism about future stability have intensified motivations not only to leave but to settle abroad long term. Young emigrants—often multilingual, globally competent, and innovation-oriented—constitute a critical segment of the workforce, and their departure diminishes Türkiye's productive capacity and innovation potential (Başel, 2007). Consequently, youth emigration should be understood as a multidimensional societal issue shaped by structural inequalities, labor market constraints, and sociocultural aspirations rather than solely as a set of individual choices (Karakaya, 2020; Massey et al., 2014).

1.3 Statistical Overview of Youth Migration (2010–2024)

Table X. Youth Emigration from Türkiye (Ages 20–29), 2016–2024: Total Emigrants and Share in Overall Outmigration

Year	Total emigrants (all ages)	Emigrants aged 20–29	Share of 20–29 in all emigrants (%)
2016	177,960	56,598	31.8
2017	253,640	75,792	29.9
2018	323,918	93,432	28.8
2019	330,289	91,748	27.8
2020	420,463	117,228	27.9
2021	287,651	74,761	26.0
2022	466,914	133,679	28.6
2023	714,579	196,547	27.5
2024	424,345	112,800	26.6

Drawing on Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK) data for the period 2016–2024, youth emigration from Türkiye appears as both quantitatively significant and structurally persistent. When the age groups 20–24 and 25–29 are combined as a proxy for the core youth cohort, the number of young people emigrating from Türkiye increases from 56,598 individuals in 2016 to a peak of 196,547 in 2023, before declining to 112,800 in 2024. Thus, despite the recent decrease, the volume of youth emigration in 2024 remains almost twice as high as in 2016.

Throughout the period, young adults aged 20–29 consistently account for about one quarter to one third of all emigrants. Their share in total emigration fluctuates within a relatively narrow band from around 26–32% indicating that youth are structurally over-represented among those leaving the country. In other words, while emigration affects different age groups, it is disproportionately concentrated among young adults who are in the transition from education to work or in the early stages of their careers.

The sharp rise observed in 2022 and especially 2023, when the number of youth emigrants surpasses 130,000 and 190,000 respectively, coincides with a period of heightened economic uncertainty, labor market volatility, and growing perceptions of limited merit-based opportunities in Türkiye. These dynamics are consistent with the push factors highlighted in the international migration literature, such as unemployment, income insecurity and perceived lack of future prospects, as well as with qualitative accounts of young people's aspirations for better education, work environments and quality of life abroad.

Due to the age-band structure of the TUIK data, this study focuses primarily on the 20–29 age range as a statistically robust proxy for "youth". While this does not fully capture the 18–19 and 30-year-old population segments, the observed patterns clearly demonstrate that youth emigration is not a marginal phenomenon but a central component of Türkiye's contemporary migration profile.

Table 1. Summary of International Migration in Türkiye, 2016–2024

Year	Total population	Immigrants to Türkiye (Total)	Emigrants from Türkiye (Total)	Net migration
2016	79,814,871	380,921	177,960	+202,961
2017	80,810,525	466,333	253,640	+212,693
2018	82,003,882	577,457	323,918	+253,539
2019	83,154,997	677,042	330,289	+346,753
2020	83,614,362	340,845	420,463	–79,618
2021	84,680,273	739,364	287,651	+451,713
2022	85,279,553	494,052	466,914	+27,138
2023	85,372,377	316,456	714,579	–398,123
2024	85,664,944	314,588	424,345	–109,757

Table 1 summarizes Türkiye's international migration dynamics between 2016 and 2024, showing clear shifts between net immigration and net emigration over time. From 2016 to 2019, Türkiye consistently records a positive migration balance, with net migration increasing from about +203,000 to a peak of +346,753 in 2019, indicating that the country functioned primarily as a destination for migrants. In 2020, this pattern breaks and Türkiye experiences its first net outflow (–79,618), largely reflecting a drop in immigration relative to emigration. The year 2021 marks a strong rebound, with the highest net gain in the entire period (+451,713), suggesting a post-pandemic recovery in mobility and renewed inflows. In 2022, immigration and emigration are almost balanced, resulting in only a slight net inflow (+27,138) and signaling a transition phase. Finally, in 2023 and 2024, the direction reverses again: Türkiye becomes a net emigration country, with a pronounced net loss in 2023 (–398,123) and a continued, though smaller, net outflow in 2024 (–109,757), showing that in the most recent years more people are leaving Türkiye than entering.

Table x. Top 5 Provinces with Highest Immigrants and Emigrants (2016–2024 Aggregated)

Rank	Highest Immigrants (2016–2024)	Total Immigrants (approx.)	Highest Emigrants (2016–2024)	Total Emigrants (approx.)
1	**İstanbul**	~1,360,000	**İstanbul**	~1,500,000
2	**Ankara**	~250,000	**Ankara**	~300,000
3	**Antalya**	~260,000	**Antalya**	~200,000
4	**Bursa**	~130,000	**İzmir**	~180,000
5	**İzmir**	~120,000	**Bursa**	~140,000

The migration summary for the 2016–2024 period shows that İstanbul is by far the province with the highest number of both immigrants and emigrants, reflecting its strong economic pull, extensive labor market, and high overall mobility. Ankara and Antalya also rank among the top provinces in both categories, influenced by their roles as administrative, educational, and service-sector hubs. Bursa and İzmir attract significant immigration due to their industrial and service-based economies while simultaneously appearing among the provinces with the highest emigration. Together, these five provinces represent the core economic centers of Türkiye, meaning that national migration dynamics are highly concentrated in a few metropolitan and economically developed regions. This concentration indicates that internal and international mobility in Türkiye is shaped primarily by opportunities, labor demands, and lifestyle preferences found in these major urban areas.

II. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that youth emigration from Türkiye has become a persistent structural trend rather than a temporary fluctuation. Young adults aged

20–29 consistently represent one of the largest emigrant cohorts, indicating that economic instability, unemployment, limited career opportunities, and perceived lack of meritocracy systematically influence emigration decisions (Soysal & Atalan Ergin, 2024; Parkins 2010; Williams et al., 2018; Koleђa 2019; Karakaya, 2020). Beyond economic pressures, social and cultural aspirations—such as seeking global mobility, quality education, and better living standards—also play a major role (Tufiș & Sandu, 2023). These dynamics suggest that youth emigration should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by structural constraints and shifting expectations.

The findings further show that the tendency toward permanent settlement abroad is increasing. Highly educated and globally skilled young people are more likely to integrate into destination countries rather than return to Türkiye, heightening concerns related to long-term human capital loss (Metin, 2023; Taştekin et al., 2025). Additionally, major metropolitan provinces despite offering more opportunities are the primary sources of youth emigration, reflecting broader dissatisfaction with future prospects and institutional trust (Karakaya, 2020; Soysal & Atalan Ergin, 2024).

To address these challenges, Türkiye needs a holistic youth strategy focused on strengthening economic stability, improving access to quality education, and ensuring transparent and merit-based recruitment mechanisms. Policies that reduce the cost of living, support young entrepreneurs, and enhance early-career employment pathways can mitigate key push factors. Complementary measures such as return-migration incentives, diaspora engagement, and international collaboration programs may also help retain or recapture skilled youth. Ultimately, reversing the rising trend of youth emigration will require coordinated efforts that empower young people, enhance opportunity structures, and rebuild confidence in long-term prospects within the country (Karakaya, 2020; Metin, 2023; Aslany et al., 2021).

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