**A migration project in retrospect: The case of the ageing zero–generation in Emirdağ**

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**Abstract**

In the 20th century, Emirdağ (Turkey) has witnessed extensive emigration and is home to the zero-generation, namely a group of old people that stayed behind while their children moved abroad. We investigate how elderly people, with at least one child that left the country, evaluate their situation of growing older. Making use of fieldwork observations and in-depth interviews, we found that elderly mainly associated the migration of their offspring with loneliness and exclusion from society, due to separation from their children and changes in the traditional family culture. The respondents clearly note a shift in the social position of family elders in Turkish culture from highly respected to ignored and looked down upon. While this status change might be experienced by all elderly inhabitants of the region, feelings of distress were reinforced by the emerging discourse that the migration project is a failed enterprise. The constraints their children experience in the immigrant country, makes them to rely less on their children and more dependent on their own resources. Future research on aging, migration and transnational care should pay attention to the different ways in which migration systems evolve and the long-term effects on social inclusion of all generations.

**Keywords**

aging; elderly; migration; Turkey; zero-generation

# 1. Introduction: The Zero-Generation

The study of the impact of a descendant’s migration on the life of his or her non-migrant parents recently is referred to as the zero-generation. Nedelcu (2009) uses the words ‘génération zéro’ to indicate parents of migrants, in her study more specifically the parents of Romanian immigrants in Toronto. Subsequently, King, Cela, Fokkema and Vullnetari (2014) applied the term to a case study in Albania and define the zero-generation as ‘the parents of first-generation migrants who are initially left behind in the migrant country of origin and who may subsequently follow their children in migration or engage in transnational back-and-forth mobility’. Both studies are significant in the field of migration studies as they firstly underlined the importance to include non-migrant parents in migration studies. Secondly, they introduced a new unit of analysis (the zero-generation) to efficiently examine and describe their subject of study. And thirdly, they concluded that the zero-generation is actively involved in negotiating the consequences of their adult children’s migration and cannot be merely conceived as passive bystanders.

According to Baldassar and Merla (2014), this agency of non-migrants in migration processes clearly shows that transnational family relationships often involve reciprocal care-giving arrangements. This means that both the migrated kin and the family left behind try to look after each other by engaging in different kinds of support, such as practical, financial, personal, symbolic, emotional and moral care. This is a crucial argument, as previously, the study of transnational care was mostly limited to the impact of an adult child’s migration on the financial well-being and health of the zero-generation. For instance, in Romania, Zimmer, Codrina and Stoica (2014), found that, in line with common expectations, children who live further away from their parents tend to provide them more in financial care, in contrast to those living nearby who take upon themselves the direct, instrumental care for which they need to be physically present. Analogue, in Cambodia, Zimmer and Knodel (2013) observed the same mechanism and conclude that migration of a child is mostly a positive evolution for a parent, as the monetary support they receive in this way increases, while they do not lose out on other types of support.

As to the health situation of the zero-generation, on the one hand, direct beneficial effects of an adult child’s migration on the physical health of elderly parents have been reported, such as better BMI results, increased mobility, self-reported health (for Moldova: Böhme, Persian, & Stöhr, 2015), and a reduction in mortality risk (for Indonesia: Kuhn, Everett, & Silvey, 2011). On the other hand, there can also be a negative impact of a child’s emigration on the elderly parents’ mental health outcomes, such as increased symptoms of depression, loneliness and sadness and even deteriorating physical health (in Mexico: Antman, 2013).

Although important migration systems have been developed since the ’60s of the previous century between Turkey and Western Europe (İçduygu & Sert, 2016), little research has focused on the Turkish zero-generation. Next to its relevance because of the millions of people it concerns, this migration system is significant as it stretches over many decades, covering different phases of the migration cycle, including the rise but also decline of the migration system (De Haas, 2001; Timmerman, Hemmerechts, & De Clerck, 2014). We therefore aim to contribute to the literature on the zero-generation, transnational care and aging in the context of migration by focusing on a long-established migration system which could be said to have seen a decline in recent years. We will demonstrate that even in migration systems with a long history, the establishment of transnational familial bonds to provide each other in necessary care is not an obvious matter. The results of the research moreover highlight the importance to connect findings on transnational care to the specific context and particular phase in the migration history of the people and region being studied.

# 2. Research Context

## 2.1 The Migration Context in Emirdağ

Emirdağ is a district in the province of Afyon. The primary town in the district bears the same name and forms the scene of our research, together with some smaller villages in its direct vicinity. When comparing all districts in Turkey in terms of socio-economic situation, development, and urbanization, Emirdag mostly fall just below the average in rankings (Karcı, Üstübici, & De Clerck, 2010).

The signing of a bilateral agreement between Belgium and Turkey in 1964 sparked the first emigration waves from Emirdağ to Belgium, which has always stayed the primary destination, although the Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and Denmark have also received tens of thousands of immigrants from the region. In 1974, Belgium stopped accepting Turkish migrants for labor, but migration continued through family reunification and the arrangement of tourist visas (Timmerman, Lodewyckx, & Wets, 2009). This long history of migration, the ‘tradition’ of emigrating to Europe, and the positive image about Europe, which was created by temporarily returning migrants, has created a ‘culture of migration’ in Emirdağ (Timmerman et al., 2009). Despite the initial positive image of Europe, the perceptions about economic opportunities and living conditions in Europe changed into a more negative migration aspirations. Moreover, migration aspirations in Emirdag became even lower than, in a similar city in the same region that was not so much impacted by migration (Timmerman et al., 2014). Not only perceptions about migration, but also related practices are changing. Before Europe experienced a period of recession, the population of Emirdağ used to triple in the summer thanks to all the temporarily returning migrants visiting family and friends. However, due to the recession and the weakening of the third generation’s ties with Emirdağ, the number of returnees in summers is decreasing. Some also prefer the Mediterranean coast over Emirdağ to spend the holidays (Karcı et al., 2010).

There is also a general decrease in Turkey in the amount of remittances sent back. According to the Balance of Payment Statistics of the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey, the number of remittances started to decline significantly after 1998. In this year, 2.8 million Turkish expats sent $8.2 billion to Turkey. Although the number of migrants further increased to 4.3 million in 2012, remittances dropped to $961 million (World Bank, 2015). This decline might be due to several reasons, such as: permanent residency in the host country, higher living costs and weaker attachment to the homeland, changes in the socio-economic statuses of the immigrants and their descendants, a second and third generation that prefer to invest in their own business in the host country instead of the non-migrant family, the economic crisis in Europe, dropping interest rates, and a rise in tax on remittances (Bettin, Elitok, & Straubhaar, 2012).

Finally, also changes in the family situation of the migrant as well as in the non-migrant household can influence or stop remittance flows. For example, unmarried migrants without children of their own tend to send more money than those who are married or do have children. Remittances of migrated daughters can also change when they marry, since daughters-in-law generally channel their care and remittances to their husbands’ parents (Coles, 2001; King et al., 2014). As to familial changes on the receiving side, the death of a father can bring remittances to the mother to an end when this weakens the son’s filial piety or remittances are oriented to another male household member (Coles, 2001). All these new developments concerning emigration from Turkey can impact the zero-generation in Emirdağ.

## 2.2 Transnational Care in Turkey

The role of the family in providing care to elderly family members is believed not to disappear with migration and this is a question of utmost importance to the zero-generation. For Turkey, only a few studies (Coles, 2001; Senyürekli & Detzner, 2008; Bilecen, 2013) have examined the provision or care arrangements within the migration family. Bilecen (2013) illustrates how protective resources flow between Germany and Turkey. She distinguishes between informational exchange, care relations, financial protection and social activities, such as having meals, doing sports and having tea. Coles (2001) found that the traditional social hierarchy in rural families change concerning changing care relations and her study shows how this often leads to feelings that the care for the elderly are often not sufficiently valued.

In their study on intergenerational relations of Turkish families between the United States and Turkey, Senürekli and Detzner (2008) mention the stress involved from the part of the US based migrants due to the necessary flexibility in terms of time, holidays, transportation and financial resources when they need to travel to Turkey in case of emergency. This stress is also seen as one of the drivers of Turkish migrants to return from the US to Turkey or to settle in Europe (Şenyürekli & Menjivar, 2012).

If one takes into account that family and children are the two most important factors that contribute to the happiness of elderly in Turkey (TurkStat, 2015), it is logical that the separation from migrant family can lead to feelings of loneliness and eventually to unhappiness and mental disorders (Coles, 2001). Furthermore, also the changes in the future prospects contribute to the negative mental health of the rural elderly in Turkey. First, being alone in late life was not what they expected in terms of intergenerational relations and filial responsibilities. Many of them grew up in extended households, following a patrilocal pattern of residence (cfr. Albania: King et al., 2014). Second, more than the reduced social support of migrating daughters, the disappeared filial responsibility of the adult male children and the changed power hierarchy between the parents and the migrated daughter-in-law seem to result in a loss of social status and feelings of isolation, especially in rural female elderly. It is often the in-laws who go to live with the son and daughter-in-law in their houses and must adjust to their household organization and rules (Coles, 2001; see also King et al., 2014 for Albanian elderly). Third, tied with health concerns, rural elderly people have constant worries about the future and the necessary health and aged care (Coles, 2001).

# 3. Methodology

In our research, we aim to provide insight into the effects of a child’s migration on the (very) old zero-generation in Emirdağ, a specific generation created by the mass – emigration toward Europe in the ’70 – ’90 of last century. First we departed from participant observations in Emirdağ stretching over a period of more than 25 years. Over the years, one of the researchers spent nearly every year (short) periods of time in Emirdağ, residing with local families, in order to follow up the dynamics within the culture of migration that emerged in the region from the seventies on, as she described in her PhD research and other studies on the migration context in Emirdağ (e.g. Timmerman et al., 2009, 2014; Timmerman, 1995, 2006, 2008) Secondly, targeted information for this paper is collected using interviews with several elderly parents of high age who saw their children leave when emigration to Europe gained momentum and, thirdly, with key – informants who because of their professional or social status were well placed to give their perspective on the situation. In total fourteen elderly parents accepted our invitation to talk about their situation. We focused on interviewees who lived in the city of Emirdağ or a neighbouring village, and had at least one child living abroad and who left for Europe in the high days of the emigration era in Emirdağ. Our sample thus consisted of two people living in the centre of Emirdağ, nine in a neighbouring village and three in residential care. Ten of the respondents were women and four of them were men, with an average age of 81.6 year.

The zero-generation respondents were selected and contacted with the help of key informants who were already acquainted with the issue and who could comment from their own experience and position in society, such as local politicians, businessmen, social workers, etc. Additionally, fourteen of these key informants also participated in an interview, in which they were asked about their views on the position of elderly people in contemporary society and the effects of migration hereupon.

The interviews for the research were semi-structured, questionnaires addressing six central themes: 1) opinions of the respondent about the quality of life in Emirdağ, 2) opinions about the status of elderly people in family life and in society in general, 3) opinions about migration, 4) the relationship with family members living abroad, 5) physical and mental health of the elderly respondents, and 6) wishes and needs of the elderly respondents. For the interviews with the key informants, we asked them to give their ideas about the situation of this very old zero-generation in Emirdağ.

All interviews took place in an environment which felt comfortable to the interviewees, such as their own houses, the retirement home or another place of their choice. All the interviews were consequently put on tape (after agreement), except for two interviews with key figures and one with an elderly woman. The interviewer spoke Turkish, the mother tongue of the interviewees. Afterwards, the interviewer translated the recordings and notes for analysis to Dutch and English.

A thematic approach was chosen to analyse the data. First, two researchers coded and analysed the translated interviews separately in order to ensure objectivity of the results. The researchers in this phase treated the interviews with the zero-generation elders and with the key local informants as two distinct sets and composed two thematic lists, one for each participant group. In a second stage, these thematic lists were compared and brought together in order to contextualize the information received from the zero-generation.

# 4. Results

“…the houses used to be small and inhabited by a lot of people, but now the houses are big and there is no place in it for nobody.” (female key-informant, 23, social worker in a retirement home)

## 4.1 The Historical Making of the Zero-Generation

First of all, the research confirmed that among its (elderly) inhabitants, Emirdağ is viewed as a city heavily affected by processes of migration throughout its history. In a first phase in the 1960s, according to many of the respondents, the lack of job opportunities in Emirdağ triggered a first emigration wave leaving the region. Financial difficulties and poverty as a result of the economic situation in the region is seen as the main cause for emigration from Emirdağ, and many people are said to have left because they had no other choice. These finding are in line with the results from the participant observation conducted over the years in the region of Emirdağ (e.g., Timmerman et al., 2009, 2014; Timmerman, 1995, 2006, 2008). Their original intentions were to find a job abroad and to return with their savings later on.

“The people left because they had no money, they were poor and this caused them to migrate to a foreign country. The first of them left in the 60s, having in mind to save some money and then to return. But they didn’t. They started a family there, or moved their family there, and the children born there, stayed there because they were used to it. They have their social networks…” (male key-informant, middle - age, lawyer in Emirdağ)

Two of the interviewees were themselves among these first economic migrants. However, in contrast to the general perception among the interviewees that these migrants for the most part never return, these two people did find their way back to Emirdağ. One of them returned because he became ill as a consequence of the unhealthy working conditions, and the other left Europe to care for his ageing mother. A third respondent moreover remembered his own migration project within the borders of Turkey and stated to have returned because he missed his hometown.

“I worked in other cities, like Bursa, for a long time. To be far away from home is also a kind of migration. I missed it too much.” (male respondent, 87, lives in a retirement home in Emirdağ)

In a second phase, migration was not merely anymore a way to escape poverty, but came to be seen as an opportunity to quickly make good money and a lot of youngsters left in search of wealth and richness (Timmerman et al., 2009). It is this migration wave in which also many children of the respondents took part.

“If they had stayed here, they would have become hard workers. They already used to work hard and right when things began to sort themselves out, Europe became more interesting to many, including to my children.” (female respondent, 70, lives in a village of Emirdağ)

As a consequence of this particular historical importance of migration in the narratives of the respondents, all the elderly men and women interviewed could be rightly said to exemplify what has been described as the zero-generation. Their personal histories are invariably connected with the migration projects of their fellow townsmen, friends, family and direct offspring and have shaped their views on migration and on live in general.

Looking back during the interviews on their own lives and the migration project of their children, the interviewees referred to a number of negative consequences of migration, which could broadly be summarized as: the consequences for the family left behind (i.e. for the elderly people themselves), the consequences for their children who migrated, and the consequences for migration in Emirdağ in general.

## 4.2 The Migration Project of Their Children in Retrospect: the Consequences for the Zero-Generation

The most regularly occurring consequence which the interviewees mention as far as they themselves are concerned, is the inevitable feeling of loneliness in the long periods of time that their children are away and that they have to live on their own.

“No, I have nothing to complain about. The only thing that gives me hard times, is the constant feeling of loneliness.” (male respondent, 83, lives on his own in the village of Karacalar to the southeast of Emirdağ)

“It feels very bad to stay behind alone, I am sad. I find it difficult when my daughter-in-law returns home in the evening, while she spends the whole day here. You are old and you are afraid of dying alone. I cannot take care of myself anymore. If I would fall down, I would not be able to get up anymore. Loneliness is very bad.” (female respondent, 89, lives on her own in the centre of Emirdağ)

Some respondents in this context even referred to extreme examples of their situation. One of them narrated how he sits the whole day looking at the door, waiting for someone to pay him a visit. A woman equally spends whole days next to the phone, waiting for one of the sporadic phone calls of her children to come which would leave her beaming with joy. Others recalled how some elderly people they had knew died alone and were found in their houses only days later.

“We married off one of our daughters to a boy from there [i.e. from Europe]. Our son did not like it here, so he married someone from there as well and left. They do not get along well, however. My son works there now. It was difficult to let them go. My daughter divorced her husband because they did not get along well either. I lost my wife in 2009, she suffered from a brain tumour. I asked my neighbours to call me from time to time, so that they may find me when I am dead.” (male respondent, 86, lives on his own in the village of Suvermez to the east of Emirdağ)

According to our findings, the situation of this zero-generation was aggravated by their perception that not only their children had deserted them, but also that they had nobody at all to take care of them.

“I have heart problems. They took me with the ambulance to Afyon. My son could not make it, so I went there on my own. In a month time, I had to go to Afyon four times. I am ill, but still I do everything myself. Nobody comes knocking on your door, asking how things are. I sit here on the balcony for the whole day, staring outside. I pay someone to do the tasks I cannot do myself anymore.” (female respondent, 90, lives on her own in the village of Güneysaray to the west of Emirdağ)

Connected to this are feelings of sadness, longing and disappointment. Most elderly people are disappointed about the outcome of the investments they made on behalf of their children. They do not think their children are grateful.

“I did everything for my children, but now I see how it has all been for nothing. I sit here all by myself. And I am not the only one, a lot of people are dissatisfied with their children” (female respondent, 82, lives on her own in the village of Karacalar to the southeast of Emirdağ)

A second change that the respondents noted as a consequence of the migration of their children, was in their financial situation. They observed that remittances from their children strongly declined after 1998 (cfr. TurkStat). A significant part of the parents had once received money from their children, but now their children had too many financial difficulties themselves. Others said that they in general never receive anything from their children, because they are already entitled to a state pension. Our results are in line with the findings of Koc and Onan (1996), who state that often elder people in the country of origin do not receive financial help from their family abroad.

“No, they [i.e. the children] say they have financial difficulties themselves and therefore they do not send me anything. They have never sent me money.” (female respondent, 75, lives on her own in the centre of Emirdağ)

“No, they [i.e. the children] say that the retirement pension I get suffices. They have their own obligations and a family for which they are responsible, so I do not expect anything from them.” (male respondent, 86, lives on his own in the village of Suvermez to the east of Emirdağ)

Apart from the decline in remittances, the respondents indicated that their financial situation had deteriorated because, as their children left, they financially stood alone. All the elder respondents belonged to a lower social class and most of them were not entitled to receive a retirement pay out. Especially women had a hard time to secure enough financial means to survive. Some of them received a small amount of financial support from the state after their husbands had passed away, but this was only the case for legally married women, and not for those who married their husbands as a second wife according to religious law (see also Basara, Molahaliloglu, Pulgat, & Kavuncubasi, 2014). The elder respondents who do not receive a pension say to survive on gifts, religious financial help, and the earnings of small jobs.

“Every two months I receive 500 lira [i.e. at the time of writing approximately 156 EUR or 177 USD) because I am a widow. I try to manage. It is not enough, but I try to manage anyway. I pay the electricity and water bills with it.” (female respondent, 82, lives on her own in the village of Karacalar to the southeast of Emirdağ)

### 4.3 Consequences for Migration in Emirdağ

The results of the research reveal that in the opinion of these elder interviewees, i.e. the people from the zero-generation whose children left at a time when emigration from Emirdağ was a hype, migration has not brought their children economic relief. In contrast, most respondents state that they notice how very hard it is to financially survive in Europe. In their opinion, this also negatively affected family ties, as they had no means to travel and visit one another. On top of that, some respondents even said that quality of life in Europe is worse than in Turkey.

“Those who now return [to Turkey] for a holiday, including my son, say that Europe is over. There is a crisis going on and money flows away quickly. It is impossible to save anything, you should not imagine anything like that. My son says from time to time that he regrets having once left [Turkey].” (male respondent, 86, lives on his own in the village of Suvermez to the east of Emirdağ)

A logical consequence to the community in Emirdağ, which is connected to the phenomenon of the zero-generation, is the demographic ageing of the population of Emirdağ. According to some respondents, a decrease in production due to the ageing of the population resulted in an increase in living costs, which are much higher than in other small Turkish towns. Moreover, the surrounding villages also appear to have become less populated than before, consequent to the migration of the young people to the bigger Turkish cities and to Europe, as also demonstrated in previous research (İçduygu and Sert 2016). Several of the key informants stated that in a few years’ time, when the elder generation will have passed away, these villages will be completely empty and disappear. This information reflects reality because during the last decades several villages were already deserted (İçduygu & Sert, 2016).

Next to demographic and economic changes, the respondents observed a general change in moral values. According to some respondents, their family in Europe lost their cultural identity, their religion and, most importantly, their observance of the importance of family values and connections. An example of this is their view on marriage. While migration to Europe by marrying a European citizen was favorably judged in the past, the key informants generally looked down upon it as a disruptive factor to traditional family life, arguably because many of these marriages ended in divorce (see also Timmerman et al., 2014).

Our findings indicate that all the respondents shared a similar view as to the final evaluation of the migration project of their children: it has failed. The negative consequences, such as loneliness, financial difficulties both in Europe and Turkey, and a change in family values, were to the respondents more than enough to condemn migration as a useless aspiration. Some local informants even proposed that the Turkish state should organize the return of all those who had once left.

“I think that the state should promote their return by facilitating a couple of things for the people who want to start a business here. It would also create more jobs for the people from here and they would not be tempted to leave anymore.” (key–informant respondent)

The respondents indicated that their evaluation of migration was shared by the whole community and that the negative connotation which migration now had acquired, had brought about a visible change in migration processes. For example, they observe that fewer marriages happen in the summer months, which is generally the time when migrants return to marry their European fiancés. Also, they see more young people consciously leaving for the bigger cities inside Turkey instead of Europe.

The most important change, however, is the visible emergence of the phenomenon of return migration. Generally, people now find that the situation in Europe has deteriorated, with the financial crisis also increasing discrimination, and that conditions in Turkey have improved.

“Turkey is doing economically much better nowadays, and people stay here. There is also an evolution in social security: people get extra grants for their children, grants to start a business…This surely convinces people to start a business here.” (key-informant)

Yet, those who return are said to be wealthy and old, and younger people are believed to move more often to the bigger cities inside Turkey instead back to Emirdağ upon their return.

“The reason why they return to other cities than Emirdağ, is to prevent that people would talk about their failures, about that they did not succeed…That is what I, from my experience, think is happening.” (key-informant)

Only one respondent said that he knew someone who after an initial return to Turkey moved back to Europe because his family had a hard time getting used to the country.

# 5. Conclusion

Our research indicates that (very) old people belonging to the zero-generation created in the seventies until the nineties of the last century in Emirdağ feel rather isolated from society. The respondents often refer a shift in the social position of family elders in Turkish culture from highly respected to ignored and looked down upon. While this status change might be experienced by all elderly inhabitants of the region, the seclusion of this high aged zero-generation in particular is exacerbated by the absence of their children caused by a failed migration project. It is significant that migration to Europe in the view of this specific zero-generation is a failed enterprise. This negative evaluation of emigration towards Europe is a remarkable shift compared to the high days of chain migration in the nineties when emigration was considered a sure investment in the future (Timmerman, 2006). This negative connotation of emigration is in line with a decrease in numbers of emigrants towards Europe from Emirdağ (Timmerman et al., 2014). Moreover, this elderly generation feels that it lost its sons and daughters, now unable to return because of financial constraints. Moreover, the financial hardships of their children deprive the elder from any monetary support, making them dependent from small state pensions, gifts, and sometimes money received after the selling of a part of their land or property.

As a contribution to the theory on transnational care and the zero-generation, we emphasise that greater attention should be paid to the way in which financial care and direct, instrumental care are interlinked. These two forms of care are mostly treated separately, since within transnational families it seems evident that everyone supports the family in the way he or she is allowed to do so within the circumstances of a transnational setting, i.e. the migrated kin supports the left-behind family financially and a larger load of hands-on tasks are assigned to the physically capable non-migrants (Zimmer & Knodel, 2013; Zimmer et al., 2014). While this model might hold true in cases where migration yields a great monetary gain for the family, we observe that when this is not the case, such as for this high aged zero-generation of Emirdağ and their migrated offspring, it cannot be assumed that this model is automatically reversed again, or that the migrated kin possibly returns to make up for its failure to provide financially. In this case, a whole new process seems instead to occur in which ties between the members of transnational families are almost completely cut loose. This finding adds to the work of Baldasser and Merla (2014) in which the reciprocal character of transnational care relations is emphasized. This case study shows that there are important sites with a long history of emigration where everyone involved in the migration process has not been able to maintain bonds with the migrated kin and to translate the migration process in an increase in well-being, let alone to reciprocate the (from the other side also absent) transnational care. We argue that studies trying to contribute to theory on aging, migration and transnational care should pay more attention to the different ways in which migration systems can evolve, for instance, also taking into account the different stages of a migration project, since a migration wave which initially seemed successful might in the end lose its appeal as in the long-run the families involved lost each other while not gaining anything.

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