

# YOUNG LEADERS RISING OUT OF THE GENERATION OF CYNICS

*As a consequence of the conditions the country has been in, the Turkish youth is not only frustrated with their life, but also feeling hopeless about the future. They are unwilling to change their lives, but are expecting some external factor to change their lives for them. The Turkish youth has low levels of participation, generalized trust, tolerance and individualism – all which indicate a low level of social capital. On the other hand the European Union accession process has led to an increase in youth activities and youth NGOs, creating new opportunities of participation and collaboration for the young people. The young people taking part in these activities will be the future leaders of Turkey.*

**Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> The author is the Director of ARI Movement

In any society, youth is the hope for the future. In Turkey, this is even more true. The official ideology of the country gives young people the duty to preserve and glorify the young Republic of Turkey. The 19th of May, the day Kemal Atatürk set foot in Samsun to start the War of Independence, is celebrated as the Youth and Sports Holiday. When an investment consulting company is trying to persuade a foreign company to invest in Turkey, the young population of Turkey is presented as one of the strengths of the country. 63 percent of the Turkish population is between the ages of 18 – 30. Compared to the aging societies of Europe this demographical dynamism is an enormous advantage; or is it?

Today's youth have witnessed incompetent coalition governments, high inflation, high interest rates, high unemployment, and high corruption. They have seen not only mafia wars and media wars, but also contrived relations among individuals from politics, the media, the mafia and the business world. They have watched the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, wars in the Balkans, wars in the Caucasus and finally the Iraq War. All of these wars were in neighboring regions of Turkey. They have lived through a terrorist campaign that cost the lives of 30.000 people. They have lived in a country where many people improved their socio-economic status in a few years, not through education or entrepreneurship, but through unethical utilization of public resources. An erosion of values was a result -honesty became a virtue rather than common practice. And in February 2001, the Turkish economy went into the deepest crisis the Republic has ever seen. Many people lost their jobs. Why would it surprise us then, when the youth blames former generations for their disappointments in life, when the youth worries about the future and when they feel that there is not much they can do to change their prospects? It is among this group of young people that the future social leaders of Turkey will emerge.

### ***Turkish Youth & Social Capital***

We are facing a generation of cynical young people who are unwilling to take the initiative to improve their lives and who feel they have 'lost'. On the other hand another concept can be instrumental in describing youth in Turkey, *social capital*. Robert Putnam, in his book "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy," questions the differences between the efficiencies of local governments in Italy after the Local Governments Reform of 1976-1977 and concludes that the reason lies in the fact that civic communities are much stronger in the cities of Northern Italy. Putnam argues that this difference is also key to the differences in the economic development levels in Northern and Southern Italy. According to Putnam, in the regions where local administration is more efficient and the economy is more developed; one can observe an environment suitable for cooperation among citizens: social networks, equal political relations and political participation.<sup>2</sup>

Pippa Norris has tried to clarify the concept of social capital as described by Putnam. According to Norris, social capital has structural and cultural dimensions. The structural dimension consists of the social networks an individual is in, and the cultural dimension consists of the social norms one is subject to.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam, "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy", 1993, p. 6-7

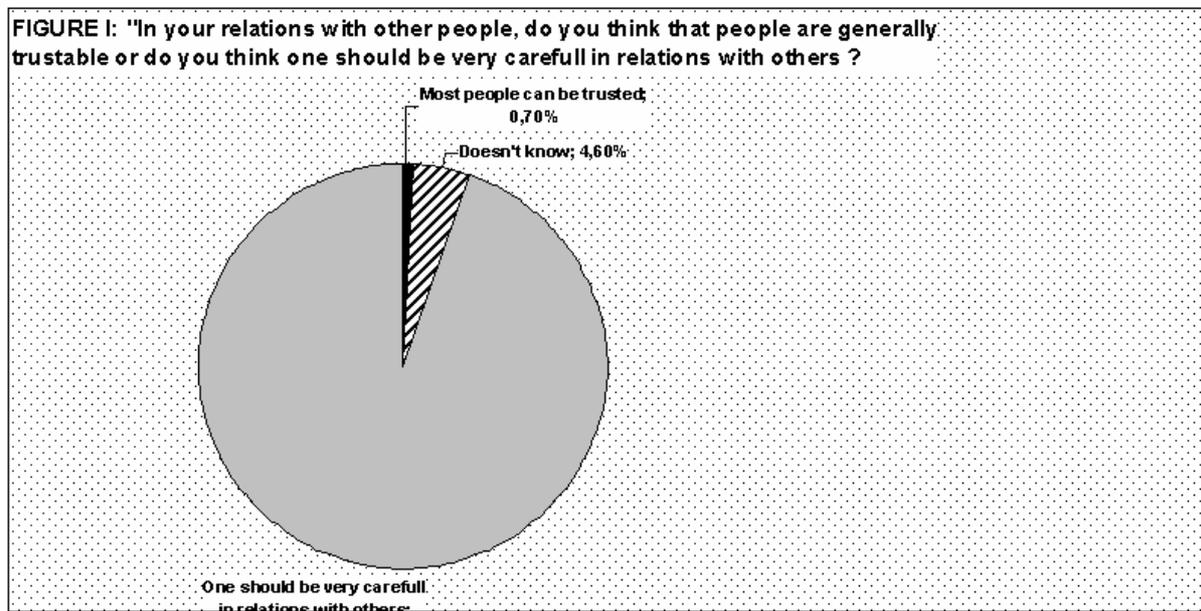
The parameters most commonly used in measuring the social capital level of a society are generalized trust level, social and political participation (membership to civic institutions), and individualism versus collectivism (individualism points to higher social capital and tolerance).

A survey conducted by the ARI Movement in 2003 provides us with data about the indicators that are used to measure the social capital of a society.<sup>3</sup> The results of the survey show that the Turkish youth has a low generalized trust level, low civic participation, low tolerance, and high collectivism. In other words, Turkish youth has a low level of social capital.

### ***Trust***

In the survey, the generalized trust level was measured with the question: *“In your relations with other people do you think most people can be trusted or do you think you have to be very careful in relations with others?”* (figure 1) The results showed that only 4,6 percent of young people in Turkey trust other people in general. Other surveys confirm this result for the Turkish population, in fact, in adults, less than 10 percent of those surveyed indicated that they trusted people in general. According to the European Values Survey, the EU average for trust is 40 percent.

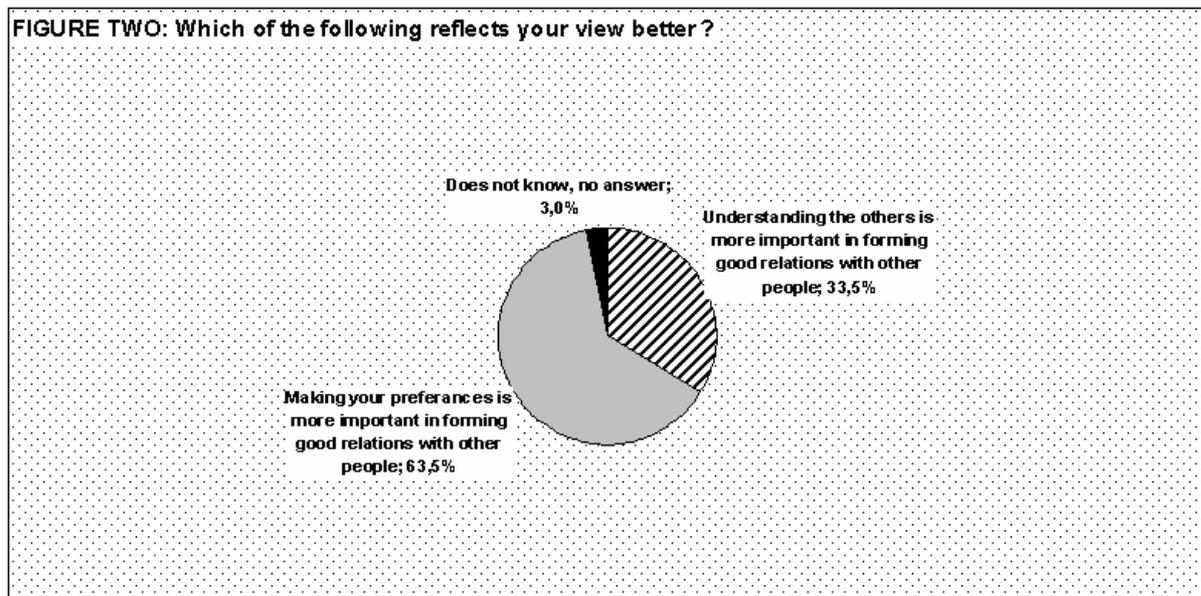
We believe that a low level of trust can be useful in explaining why financial markets can not gain depth, why people don't deposit their money in banks, why membership to NGOs and political parties is low, and why family owned companies are preferred to larger partnerships. The answer to all these questions is the same: people do not cooperate with people whom they don't trust.



Trust is accumulated through the successful experience of cooperating with others. While low levels of trust leads to low participation, the opposite is also true: civic participation creates

<sup>3</sup> Research on the Perception of Human Rights by the Turkish Youth, conducted by Strateji Mori for the ARI Foundation of Social Participation and Development

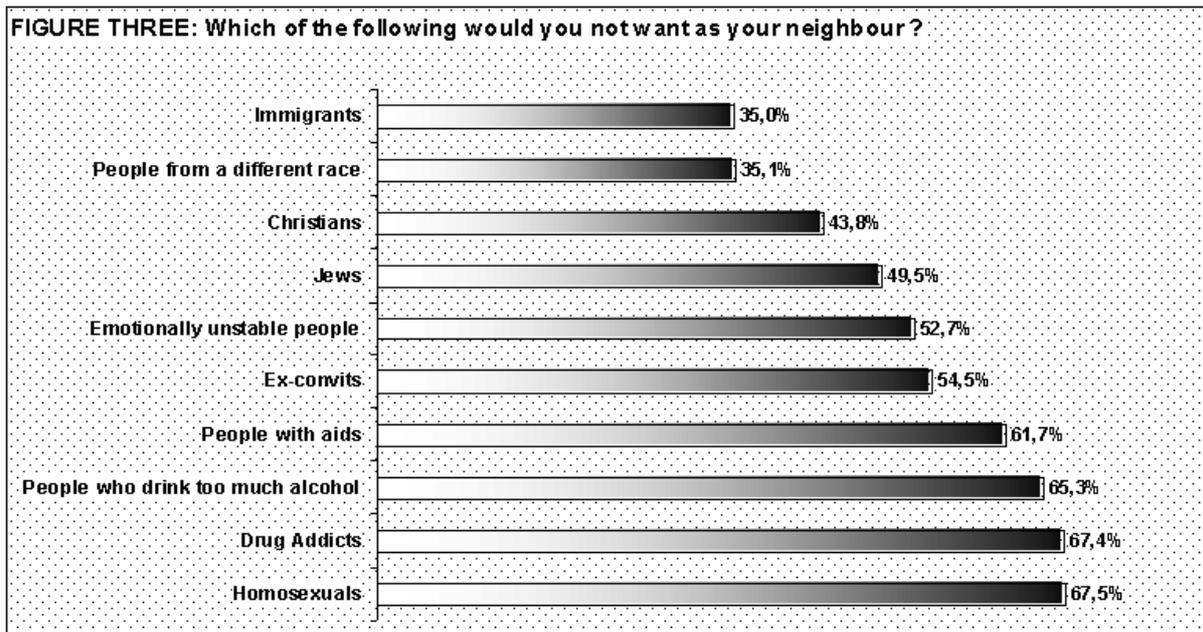
opportunities of successful cooperation leading to the accumulation of generalized trust. Low trust levels in Turkish youth is a vicious cycle that needs to be broken.



Another question asked in the survey aims to determine the level of respect young people show to the ideas of other people (figure 2). 63 percent of the respondents said that making ones preferences understood is more important than trying to understand the others. This is consistent, as one does not need to understand the preferences of people he does not trust. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that dialogue and finding common ground is extremely hard when individuals in a society do not try to understand each other.

### ***Tolerance***

Low levels of tolerance are becoming a problem throughout Europe, and it is a problem among Turkish youth as well. In the “World Values Survey” question-set, tolerance is measured with the question “Which of the following would you not want as your neighbor?” (figure 3). The results show that anyone who is different, structurally (like religion or race), or by choice (drinking too much alcohol, using drugs) or by consequences (like being HIV positive) is unwanted as a neighbor. Acquired differences are tolerated more than chosen differences.



We can see that there is an idealized citizen in the minds of the young people and anyone who is different from the idealized citizen is disliked. This is very concerning for pluralism and democracy.

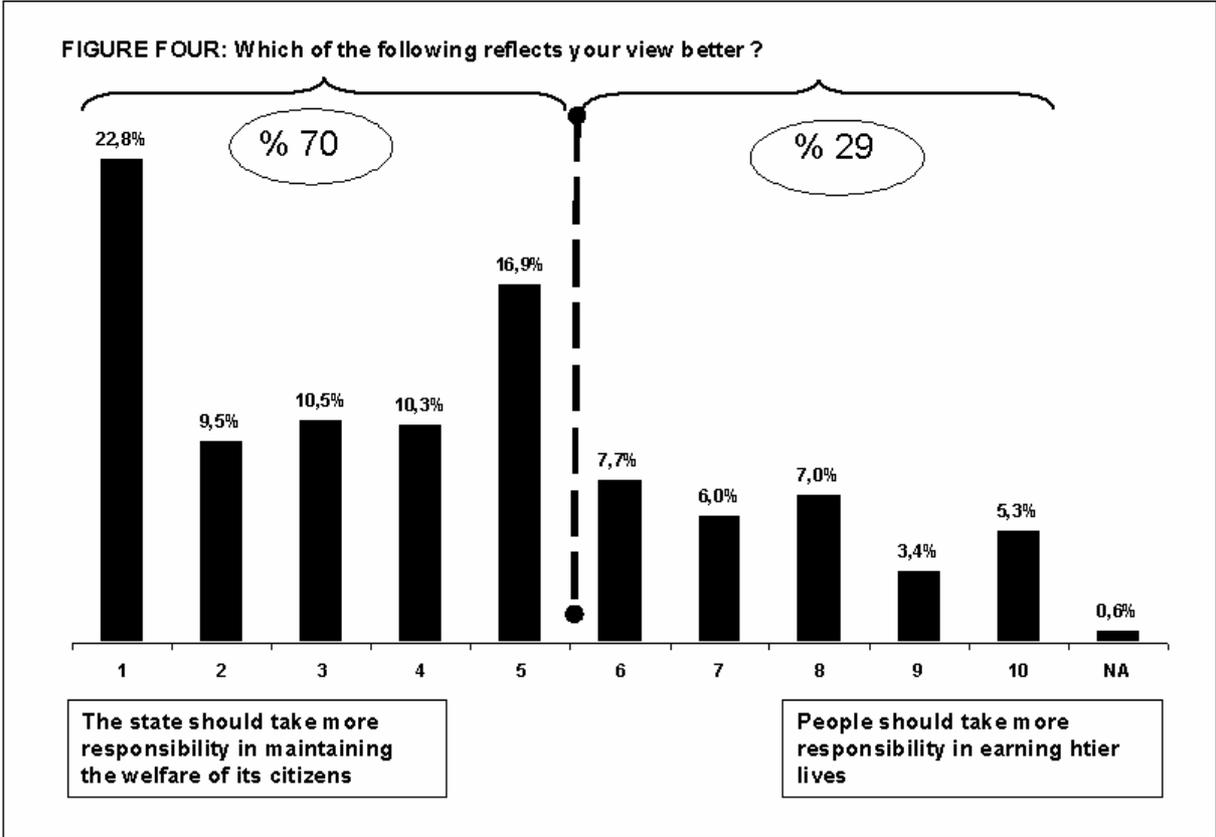
### ***Individualism versus Collectivism***

Individualism versus collectivism is another parameter used to measure social capital. *Ceterus paribus*, a higher level of individualism points to a higher level of social capital. Within this context, individualism should be regarded as accepting the responsibilities of being an individual. According to the survey done by Hofstede, Turkey is a collectivist society, where individuals prefer to pass on their responsibilities to society.<sup>4</sup>

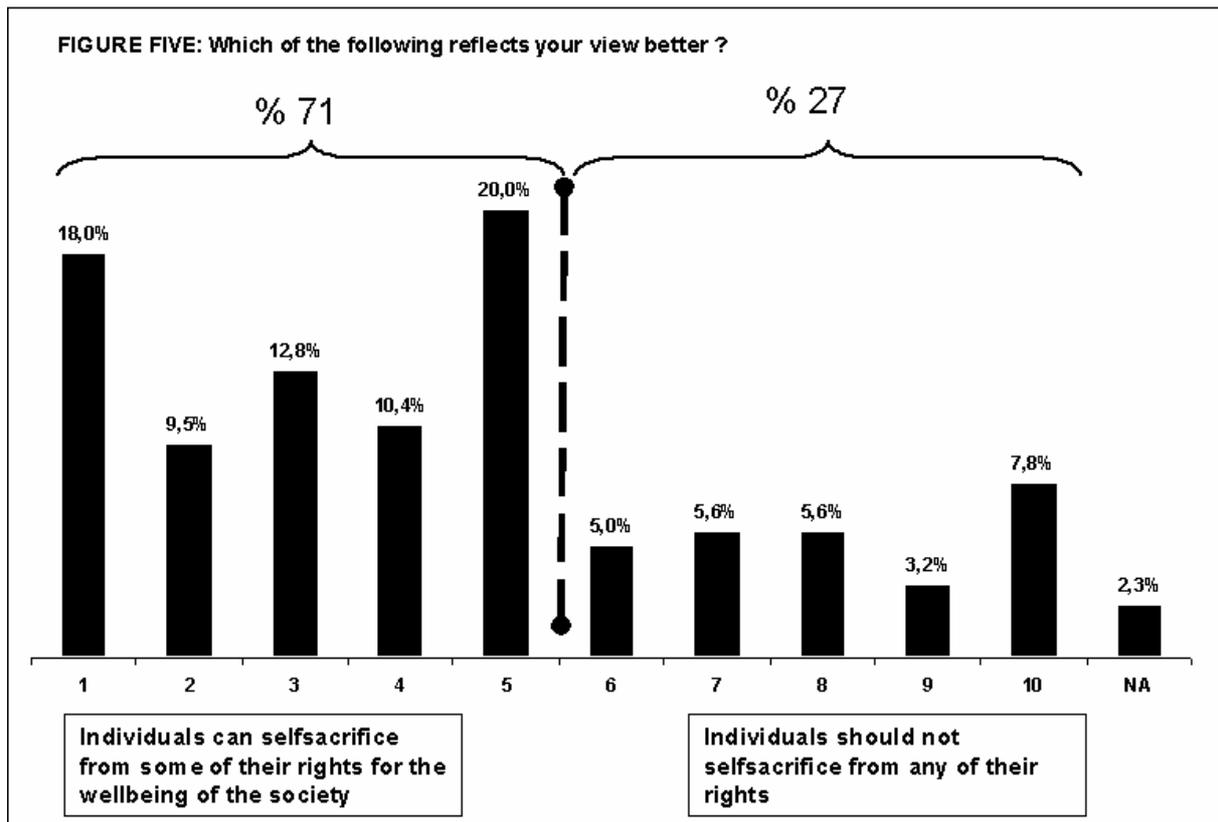
In the “Perception of Human Rights by Turkish Youth” survey, individualism was measured by the question “*Should the the state take more responsibility for maintaining the welfare of citizens, or should individuals be more responsible in guaranteeing their welfare?*” (figure 4) 70 percent of the respondents said that the state should take more responsibility, reflecting a tendency towards collectivism rather than individualism.

This explains why the young people, who are dissatisfied with their lives, will not take the initiative to change them. If there is to be an improvement in their lives it should come from an external factor, like the state, taking action.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.geert-hofstede.com>



Individuals who are reluctant to take responsibility for themselves, are not very enthusiastic about their rights either. As “figure 5” demonstrates, when asked “if *Individuals would sacrifice some of their rights for the wellbeing of the society?*” 70 percent of respondents stated that one should sacrifice some rights if the wellbeing of the society required it. At the same time, collectivism leads to a low level of engagement with one’s rights and responsibilities.



### *Participation*

Participation is one of the most important indicators of social capital. As “figure 6” below demonstrates, taking part in volunteer activities is the most common mode of participation, at only 15 percent. Donating to philanthropic institutions comes in second with 14 percent. Membership to a student club and working on non-political issues comes in third with 11 percent. The frequencies of all other modes of participation fall below 6 percent.

While 50 percent of the young respondents said that they did not have a chance to take part in volunteer activities, donate to philanthropic institutions or become a member to a nonpolitical student club, 50 percent said that they have chosen not to become a member to a student club working on political issues, become a member to an NGO working on societal issues or become a member to an NGO working on political issues. These responses reflect the success of the de-politization process in Turkey.

**Figure 6:** Which of the following have you done in the past ?

	Yes %	No, did not have the chance %	No, preferred not to %
Taking part in volunteer activities	15.4	53.9	30.7
Donating to philanthropic institutions	14.3	52.2	33.4
Membership to student clubs that work on nonpolitical issues	11.4	48.4	40.2
Membership to student clubs that work on politically related issues	3.8	32.3	63.8
Membership to an NGO working on societal issues	3.6	44.4	51.9
Membership to a political NGO	2.9	28.0	69.1

In summary, young people in Turkey have low levels trust, tolerance and participation and are collectivistic rather than individualistic.

The limited data we have at hand shows that Turkish youth has a low level of social capital. This leads to poor development in democratic values and lack of civic participation. In other words, increasing trust, tolerance and participation, or, social capital, is a prerequisite for promoting democratic values and civic participation. This will be possible by creating easily accessible channels of participation for young people. Through participation, young people will be able to accumulate trust, as well as learn to tolerate and perceive the benefits of participation.

### ***The EU Accession Process & Turkish Youth Leadership***

The lack of social capital, as demonstrated in the mentioned studies, is the reason this article uses the term “generation of cynics.” *Is Turkish youth really an advantage for the country?* Any answer given to this question, or any similar question about Turkey can not be answered independent of Turkey’s EU Accession process which is, in essence, a social transformation process.

Mental transformation is an important part of social transformation. One may change all the laws and regulations in a country, but if there is no change in people’s mindsets, structural changes that are made will be in vain. For a complete social transformation, one has to change mindsets.

This is exactly what’s happening in Turkey. The EU accession process has, for one thing, given a boost to Turkish civil society. Not only has the number of NGO’s increased but also their networking abilities among each other and at the EU level have expanded dramatically.

Women's NGOs, for example, have joined forces to put pressure on the government for changes in legislation and have succeeded; now women's NGOs in Turkey are represented in the European Women's Lobby.

There are similar developments among youth NGOs as well. Since 1999 when Turkey's candidacy for EU accession was reconfirmed, both the number and efficiency of youth NGOs has increased. Large NGOs in the big cities have chosen Anatolia as their area of action and many youth NGOs have been established in smaller cities. These are not just NGOs on paper, but institutions that can implement EU supported projects and that are involved in national or EU wide networks. All of the universities are flooding with student clubs, and the student councils of universities which were banned after the coup d'etat in 1980 have been reestablished. Following successes in the women's movement, more than 40 youth NGOs have set up an initiative to establish the youth council of Turkey, which will also become a member of the European Youth Forum.

As a result of the EU Accession process, the educational system is being reformed with the participation of civic initiatives. Not only are the curricula being transformed, but new practices, like opening student clubs and student parliaments even at the elementary school level, are becoming the norm.

The social capital accumulation of Turkish youth is increasing and at least some individuals can see that they could take part in the transformation of their society. They can see that they can change not only their individual futures, but also the future of their country through participation, through trusting other people and being tolerant towards differences. These young leaders will be the future role models that will inspire others down the line. Turkey is undergoing an exciting social transformation, and the young leaders of Turkey are not only among the products of this transformation, but also among its pioneers.

Within this framework, the answer to the question: *Is the young population of Turkey really an advantage for the country*, is a cautious "yes". Turkish youth is an advantage if we keep investing in the young people. On the other hand, it could pose a threat if not invested in.

As stated in a European Commission Whitepaper<sup>5</sup>, "Following enlargement, there will be 75 million young people in Europe between the ages of 15 and 25. Whatever their differences (in terms of access to the labour market, education, family life, income, etc.), young people see themselves as fully-fledged citizens with all the attendant rights and obligations. Investing in youth is an investment in the richness of our societies, today and tomorrow. It is therefore one of the keys to achieving the political objective laid down by the Lisbon European Council: making Europe "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2020". Investing in youth is an investment in the richness of our societies, and in this regard investing in the Turkish youth is investing in the richness of the European Union.

## ***Conclusion***

Survey data shows that values like generalized trust, participation, individualism and tolerance are low among Turkish youth, pointing to a low level of social capital. The sociopolitical environment in which this new generation of Turkish youth has grown up has

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<sup>5</sup> European Commission white paper - A new impetus for European youth /\* COM/2001/0681 final \*/

not given them opportunities for participation and successful cooperation, leading to a generation with low levels of social capital.

On the other hand, the EU accession process has presented Turkish youth with much needed opportunities for participation and successful cooperation not only at a national level, but at the international level.

As a result, young leaders are emerging who will become role models for the rest. As the EU Commission White Paper suggests, investing in the youth is investing in our future. Investing in the Turkish youth will be investing not only in the future of Turkey, but also that of the European Union.